AUTHORS OF SUCCESS:
Cultural Capitalism and Literary Evolution in Contemporary Russia

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ABSTRACT
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This dissertation examines the development of Russian literature in the decades after the fall of the Soviet Union as a focused study in how literature adjusts to institutional failure. It investigates how cultural forms reproduce themselves and how literature continues to forge meaningful symbolic connections with its audiences, traditions, and the broader culture.

I begin when Soviet state prizes, publishers, and organizations like the Writers Union could no longer provide paths to literary prominence in the early 1990s and a booming book market and a privatized prestige economy stepped into the vacuum. At this time, post-Soviet Russian authors faced a mixed blessing: freedom from censorship alongside a disorienting array of new publishers, prizes, and critical outlets, joined later by online and social media. In this new environment, personal success became an important structural value for authors and for literary works. The literary process was driven, in large part, by authors who found innovative solutions to immediate problems along their pathways to success. In search of readers, recognition, and aesthetic innovation, the authors in this dissertation transformed and even created the institutional and economic frameworks for post-Soviet Russian literature’s development, while at the same time developing new cultural forms capable of connecting with audiences in intimate and meaningful ways. The sum effect of their individual solutions to discrete problems along their own paths to success was a profound shift in the literary field, the creation and entrenchment of a new system of cultural production, distribution and consumption based on capitalist principles—the system I call “cultural capitalism.” This dissertation shows how cultural capitalism developed out of the institutional collapse of the Soviet cultural system.
While many studies have analyzed the cultural field’s genesis, its social role, and internal mechanisms, few have considered the fate of literature or culture at times of institutional failure, and fewer still have focused on possible mechanisms of recovery. Studies of contemporary Russian literature, on the other hand, have often relied on master tropes, frequently borrowed from Western literary theory. While this research constitutes an important contribution, it fails to address the central question of how literature has been affected by social upheaval and institutional failure. My project addresses this gap by modeling cultural capitalism as a literary system in which the drive for success is pervasive, but the very meaning of “success” can be defined differently by different authors. The term cultural capitalism builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital, but imagines that resource as part of a dynamic system of cultural exchange, while my understanding of success expands on Boris Dubin’s work on the topic. Finally, building on Formalist investigations of “literary evolution” and the “literary everyday,” as well as contemporary Russian sociological studies, I provide a theoretical model that connects the structures of the post-Soviet literary environment to new forms of verbal art.

Through interviews, close readings, and secondary research, I show how four prominent authors—Boris Akunin, Olga Slavnikova, Aleksei Ivanov, and Vera Polozkova—have developed idiosyncratic visions of success. I then demonstrate how each author’s particular patterns of ambitions correlate with the literary, economic, and institutional innovations that define their artistic works, careers, and positions in the literary field. By triangulating authors’ visions of success, their navigations of the literary field, and their innovative verbal art, I map out the trajectories of literature as both an institution and as an art form across the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era.
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INTRODUCTION
Reassembling the Literary:
Post-Soviet Literature as Social Institution and Aesthetic Practice

О люди! жалкий род, достойный слез и смеха!
Жрецы минутного, поклонники успеха!
— Alexander Pushkin, “Polkovodets” (1835)

Perhaps the most epochal Russian novel of the 1990s is premised on the impossibility of being a writer in post-Soviet Russia. Upon finishing the Literary Institute in the late 1980s, the protagonist of Viktor Pelevin’s Generation P (1999), Vavilen Tatarsky, imagines his future as a Soviet poet.1 With eager anticipation, he foresees his time divided according to the predictable patterns of a writer’s life: “during the day—an empty lecture hall in the Literary Institute, a word-for-word translation from the Uzbek or the Kirghiz that had to be set in rhyme by the next deadline; in the evenings—his creative labors for eternity.”2 But when the Soviet Union falls, the entire way of being a writer that Tatarsky had envisioned becomes both irrelevant and impossible. He can no longer subsist on translations from Soviet languages, nor can he make money teaching in the Literary Institute. Even the prospect of his creative work itself has changed. Without the system of collective belief ensured by the Soviet Union’s stability, the eternity Tatarsky had imagined “began to curl back on itself and disappear.”3 It was no longer economically feasible to write, nor was it attractive to do so in a larger sense. What is more, the two aspects of the literary profession were unexpectedly connected. “The eternity he used to

1 Translated by Andrew Bromfield, Pelevin’s novel was published in the U.K. as Babylon and in the U.S. as Homo Zapiens. I refer to its original Russian title Generation P (the word “Generation” is rendered in English in the original, while the P is in Cyrillic), and to the protagonist’s original name, but I borrow my translations from Bromfield: Viktor Pelevin, Homo Zapiens, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Viking, 2000).

2 Ibid., 3.

3 Ibid., 4.
believe in could only exist on state subsidies, or else—which is just the same thing—as something forbidden by the state.”\textsuperscript{4} Inextricable from its economic and institutional contexts, eternity, the very essence of what Tatarsky had envisioned as literary life, had changed. Along with economic circumstances, it was an abstract concept that might be thought of as “the literary” that had unraveled. Tatarsky “didn’t write any more poems after that: with the collapse of Soviet power they had simply lost their meaning and value.”\textsuperscript{5} Instead, he turns to advertising, addressing his “creative labors” not to eternity, but to the capitalist market.

This dissertation is about authors who, like Tatarsky, found themselves in a society in which “the literary” had unraveled. Unlike Tatarsky, however, the authors in this dissertation did not abandon literature entirely, but found innovative ways—both economic and aesthetic—to create literature in the new society. The dissolution of Soviet institutions meant not only the disappearance of state subsidies for the arts and the lifting of censorship, but also dramatic changes in the publishing industry, the critical apparatus, and the “prestige economy” of prizes and awards (to name only a few aspects of the literary field explored in the following pages).\textsuperscript{6} Faced with all these transformations, writers had to forge new ways of being successful, new ways of being writers. Though previous paths to success had not entirely closed off—the career of Tatarsky’s creator, Viktor Pelevin, for instance, traces a relatively traditional trajectory through early publications in prestigious “thick” literary journals, critical acclaim, book publications, and popular attention—most writers who emerged in the post-Soviet decades had to

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6} The term “prestige economy” is borrowed from James F. English’s study \textit{The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005). I use the term here to indicate the shift from the state prizes of the Soviet era to the post-Soviet prizes funded by wealthy patrons. That shift, as well as English’s book, are discussed in more detail in chapter 2.
Introduction: Reassembling the Literary

forge their own pathways to prominence. Their navigations of the literary field created new institutional and economic frameworks for literature’s development, while at the same time generating new cultural forms capable of connecting with audiences in intimate and meaningful ways. By following individual authors through the literary field, paying attention to their interactions with institutions, readers, critics, and their own literary texts, I offer an account of how the eternity that disappeared from under Tatarsky’s feet transformed into something new. That something new was just as inextricable from its economic and social circumstances as Tatarsky’s Soviet eternity, but it was capable of supporting literary creativity in the post-Soviet era. In other words, I give an account of the institutional, economic, and aesthetic processes that revitalized the literary field—and reassembled the concept of “the literary”—after the fall of the Soviet Union.

While many studies have analyzed the cultural field’s genesis, its social role, and internal mechanisms, few have considered the fate of literature or culture at times of institutional failure, and fewer still have focused on possible mechanisms of recovery. I address this gap by suggesting that the literary field reacted to the institutional failures of the post-Soviet era through a patchwork of ad hoc responses made by authors in pursuit of their own success. As individual authors sought success, they innovated solutions to immediate problems, and created the very structures and institutions that came to define post-Soviet literature. Such patchwork survival tactics were pervasive not just in literature, but throughout 1990s Russian society. Ad hoc

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responses to institutional failure addressed immediate needs, but also created viable and often permanent structures in every aspect of life. In her study of post-Soviet business, for instance, political scientist Alena Ledeneva has shown that the inefficiencies and under-regulation of new markets led to the development of a whole range of what she calls “informal practices.” It was these informal practices, invented on an ad hoc basis to address specific needs of specific agents that became the most important, if unwritten, rules of post-Soviet business. In a similar vein, the sociologist Olga Shevchenko has studied the everyday survival techniques of post-Soviet Muscovites, who found themselves in a situation of “permanent crisis” in the 1990s. The failure of a broad array of Soviet institutions rendered tasks like grocery shopping increasingly difficult and even potentially dangerous. The ongoing crisis situation, unaddressed by existing structures, Shevchenko argues, gave rise to creative solutions: “it was in the voids created by failing institutions,” she writes, that 1990s Muscovites formulated innovative ways of shaping and navigating their world. She describes, for instance, how the state’s inability to contain fraud initiated a cottage industry of “consumer magazines, free instructional newspapers and TV programs all dedicated to the art of spotting faulty products and forgeries.” Beyond publications and television programs, other innovative solutions to discrete problems, like the lack of access to fresh produce, created makeshift markets and distribution networks, which, in the ensuing decade, formalized into institutions of the legal economy. In this way, Shevchenko

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10 Ibid., 175.

11 See, for instance, Ledeneva, 115–41; and for a similar account of how makeshift bartering practices in post-Soviet provincial oil markets became a standardized practice in the 2000s, see Douglas Rodgers, *The Depths of Russia: Oil, Power and Culture after Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2015), 71–101.
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argues, citizens’ makeshift solutions to immediate problems “gave rise to some of the first specifically post-Soviet structures. They shaped the very fabric of the emerging order.”

The central contention of this dissertation is that something similar happened in the literary field: post-Soviet literature formed largely out of a patchwork of distinct responses to real or perceived inadequacies in the literary landscape, and this is true for both the literary field as an institution and for literature as a set of aesthetic forms and practices. In the immediate post-Soviet period, I argue, traditional paths to literary prominence—thick journals, writers’ union, authoritative critics—lost the public’s trust and were felt to be inadequate. At the same time, a largely unregulated book market, new literary awards, and online and social media, offered new but untested pathways to success. In this environment, authors, faced with the discrete task of finding a readership, were forced to grapple with broader questions about the meaning of success and how to pursue it. To borrow a framing from Boris Eikhenbaum, the question of “how to write” became eclipsed by the question of “how to be a writer.”

The four authors who figure in the current study—Boris Akunin, Olga Slavnikova, Aleksei Ivanov, and Vera Polozkova—all found innovative ways to be writers, each modeling new possibilities for literary success. In this way, these writers became both successful authors and authors of “success” as a concept. As they have done so, I argue, they have given shape to the contemporary literary field—constructing the emergent system of what I call “cultural capitalism”—while at the same time developing the genres, forms, and styles that have come to characterize post-Soviet literature as a field of aesthetic activity.

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12 Ibid., 176.

I position this research as a point of articulation between two fields: sociology of literature and literary analysis. While I am interested in how authors navigate the literary field, how extra-textual activities constitute what Iurii Lotman called “everyday behavior” (*bytovoe povedenie*), and how their actions shape the possibilities for their peers and successors, I believe these questions are inextricable from questions about the aesthetic qualities of literary texts themselves.14 Since the literary field is constituted as a field that believes in the power of the texts it produces, as a field that devotes its resources of time and energy to the creation, analysis, and dissemination of these texts, as a field that propagates the value of these texts to the broader society, it makes little sense to analyze the field abstracted from the very texts that constitute its center. Sociologies of literature have approached the problem of the text itself in different ways. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, in his essay “The Field of Cultural Production” (1983) suggests that “the full reality of the work of art” includes its aesthetic qualities, but that “the essential explanation of each work lies outside each of them, in the objective relations which constitute the field.”15 His approach is meant not to understand the value of literary works, but precisely the opposite: to overcome the “belief in the value of the work, which is one of the major obstacles to the constitution of a science of artistic production.”16 In later works, such as *The Rules of Art*, he engages in careful analysis of literary texts, but instead of reading them as aesthetic works, he reads them as something closer to manifestoes or political tracts. The title of a 1986 essay, for instance, is symptomatic: “Is the Structure of *Sentimental Education* an Instance of Social Self-Analysis?”

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16 Ibid., 36.
Introduction: Reassembling the Literary

Though deeply influenced by Bourdieu’s work, Mikhail Berg takes a different approach to the value of literary texts themselves. In his sociological study of the Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet literary field, *Literaturocracy: The Problem of the Acquisition and Distribution of Power in Literature* (*Literaturokratiia: Problema prisvoeniia i pereraspredeleniia vlasti v literature* 2000), Berg frames each work of art as generative of “energy,” which then can be distributed and reallocated through the mechanisms of the literary field. “In creating the text,” he writes, “the author communicates a certain energy to it; and in reading the text, a member of the reference group [referentnaia gruppа] extracts the energy with which it has been invested.”

This framing has the distinct advantage of putting the aesthetic power of the text at the center of the literary field. Instead of simply grafting the field of power relations onto the literary field, or modeling an “inverted economic world” (to highlight another phrase from Bourdieu), Berg’s framing of the text’s inherent power makes the literary field into a dynamic system, fueled, in part, by the verbal creations at its center. While power and economic relations still play important roles in Berg’s model, texts themselves are not reduced to the equivalent of any other commodity exchanged in any other field. Berg’s shortcoming, though, is that he assumes the energy of literary texts, rather than accounting for it. He does not perform any close readings, nor does he attempt to demonstrate the aesthetic qualities of literature. Instead, he uses assertions about the aesthetic qualities of literature to substantiate his sociological analysis.18

17 Mikhail Berg, *Literaturokratiia*, 233. “создавая текст, автор сообщает ему некоторую энергию; а прочитывая текст, член референтной группы извлекает энергию, в нём заключенную.” The generalized conception of a work of art (especially of literature) as a source of energy informs the conceit of two major Russian postmodern novels, Vladimir Sorokin’s *Blue Lard* (*Goluboe salo*, 1999) and Mikhail Elizarov’s *Librarian* (*Bibliotekar’*, 2006). In Sorokin’s novel, clones of classic Russian writers are chained to desks and made to write. The very process of writing produces the titular substance, which later proves capable of endowing religious cults and political figures with enormous power. In Elizarov’s novel, the works of one socialist realist writer, when read uninterruptedly endow the reader with supernatural powers. Both of these books embody an implicit metaphor in Russia’s cultural self-perception in which literature itself is a source of enormous strength.

18 Writing about various late-Soviet literary almanacs, for instance, Berg writes, “The absence of innovation in the majority of the texts in the collection did not make ‘Circle’ an event in literature.” (“Отсутствие инновационности...
Following Berg, I treat texts themselves as powerful symbolic actors (or “actants,” to borrow Bruno Latour’s term for non-human actors) in the literary field—not as merely nodes in a system of power or economic relations, but as generative agents in their own right. The form, style, and content of literary texts, I believe, are inextricably bound up with all the extra-textual elements that constitute the literary field—authorial behavior, audience engagement, institutional relations, and so on. The relationship between the field and its literature is complex and multidirectional; it is not reducible to simple cause and effect. Nevertheless, writers’ extra-textual activities are suggested, enabled, and circumscribed by the kinds of texts they produce. It would be equally unimaginable for Liudmila Ulitskaia to publically discuss eating her own excrement—as Vladimir Sorokin did in an interview on his book *The Norm* (*Norma* 1983)—as it would be for Sorokin to sponsor a series of children’s books on tolerance—as Ulitskaia did beginning in 2011. At the same time, authors’ extra-textual behaviors, including their pursuit of success, often inform the aesthetic qualities of—and readers’ aesthetic responses to—their literary creations. To take two examples from the following pages, Grigorii Chkhartishvili (under the pseudonym B. Akunin, explored in chapter 1) borrows genre plotting from the classical detective fiction he had published as an editor of *Inostrannaya literatura* in the 1990s, and Vera больши́нства текстов, вошедших в сборник, не сделало “Круг” событием в литературе.”) Berg, *Literaturokratiia*, 255.

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Introduction: Reassembling the Literary

Polozkova (chapter 4) imbues her poetry with syntactical and lexical innovations characteristic of the Russian internet, where she built her audience and first found success.

In each of my case studies, literature emerges as both a field of social activity and a set of aesthetic forms and practices, where each aspect informs the other. For this reason, each of my chapters takes a hybrid approach. Alongside analysis of authors’ extra-textual activities, public statements, essays and interviews (both my own and previously published), I devote a substantial section of each chapter to close readings and careful literary analysis. I attempt to understand precisely how each author’s key literary texts work on their own terms before integrating my literary analysis with the extra-literary components of my argument. The methodological intervention implicit in this approach holds that literary texts themselves are important objects of scholarly interest not only because they constitute an immanent value, a “finality without end” (to borrow a phrase from Kant), and not only because they claim such status in a broader social field, but because they exert certain powers over both writers and readers (critics, publishers, prize committees, etc.). In other words, literary texts are worthy of rigorous close readings not just in strictly literary studies but wherever they figure in social relations. Conversely, social formations around texts—author and reader behaviors, institutional configurations, economic circumstances—are worth considering, even within what might be thought of as pure literary scholarship.

At the same time, I argue that the literary field is not simply one of many social institutions. It is unique because it structures itself around texts’ immanent value, because it adjudicates claims to their values, and because it responds to the power of texts. In other words, underlying the structure of this dissertation is the contention that the immanent meaning, the active power, and the social significance of literature are mutually constitutive, that none is
reducible to either of the others, and that none should be thought of as the “essential explanation” of any other. The distinctive power of literature—indeed of any form of art—stems, at least in part, from this very fact, from its irreducibility to either a set of economic relations or to a strictly aesthetic creation. Each aspect derives energy from the other, and the dynamic interrelations between the two drive literary innovation, expanding literature’s social and aesthetic possibilities, and animating literature’s place in the broader society.\textsuperscript{20}

Though integrating the social and aesthetic aspects of literature has often proven difficult in theoretical accounts, they are organically connected for each of the authors studied here. Each author acts as a mediator between these aspects of literature—at once a (highly intelligent and often very self-conscious) social agent and a creative producer—moving seamlessly between these roles as he or she gives interviews, serves on prize committees, writes reviews, and composes literary texts. The lens of success provides a focal point for that mediation, showing how each author negotiates between these roles, connecting literature as a social institution to literature as such. In pursuit of literary success, all the authors here had to grapple with the shifting institutional structures of the post-Soviet literary field, while at the same time also crafting works that connected with new post-Soviet audiences. Furthermore, each of the authors treated here addresses, explicitly or otherwise, the nature of success, and often success in specifically post-Soviet circumstances, in their literary works. I use these literary treatments of the extra-literary aspects of the literary field in order to facilitate an analysis that shuttles between social and aesthetic, between literary and extra-literary, in a constant attempt to

\textsuperscript{20} The Russian Formalists critics Boris Eikhenbaum and Iurii Tynianov approached this same dynamic interaction in a series of essays published in the late 1920s, in which they developed three key terms, the “literary everyday” (“literaturnyi byt”), “literary fact” (“literaturnyi fakt”), and “literary evolution” (“literaturnaia evoliutsiia”). I explore all three of these terms and the essays in which they appeared in the section on terminology below.
assemble a complex, never complete, but always integral picture of literature and of the abstract concept of “the literary” that includes its aesthetic, economic, and institutional aspects.

Though each chapter features a single author, each also analyzes a broader development of the literary field. The chapter on Boris Akunin traces the growth of the post-Soviet book market; Olga Slavnikova shares her chapter with an analysis of prize culture; Aleksei Ivanov with multimedia aesthetics; and Vera Polozkova with the internet and social media. In framing each chapter in this way, I push back against the gravitational pull of single-author literary scholarship and emphasize structural changes in the literary field. At the same time, I maintain that individual agents, such as successful authors, can have effects on the directions and implications of those institutional changes. Just as I try not to privilege the aesthetic over the social, or vice versa, in my conception of literature, here too, I try not to assign primacy to either the individual or to the larger institutional changes in each of my case studies. Such concerted methodological ambivalence borrows from Bruno Latour’s development of actor-network-theory. In his introduction to the influential approach, *Reassembling the Social*, Latour insists that in order to understand a sociality as a dynamic and always forming organism,

you have ‘to follow the actors themselves’, that is try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish. If the sociology of the social works fine with what has been already *assembled*, it does not work so well to collect anew the participants in what is not—*not yet*—a sort of social realm.  

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I find Latour’s formulation especially attractive because the post-Soviet literary field, certainly in its first two decades, is not something “already assembled,” but rather, something at best in flux, at worst in disarray, and in any case, “not yet” a literary field. It is for this reason, perhaps more than any other, that a study of the post-Soviet literary field must differ methodologically from Bourdieu’s studies of French literature (or similar studies of relatively stable literary fields).

Instead of accounting for the formation of the literary field, a study of post-Soviet literature might think of itself as “reassembling the literary,” of attempting to understand, through the dynamic interactions of actors, actants, and networks, how the production of literature in post-Soviet Russia is in the process of becoming a literary field. For this reason, in my account of the formation of the post-Soviet literary field, I “follow the actors themselves,” as much as possible. I take my authors at face value and trust their innovative and transformational aspirations. I also treat non-human actants (to use Latour’s term again)—literary institutions and the literary works themselves—as equally constitutive, along with authors, in the formation of the literary field. In this way, I give an account of “reassembling the literary” over the first two post-Soviet decades.

IMPORT, DOMESTICATE, APPROPRIATE: PARADIGMS OF CULTURAL BORROWING

This process of reassembling carries interest beyond the immediate field of post-Soviet Russian literature. Focus on the dynamics of a recovering literary field shows how cultural regeneration borrows from and domesticates foreign models, casting new light on both those models and the

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22 For instance, studies such as Williams, *Culture and Society*, Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, or English, *Economy of Prestige*, all approach relatively stable cultural fields as something *already assembled*, or, in the case of English, something in a relatively stable period of growth.

23 For a successful application of this methodology to a project on literary production, though in an American context, see Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2016).
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domestic cultural traditions into which they are subsumed. This study shows how, in response to local problems and immediate insufficiencies, several Western—and especially Anglo-American—models of cultural institutions, metrics, and practices were adopted into the post-Soviet literary field. The adoption of these practices meant both new and often innovative iterations of familiar cultural forms and practices—such as bestseller lists, literary prizes, and internet literature—as well as new stages in Russian cultural and literary history, both of which speak to fields of inquiry beyond the immediate focus of this study.

The political and economic difficulties of the post-Soviet transition provoked widespread reassessments of accepted Western paradigms like market economy and liberal democracy, as the facts on the ground brought insight into unexamined assumptions. In a similar way, the post-Soviet adoption of Western cultural models can bring new light to how certain imported cultural institutions might affect artistic production at home as well. For instance, chapter one follows the introduction of bestseller lists into the new Russian book market and shows how such statistical measures quickly edged out the critical apparatus as a legitimating mechanism for literary prominence. The rapid pace of change in post-Soviet Russia makes such transformations

perceptible over the span of only a few years. In the U.S. on the other hand, where bestseller lists have long constituted part of the literary landscape, it might be more difficult to discern changes in the relative influence of the market versus the critical apparatus. The starkness of the change in Russia indicates that a similar mechanism might operate in more established literary markets as well, opening up, perhaps, a productive line of inquiry. Post-soviet cultural awards present another intriguing insight into the general mechanisms of such institutions. In a few short years in the 1990s, as I demonstrate in chapter two, the Russian Booker Prize went from relying on literary journals for its nominations to dictating, to those very same journals, the direction of the literary conversation by suggesting through its short-list which books should be reviewed. Once again, the rapidness of the change allows us to see precisely how the literary prize came to impose its own priorities on existing literary institutions. Similar mechanisms, no doubt, are at work in the Booker Prize’s native land, but because of the award’s long history in Britain and the relatively stable literary field there, they might be more difficult to perceive. In this way, the rapidly changing literary field in Russia can provide insights into how institutions interact with cultural production more broadly. As that field adopts so many specifically Anglo-American models, it seems of particular interest to the English-language researcher and reader. By seeing our own institutions refracted, and often amplified, in an unfamiliar setting, we can better understand how they work at home. Furthermore, by tracing the paradigm of cultural capitalism


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as it is created and entrenched at accelerated rates in post-Soviet Russia, we can begin to understand how we came to produce and export so many of the models that have made such a transformation possible (if not necessarily inevitable) in Russia.

From another perspective, this study shows how certain Western models were appropriated into Russian literary culture. I use the word “appropriate” intentionally, as it might be productive to think of such borrowings as “cultural appropriation.” At first blush, this usage seems counter-intuitive: after all, “appropriation” usually describes a hegemonic culture’s borrowings from subordinate cultures or from its own peripheries, and post-Soviet Russia is often understood as existing on the periphery of the Western world. But as post-Soviet Russian authors adopt Western models they domesticate them not only into the post-Soviet context, but into the long tradition of the Russian literary canon. Aleksei Ivanov, as shown in chapter three, borrows narrative techniques from Hollywood blockbusters and H.B.O. television series to formulate a “new type of novel” that, according to him, shows the way forward for Russian literature. In a similar vein, Vera Polozkova makes internet celebrity into the logical next step in a tradition of the Russian poetic persona that traces its provenance through Vladimir Mayakovsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, and Joseph Brodsky. In such gestures, these authors import a Western cultural model into the Russian literary tradition, in order to enrich that tradition and suggest a new stage for its development. For these authors at these moments, the Western model is the outside innovation brought into the central stream of Russian literature: Polozkova uses the internet in order to claim her place as the next Tsvetaeva, and Ivanov borrows from Hollywood to rejuvenate the Russian novel. In both instances, Russian literature remains central; Russian literature and its traditions are the hegemonic cultural paradigm into which Western models might be capable of injecting new life.
Whether this is a weakness—understood as the insularity of the Russian cultural imagination—or a strength—the uniqueness of a great tradition—it nevertheless reveals something essential about how Russian literature operates in an increasingly globalized cultural economy. The Russian tradition still exercises such power over the aspiring literary imagination that the authors in this study—even as they adopt Western cultural practices—invariably conceive of success within the framework of the Russian literary tradition, rather than as part of a world or transnational literature. As they adopt models for success, they domesticate them, transforming them in innovative, unprecedented, groundbreaking ways, but such transformations, rather than aspiring to worldwide significance, are most often seen by their creators as contributing primarily to the Russian literary tradition.

Indeed, the adoption and adaptation of Western cultural models often trace a, roughly, four-stage trajectory, in which each stage brings the borrowed model more deeply into the local tradition. Those stages can be thought of as importation, impersonation, imitation, and innovation. This paradigm can be clearly observed in how Russian literary production adapted to the influx of Western mass literature in the first post-Soviet years. Immediately after printing laws were liberalized in 1990, Western authors like Stephen King, Danielle Steele, and James Hadley Chase were translated, printed in cheap print runs of 50,000 to 100,000 copies, and sold in bookstores—and often illegally off the backs of trucks in markets in the Russian provinces. Many of the most successful publishers of the early post-Soviet years, including St. Petersburg’s Severozapad, generated their early revenue in precisely this fashion.27 At this first stage, the foreign model is imported without much alteration at all. Following the success of these

imported models, several Russian authors—and often collectives—began to write Western-style fictions set in England or America and meant to impersonate already-popular titles. Such novels included several sequels to Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* such as *Rhett Butler (Rett Batler)* and *Scarlett’s Last Love (Posledniaia liubov’ Skarlett)* written by the pseudonymous “D. Khilpatrik.” Other authors soon transformed this stage of impersonation into the next stage, imitation, in which Western models were borrowed, but transplanted into a local context, or otherwise transformed into a cultural hybrid. Examples of this stage include the so-called *zhenskie detektivy* (women’s mystery novels) of Aleksandra Marinina, Daria Dontsova, and others. These works produce cultural hybrids, but they do little to transform either the imported model or the local tradition. In contrast, the last stage in the paradigm I am proposing does just that—it transforms both the imported model and the tradition into which it implants, and proposes innovative possibilities for each. Boris Akunin, among other authors, took up the challenge of this last stage and, as I argue in chapter one, proposed a way forward for Russian literature that would incorporate innovations from the realm of mass literature.

Throughout this study, I trace the trajectories of several cultural models—aesthetic and institutional, economic, and linguistic—as they make their way into post-Soviet Russia, and into the *longue durée* of Russian literary history. As I do so, I show how the specificities of the post-Soviet context illuminate aspects of those cultural models that might have otherwise remained invisible. At the same time, I show how those models transform the greater Russian literary

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tradition. The authors in this study see themselves first and foremost as inheritors of that tradition. As they domesticate foreign models, they consciously imagine their own place within the national literature, often by reframing its trajectories to meet their needs. When Polozkova presents Tsvetaeva and Mayakovsky as proto-celebrities, for instance, she bends the arc of literary history to meet her (Polozkova) where she stands. When Olga Slavnikova animates a contemporary novel with the spirits of Pavel Bazhov’s magical tales, she suggests a post-Soviet version of magical realism based on Soviet fakelore (or fabricated folklore), while at the same time updating the novel form for a post-Soviet audience. Such amalgamations reimagine their sources as they reformulate the tradition they aspire to continue. If a literary tradition is written by its constituent authors, it is not simply through each author’s individual contribution, nor is it exclusively through the innovations and struggles framed by the anxiety of influence, or the uncle-nephew line of inheritance proposed by Viktor Shklovskii. Literary traditions are written, at least in part, by authors reimagining what came before in order to build a space for themselves within that tradition. As the authors in this study reassemble the literary in post-Soviet Russia, they do so in ways that update the Russian literary tradition through the economic institutions and aesthetic practices of the twenty-first century, but just as importantly, they do so in ways that reassemble that tradition in order to construct a place for themselves as twenty-first-century authors adept at various imported cultural practices.

KEY WORDS

The key terms of this dissertation are contained, but not clearly defined, in its title. In the following section, I explore definitions for each of these terms. Aside from clarifying the meaning of my title, defining these terms allows me to further refine my methodology, probe
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some of the underlying assumptions of this study, and touch on a few more of the theoretical
texts which have been foundational to my thinking. These key terms are: success, cultural
capitalism, and literary evolution.

Success
A basic premise of my dissertation is that there is a thing called success, which is desirable for
authors to attain. But what is success, precisely? The concept turns out to be quite slippery.
Vladimir Dal’s dictionary suggests that the Russian equivalent, “uspekh,” means the
“achievement of the desired” (“dostizhenie zhelaemogo”) or a “fruitful effort” (“udachnoe
staranie”), but does not specify what “the desired” might be or what the fruitful effort ought to
be directed toward. 
Sergei Ozhegov’s more contemporary lexicon does not clarify much,
defining the term as “luck in the achievement of something” (“udacha v dostizhenii chego-n.”)
and “good results in work” (“khoroshie rezul’taty v rabote”). (Ozhegov does, however, add the
essential, if still imprecise, element of “public recognition” (“obshchestvennoe priznanie”),
which will be an essential aspect of success as defined here.)
In these definitions, “success” is
framed as the attainment of some goal, the achievement of an aspiration. But both sides of these
definitions—the achievement and the aspiration—are left as mutable concepts, indexicals able to
point to any number of possibilities. For this reason, success as a stand-alone concept can seem
frustratingly tautological and unstable. 

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31 S. I. Ozhegov, Slovar’ russkogo iazyka (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo inostrannykh i natsional’nnykh slovarei, 1953), 772.
32 The tautological nature of the concept of success is laid bare in the aspiration towards success as a goal in itself,
commonly expressed in such popular internet lists as “10 books that’ll help you achieve more success in life”
(Business Insider, 7 July 2016). When success is the goal, how does one measure the achievement of that goal? Can
it also be measured in success? Can you be successful at attaining success? In the capitalist context of this Business
constantly stretching and expanding to allow for new possibilities that reflect the transformations of the field it describes. It is precisely this quality of dynamic instability (or flexibility) that makes success such a productive lens onto a literary field in flux. It allows authors to focus their aspirations, their conscious strategies, and the perceived outcomes of their efforts through a single concept that changes along with the field it represents.

Its flexibility, however, is not unlimited; “success,” and even “literary success,” are not empty signifiers available to be filled with just any meaning. These terms have specific characteristics that make attempts at definitions fruitful, if not always fully satisfying. The two aspects of success drawn out in the dictionary definitions above—aspirations and achievement—already point to the teleological and temporal nature of success. Aspirations are necessarily forward-looking, while achievement suggests a culmination, an end point, a telos. The space between aspiration and achievement suggests the passage of time along with conscious activity. Implicitly, it also assumes a relatively stable set of surrounding circumstances, such that aspirations can be conceived and achieved within the same (or recognizably similar) contexts. Literary success, for instance, is only possible as long as literature as a social practice exists—as long as publishers print, critics review, bookstores sell, and readers read. (Because of changes in such contexts, as we have seen, literary success lost its meaning for Vavilen Tatarsky with the fall of the Soviet Union.) The necessary circumstances surrounding the conception and pursuit of success include the modes, practices, and institutions adjacent to the envisioned activity. They also include structures and instances of recognition. This is finally the third and most slippery

Insider article, money provides the implicit path out of this tautology as success is assumed to be synonymous with wealth (the first two books suggested are The Millionaire Next Door: The Surprising Secrets of America’s Wealthy and Rich Dad, Poor Dad: What the Rich Teach Their Kids About Money – That the Poor and the Middle Class Do Not!). When authors express aspirations towards success (as some in this dissertation do), money alone does not usually stand in for success. Instead, they seek some mix of prestige, the respect of their peers, and popularity/sales in order to find an alternative way out of the tautological dead end.
aspect of success: recognition. It is not enough to achieve a goal, that achievement must be
recognized in some way for success to “count” as success. Precisely how an achievement is
recognized as success, however, is also mutable, subject to historical and social changes, further
adding to the complexity—in the sense of both difficulty and richness—of the concept of success.

Iurii Lotman’s analysis of medieval “honor” ("chest") and “glory” ("slava") investigates
a similar system of recognition, though not specifically conceptualized as success. Uses of these
two terms, for Lotman, reveal the deeply hierarchical nature of recognition systems. Certain
virtues, like glory, are exclusively “attached to the highest rungs of the feudal hierarchy,” while
others, like honor, are attainable by others.33 Nevertheless, Lotman finds, “the source of honor”
is always within the exclusive province of political power, the feudal lord.34 Literary success
might be thought of in a similar category with honor: it is available for attainment by various
members of society, but it must be bestowed by an entity recognized as having the power to do
so. What distinguishes success from honor, however, is that it can be conferred not only by the
feudal lord, monarch, or other political potentate, but also by the broad populace. Indeed, success
as a modern concept is often imagined to derive its legitimacy from the broad populace.
However, the conferral of success by the populace requires a mechanism to measure popular
acclaim and translate that acclaim into markers of success. Most often, in modern European
history, that mechanism has been the market. It is no surprise that, as Viktor Zhivov has shown,
the concept of literary success in Russia (as well as in Western Europe) can be traced to the development of a book market.\footnote{Viktor Zhivov, “Pervye russkie literaturnye biografii kak sotsial’nye iavlenie: Trediakovskii, Lomonosov, Sumarokov,” \textit{Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie}, No. 25 (1997): 24–83.}

Mikhail Berg’s ambitious sociological history of Russian literature, \textit{Literaturokracy}, builds on Lotman’s and Zhivov’s insights to construct a diachronic understanding of success. In a section devoted to a historical analysis of the “Criteria and Strategies of Success,” Berg suggests that both power structures and the market can be arbiters of success depending on the historical moment. In different historical contexts artists seek recognition and validation from different “reference groups” (“referentnye gruppy”), including political power, critical circles (\textit{kruzhki}), the market (as a proxy for popular opinion), or even themselves. Pushkin’s 1824 aphorism, “I write for myself, I publish for money” (“\textit{Pishu dlia sebia, pechataiu dlia deneg}”), for instance, invokes two alternative reference groups—his own internal standards, and the market—without mentioning recognition from any political power, an omission that an eighteenth-century court poet like Mikhail Lomonosov might find unimaginable. At other historical moments artists can even claim that the \textit{only} legitimate “reference group” is their own internal aesthetic sense. Boris Pasternak’s “The goal of art is self-giving” (“\textit{Tsel’ tvorchestva—samootdacha}”), serves as one example. The widely discussed late-Soviet practice of “writing for the desk drawer” is another. The recognition necessary for success, then, can come from various sources, including structures of political power, critical communities, the market, and even the artist him or herself. With these possible variations in mind, Berg proposes the following “parameters of success”: power (\textit{vlast’}), glory (\textit{slava}), money (\textit{den’gi}), and satisfaction (\textit{samoudovletvorenie}).\footnote{Berg, \textit{Literaturokratiia}, 241.} The richness of artistic success as a concept comes from its ability to
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contantly recombine these variables in different proportions. Each author’s conception of success reflects the current state of the literary field, acting as a real-time marker of the perceived legitimacy of each of Berg’s potential “parameters of success.”

The historically and socially contingent nature of success is further explored by the cultural sociologist Boris Dubin in an essay on the concept in literary history. For the sociologist, Dubin writes, the concept of success defines achievements that are recognized by “authoritative institutions in a given society [sotsium],” or by representative figures. In this way, achievements recognized as successful are socially “sanctioned” as “worthy of general attention and imitation.” This is what is normally thought of as success—public recognition of a significant achievement. Dubin even suggests that both achievement and recognition are implicitly understood as socially contingent concepts. But what is less well understood is that even the very “motivation to achieve a higher level of activity or ability must be recognized by society as not only lawful, but also condoned.” The very formation of aspirations, Dubin argues, is a socially embedded, and therefore a socially meaningful act. For this reason, the concept of success bears a much more intimate and meaningful relationship to what Dubin calls the “normative order of society” that might have been previously assumed.

The recognition of one or another action […] as successful certifies it as generally valid, confirms and endorses its social character in the highest degree. Any success bolsters the normative order of a given society, it is an expression of that order; just as the normative

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order, in its turn, ensures any success, it is almost a guarantee of the given [instance of] success.\(^{38}\)

In the present study, I ground my understanding of success in these theoretical explorations. I remain conscious of the instability of the concept of success and use that instability to methodological advantage. In each of my case studies I work to understand the meaning of success for the given author, allowing that meaning—however incomplete, subjective, or variable—to suggest an image of the “normative order” of the field in which that success takes place. Each author analyzed here envisions a very distinct version of literary success, relying on different reference groups and institutions of recognition. Boris Akunin conceives of success largely through the book market, while Olga Slavnikova relies on literary prizes for recognition. Aleksei Ivanov constructs a wholly original vision of success based on readers’ continued engagement with his multimedia projects. Vera Polozkova constructs her own reference group by building an online public through social media. Each of these visions of success responds to perceived strengths and inadequacies in the post-Soviet literary field. The strength of the book market or prize culture, for instance, can be perceived in authors’ reliance on these structures, while inadequacies can be perceived by their absences in these authors’ conceptions of success. For instance, none of these authors relates success to state power structures. None relies directly on the “thick” literary journals, or even on the critical apparatus more broadly. Instead, they all turn to reference groups which are, in one way or another, related to the capitalist book market (even Olga Slavnikova’s vision of a prestigious success outside of popular acclaim rely on the imported, capitalist Booker Prize). As other reference groups were

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., “признание того или иного действия […] успешным удостоверяет его как общезначимое, подтверждает и одобряет его в высшей степени социальный характер. Любой успех укрепляет нормативный порядок данного общества, он — выражение этого порядка; как нормативный порядок, со своей стороны, обеспечивает любой успех, он — как бы гарантия данного успеха.”
perceived to be inadequate, authors constructed success through various permutations and 
epiphenomena of the only reliable indicator of success in post-Soviet Russia: the capitalist book 
market.

Cultural Capitalism

The dominant position of the book market in conceptions of literary success points toward the 
prevalence of capitalist principles within the literary field. If “the structure of the [literary] field,” 
to quote Bourdieu, “is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific 
properties which govern success in the field,” then the post-Soviet literary field structured itself 
around the capitalist book market.39 It is this conception of a cultural system with a capitalist 
market as its center, and as its most fundamental marker of success, that I characterize with the 
term “cultural capitalism.”

Before refining my definition of this term, I need to disentangle it from possible 
 misleading associations. The particular collocation “cultural capitalism” has been used in at least 
two ways that do not reflect the meaning I intend. The first comes from Slavoj Žižek, who has 
popularized the “so-called cultural capitalism [as] today’s form of capitalism.” This system 
integrates altruistic impulses such as “charity” and “post-modern caring for ecology” into acts of 
consumption themselves.40 In Žižek’s understanding, advanced consumerism already 
addresses—within the very act of consumption—the “anti-consumerist duty” that movements of 
the 1960s emphasized. Though far from my own definition of cultural capitalism, what Žižek’s 
analysis shares with my own is how capitalist markets can be mobilized to symbolic ends that go

39 Bourdieu, Field of Cultural Production, 30.
beyond commodity exchange. In Žižek’s examples, buying a cup of coffee from Starbucks or a pair of shoes from Tom’s constitutes an act of consumption, but it also constitutes a symbolic act, dissociated from—or even atoning for—that act of consumption. Nevertheless, Žižek’s use of the modifier “cultural” is misleading here, and certainly does not coincide with my use of these terms.

Closer to my own understanding of “cultural capitalism” is that advanced by Timothy Bewes and Jeremy Gilbert in a collection of essays under that title.41 In their introduction, the two political philosophers frame the term as a cultural paradigm that has grown up around, and also helped facilitate, the late-1990s political consensus on the value of capitalism. “A version of ‘culture,’” they write, “is currently in the ascendant which is indissociable from the emergence of ‘Third Way’ politics [referring to the 1997 electoral victory of New Labour], and which seems, furthermore to have an ideological role of enforcing consensus.”42 Though they never explicitly define the term “cultural capitalism” as such, the type of culture they have in mind constitutes “the site of the contemporary consolidation of the globalizing world order.”43 This conception of cultural capitalism hews closer to my own understanding of both constituent terms and their relationship. Culture, understood as the collective field of the arts, is placed in direct, but not subordinate, relationship to capitalism. It both grows out of a capitalist consensus and facilitates its further consolidation. The mechanisms of cultural capitalism explored in the current study are similarly entangled with the growth and consolidation of capitalism as an economic system within Russia. However, while Bewes and Gilbert see culture as part of broader political

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42 Ibid., 5.
43 Ibid., 7.
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processes, I maintain focus on developments within culture itself, and literature specifically. Furthermore, while for Bewes and Gilbert, “capitalism” represents a worldview as much as it does a system of exchange, my understanding of “cultural capitalism” derives from the adoption of capitalist principles of exchange within the field of cultural production. Once adopted, those principles do form a specific worldview, giving rise to innovative aesthetic forms and practices, but that worldview is not borrowed directly from capitalism. It does not necessarily reference or explicitly support what Bewes and Gilbert refer to as “Third Way politics,” or what we might now call “neoliberalism.” Rather, it is a worldview developed from specific forms of aesthetic expression that emerge out of a cultural field governed by capitalist principles of exchange.

Finally, the term cultural capitalism might appear to derive from the term “cultural capital,” one of Pierre Bourdieu’s original “Forms of Capital” (along with economic and social capital). However, Bourdieu defines cultural capital in his foundational essay as a person’s educational attainments, which can be converted into economic capital (money), but have little directly to do with culture as the collective field of the arts. The system of cultural capitalism that I am proposing, on the other hand, is a system of cultural production (primarily literature, but also visual art, music, film, etc.) based on capitalist principles (of market exchange facilitated by money), rather than a system based around Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital. Further muddying the waters, I nevertheless borrow from Bourdieu in my analysis of cultural capitalism. I do so in part because Bourdieu’s concepts have become the lingua franca for the sociology of culture—indeed, they pervade Russian theoretical texts throughout the 1990s and 2000s—but also because one of the goals of this study is to push beyond Bourdieu’s work on the French literary field. By pointing out where Bourdieu’s analysis does not fit the empirical findings of my

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research, I hope to show how the specificity of post-Soviet Russia can lead to new theoretical insights.

The first concept I borrow from Bourdieu is the notion of the “field” as a space of a certain type of activity populated by heterogeneous subjects engaged in struggles to gain power, recognition, and money within the various aspects of that activity. The literary field, for instance, is made up not only of writers, but also of critics, publishers, prize judges, and readers. The field is structured by various available positions—“the universe of options that are simultaneously offered for producers and consumers to choose from.”\(^\text{45}\) It is animated by subjects attempting to take those positions, while such position-taking is mediated by institutions in the field. An example of such a position might be that of a literary prizewinner. Such a position is created by the prize’s founding, the position is taken through a struggle among competitors, and it is mediated by the prize jury, as well as critics and literary journalists who judge the prize as deserved or not. Any field, literary or otherwise, overlaps with other fields of political, social, and economic activity, including the field of power. Indeed, the field of power specifically is central to Bourdieu’s analysis. In the cultural capitalism of post-Soviet Russia, however, the field of power recedes, and economic activity takes a dominant position.

Facilitating exchange among these fields are various resources or forms of “capital,” the second concept I borrow from Bourdieu. Primarily, I explore the interaction between two forms of capital: economic capital (money) and symbolic capital. Bourdieu defines symbolic capital as, “a capital of recognition which permits [the holder] to exert symbolic effects.”\(^\text{46}\) In the literary field, such symbolic effects might be best thought of as prestige or legitimacy. Symbolic capital


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is generated by collective agreement among “social agents endowed with the categories of perception and appreciation permitting them to perceive, know, and recognize it.” Thus, a trusted critical apparatus, a venerable prize, or, under certain historical circumstances, a political leader, might be able to endow a literary work or an author with symbolic capital. In post-Soviet Russia, however, none of these institutions exerted the necessary influence in society. The social agent that emerged as the most trusted with the “categories of perception and appreciation” to endow symbolic capital in the literary field was none other than the capitalist book market. This is the particular characteristic of cultural capitalism: it is a system in which symbolic capital derives largely from economic capital.

In this way, cultural capitalism inverts a widely held understanding of the cultural sphere, articulated by Bourdieu as variously “the economic world reversed” and as an “economic world turned upside down.” In Bourdieu’s conception, artists effect a “symbolic revolution” which makes a virtue out of non-success, and insists that art is “foreign to the ordinary logic of the ordinary economy,” and only subject to its own internal demands. In the Russian tradition this conception of the cultural sphere is characterized by Viktor Shklovskii’s notion of a “Hamburg score” (“Gamburgskii schet”), an evaluation free from all external influences—social, economic, political—and based purely on merit. Bourdieu’s corpus of studies on the fields of cultural production are dedicated to showing that no such thing as a “Hamburg score” is ever possible, that even if cultural fields might invert economic logic, they are always subject to the struggles for power, the exchanges of capital, and the social imbrications that characterize the rest of life.

47 Ibid.

But if Bourdieu’s analyses reliably return to struggles for power and domination, cultural capitalism always revolves around economic exchange.

_Literary Evolution_

For the literary scholar—or for that matter, the reader—all the positions and position-taking, the forms of capital and mechanisms of conversion, would be nothing but background noise if they bore no relation to the literature produced. As suggested above, it has often proven theoretically difficult to build a bridge between, on the one hand, a rigorous sociological picture of literature as a field and, on the other, the practice of literature as the creation and appreciation of verbal art. One of the more suggestive attempts at such a connection—and one that informs the present study—comes from the Russian Formalists, especially Boris Eikhenbaum and Iurii Tynianov. In a series essays from the mid to late 1920s, Eikhenbaum and Tynianov begin to posit a fragmentary theory that connects literature as a phenomenon of formal aesthetic innovation (which had preoccupied early Formalist studies and had given the school its name) to literature as a socially embedded phenomenon. They suggested the connection by proposing three terms—the literary everyday, literary fact, and literary evolution—which, they argue, interact dynamically within literature, making it a “system” among other systems.49

The first term, “the literary everyday” or “literaturnyi byt,” proposed by Eikhenbaum in an essay by that name, is meant to capture the apparatus around literature, responsible for its production, dissemination, and consumption, but not constituting literature itself.50 Tynianov’s

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essay on “Literary Fact” ("Literaturnyi fakt") gave a name to the phenomena within literature proper. The literary everyday and literary facts are not stable categories; they move in dynamic relation to one another, always exchanging certain positions, so that what was outside of literature (the literary everyday) becomes part of literature (a literary fact), and vice versa. For example, journals and almanacs, in one of Tynianov’s examples, had long been part of the literary everyday, outside of literature proper, but in the early twentieth century, avant-garde figures transformed them into works of literature in their own right. 51 Other phenomena move from the center of literature towards the literary everyday. The poet’s relationship to state power, which served as the central subject of the eighteenth-century ode, as well as early nineteenth-century meditations on art and power, had by the late nineteenth century receded from thematic prominence, even if state censorship, for instance, remained influential in the production, dissemination, and consumption of literature. The constant movement of these two aspects constitutes literature as a “system” that is “in uninterrupted relation” ("v nepreryvnoi sootnesennosti") with other systems. 52 What Tynianov calls “literary evolution” ("literaturnaia evoliutsiia") is driven, in large part, by the interaction between literary facts and the literary everyday, between literature as a system of aesthetic functions, and the systems adjacent to literature which do not constitute literature proper.

The Formalists’ essays suggesting this approach are relatively brief and fragmentary, proposing—rather than executing—a methodology for connecting the qualities of literary art with extra-literary factors. Nevertheless, their suggestive power influences the approach I take in this dissertation. Each chapter examines an aspect of what might be called the literary

52 Ibid., 670.
everyday—the book market, literary prizes, multimedia events, and the internet and social media—alongside the literary creations of specific authors. By bringing new aspects of the post-Soviet literary everyday in contact with the literary facts that constitute the post-Soviet production of verbal art, I implement a methodology similar to the one the Formalists’ proposed. This methodology allows me to show how literature itself, verbal art from prose narrative to lyric poetry, has developed in the post-Soviet era.

Through these methods, this study attempts to construct a broad vision of the post-Soviet literary field that is assembled from within. Many studies of contemporary Russian literature present themselves as surveys that do not insist on a central conceptual framework, but rather offer a lay of the land. Other studies offer overarching frameworks that invoke global intellectual trends or master tropes, frequently borrowed from Western literary theory, such as postmodern aesthetics, feminist outlooks, or trauma studies, to name just a few. While this research represents invaluable contributions, much of it does not attempt a theoretical conceptualization derived organically from the post-Soviet field itself. My approach instead attempts to take post-Soviet literature on its own terms, to understand how the economic, institutional, and literary mechanisms within the field itself have disintegrated, shifted, and recombined to produce new forms of both the literary everyday and of literature itself.


54 Western feminism, for instance, has been grafted on to post-Soviet Russian literature in works such as Helena Goscilo, ed., Fruits of Her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Women’s Culture (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993) and Benjamin Sutcliffe The Prose of Life: Russian Women Writers from Khrushchev to Putin (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); Western postmodernist theory has been mapped on to the Russian context perhaps most prominently by Mark Lipovetsky, in Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999) and Paralogii: transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kulture 1920—2000-kh godov (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008); in a similar way, trauma studies has been imported by Alexander Etkind in Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2013).
Introduction: Reassembling the Literary

What emerges is a literary paradigm deeply embedded in the success rhetoric of cultural capitalism. Each of the authors in this study treats success, usually measured by economic markets, both in their public statements and in their literary texts. Within their fictional worlds, economic indicators pervade characters’ thinking, their relationships, and even the mechanisms of fate itself. This is equally true for works that valorize capitalism, for those that depict its formation, and for those that critique its pervasiveness. Across these various orientations, post-Soviet Russia has produced literature that is deeply informed both explicitly and implicitly by the success rhetoric of cultural capitalism. This literature of capitalism, however, is not a return to the bourgeois literature most often associated (largely by Marxist critics) with capitalist social formations. Instead this is a literature of what Max Weber called “adventure capitalism,” or capitalism without the “protestant ethic” that values frugality, work for its own sake, and stability. Here, drastic changes in fate and social status are the norm, risks are high and rewards can be great, but they are rarely attained through logical planning or sustained effort. More often, fate, luck, the caprices of markets or of powerful individuals exercise decisive influence. This vision of a non-bourgeois capitalism comes through especially in the chapter on Olga Slavnikova’s prose—where the categories of bourgeois values and adventure capitalism are treated in more detail—but is pervasive throughout. Even Boris Akunin, whose protagonist Erast Fandorin is a tireless promoter of bourgeois ideals, constantly frustrates his character’s best intentions by lacing his world with the vagaries of criminality, capitalism, and corruption. While such depictions of adventure capitalism in post-Soviet Russia could be perceived and even analyzed without necessary recourse to the extra-textual activities of their creators, I believe that


careful attention to the literary everyday alongside analysis of literature itself can provide a more robust picture of literary evolution. Literature moved towards depictions of capitalism in response to broad societal changes involving market reforms in post-Soviet Russia. This is only natural. But literature developed the *specific* forms and practices outlined in the following chapters through individual authors’ often idiosyncratic responses to both literary and extra-literary situations. By following the authors themselves and the choices they make, both within and beyond their literary creations, I assemble an account of how literary evolution under cultural capitalism has developed many of the themes, forms, and styles characteristic of post-Soviet Russian literature.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Each chapter in this dissertation both deploys and develops my methodology and provides a case study of the development of cultural capitalism as an economic and aesthetic system. In this way, each new set of facts not only adds richness to the picture of how culture is created, distributed, recognized, and consumed in post-Soviet Russia, it also tests the various ways literary texts might be productively brought into contact with their extra-literary contexts.

The first chapter traces the development of the post-Soviet book market and the various statistical measures that the literary field developed in ever more refined attempts to represent itself. Such statistical measures, including the bestseller lists published in *Knizhnoe obozrenie* (*The Book Review*), demonstrated the popularity of mass literature alongside waning interests in the type of serious poetry and prose published in traditional “thick” literary journals. Through these materials, I demonstrate how the literary field’s increasingly sophisticated self-presentation revealed an expanding rift between elite literary production and popular tastes. I then turn to an
Introduction: Reassembling the Literary

to attract a mass readership. Under the pseudonym B. Akunin, Chkhartishvili married the genre plotting and the tropes of mystery novels with cultural references and a refined prose style reminiscent of serious literary fiction to create what he called a “new detective” novel. These works, I argue, consciously adopt the entertainment value of genre prose into the realm of elite literature, attempting to attract a broad readership to serious fiction and renew elite literature from within. In this way, I contend, Chkhartishvili’s project brings the success rhetoric and market indicators from mass fiction into elite literary production, adopting some of the key tenets of cultural capitalism into works written for the intelligentsia.

The second chapter, by analyzing the institution of literary prizes, shows how cultural capitalism has pervaded yet another aspect of elite literature. I compare two emblematic literary prizes that were founded at the beginning of the post-Soviet era, the Triumph Prize and the Russian Booker Prize, and show how the latter gained prestige while the former remained in relative obscurity. I argue that the two prizes’ divergent fates can be understood, in part, through their relationship to capitalism—the Triumph promised to insulated its laureates from the whims of the market, while the Booker promised to make prizewinners beneficiaries of those same whims. I then turn to Olga Slavnikova, an early advocate of Russian prize culture and an author who envisions her own success as legitimated by literary prizes, especially the Russian Booker. I trace her commentary on prize culture alongside the development of her prose to show how her verbal art incorporated—both thematically and stylistically—her changing relationship to capitalism and to prize culture.
The third chapter tells a story of failure that led to an innovative reconceptualization of the very concept of success. I examine the career of the Urals writer Aleksei Ivanov, whose provincial origins at first helped him gain recognition in Moscow, but later led to rejection from much of the literary establishment. I argue that the deeply local orientation of his first novels created a powerful sense of enchantment and affective attachment to the territory they depicted. This intensely local orientation allowed Ivanov to occupy a position in the literary field that had developed following increased interest in postcolonial tropes and metaphors in the early 2000s. But it also stymied Ivanov’s attempts to find consecration through institutions of the literary mainstream, especially prestigious prizes. Frustrated with the Moscow establishment, Ivanov reoriented his understanding of success away from the capital and its institutions, but also away from a literature-centric model of authorship. Subsequently, Ivanov came to understand success as his readers’ willingness to engage with his work not only as literary art, but in its various incarnations: film adaptations, festivals based on his novels, interactive games, and even tourist guides. This re-envisioning of success, I argue, transforms the literary triad of author, reader, and work. In Ivanov’s vision, the author has the role of creator/mediator, while the reader becomes an active participant, and the work is conceived more broadly as various forms of (often collective) imaginative activity.

The final chapter examines the rise of the literary internet through the lens of one of its most popular poetic denizens. I show how early literary production on the Russian internet was carefully separated from “serious” literature by authors, poets, and critics who had already found success in the print media. Soon, however, the separation between print literature and the literary internet was bridged through the efforts not of print authors as much as by enthusiastic readers of print literature who formed reader communities online. These communities, which I call “online
Introdution: Reassembling the Literary

publics,” soon took on important roles in the distribution and consumption of print media, attracting the attention of print authors and publishers. A younger generation of internet writers, including Vera Polozkova—the subject of the fourth chapter—began to build their own online publics as a way of creating their own success. I trace how Polozkova built her phenomenal popularity by activating the creative impulses of her online public and making her audience into co-creators of her poetic oeuvre. I then show how her experience with the language and conventions of social media as well as her audience-orientation are reflected in the forms, language, and syntax of her poetic texts.

In each of these examples, I demonstrate how an author’s vision of success reflects changes in the contours of the literary field at large. I also show how success for post-Soviet Russian writers is often perceived through measures of popularity, the book market, or derivatives thereof. I argue that these examples are not isolated instances, but exemplars of larger trends that, taken together, indicate the development and consolidation of the system I call cultural capitalism. In my afterword, I turn to representatives of the new left, including the poet and essayist Kirill Medvedev and the artist collective Chto delat’? (What is to be Done?). Beginning in the mid-2000s, these figures mounted a critique of the hegemony of capitalist values in the cultural sphere, staking out a position outside of cultural capitalism specifically based on a value system independent of the book market. I argue that such push back against capitalism within culture not only indicates the entrenchment of cultural capitalism as I have described it, but also points in a new direction. The way forward indicated by these figures includes the assertion of a type of artistic autonomy that derives its power and legitimacy not from economic exchange, but on the contrary, from political and ethical opposition to cultural capitalism and the system it has created.
CHAPTER 1
Socialist Realism Inside-Out:
Boris Akunin and Mass Literature for the Elite

“Мы фабулы не знаем и поэтому фабулу презираем. […] И гордимся этим. Гордиться нечего.”
— Lev Lunts, “Na zapad!” (1922)

INTRODUCTION

Near the end of the 1990s, the co-editor of the prestigious journal of literary translation, Inostrannaia literatura, wrote an article (for a different journal) playfully titled “If I Were a Newspaper Magnate” (“Esli by ia byl gazetnym magnatom”). In the midst of the many dire prognostications of the demise of Russian literature appearing at the time, this article stood out for its lighthearted optimism. Its author, Grigorii Chkhartishvili (who would later take on the pseudonym B. Akunin) proposed a half-serious plan to save Russian letters from the current crisis. Given infinite money, wrote Chkhartishvili, a “glorious news-and-periodical life would begin under the trustworthy wing of my many-headed oligarchic eagle. Russian literature would blossom.” Among other things, he went on, his empire would include a second Inostrannaia literatura, an IL-2 completely devoted to entertainment: “Intellectual murder mysteries (intellektual’nye detektivy), provocative memoirs, literary games and further amusements. […] This is the contribution I can make to raising the culture of entertainment. I imagine IL-2 will have ten times the readers as IL-1.”

In the following years, under the penname B. Akunin, Chkhartishvili would write his own intellektual’nye detektivy—the adventures of Erast

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1 Grigorii Chkhartishvili, “Esli by ia byl gazetnym magnatom,” Neprikosnovennyi zapas 2 (1999). All translations from the Russian are by Bradley Gorski unless otherwise noted.

2 Ibid.
Chapter 1: Socialist Realism Inside-Out

Fandorin—which would attract even more readers and would do even more to “rais[e] the culture of entertainment” than the imagined IL-2 ever could.³

In this chapter, I argue that Chkhartishvili’s purpose with his Fandorin detective novels is no less ambitious than the jocular aspirations that frame “If I Were a Newspaper Magnate”: to create the conditions under which “Russian literature would blossom.” Indeed, the wild success that he imagines for IL-2 is the central pillar of the rejuvenated Russian literature that he envisions in this essay. In fact, for Chkhartishvili, I argue, success is not simply a means to an end; it does more than attract a broad audience, or provide ample monetary compensation for literary labor. Success as a concept, even as an ideology, becomes the central structuring principle in Chkhartishvili’s multi-layered literary project, which involves the creation of an explicitly successful authorial persona named “B. Akunin,” and of his central hero, the unfailingly successful sleuth, Erast Fandorin. Both of Chkhartishvili’s creations are characters of extraordinary personal merit—intelligent, courageous, reliable, competent—and both are situated in literary worlds capable of perceiving, valuing, and rewarding their personal qualities with public markers of success—that is, in worlds constructed as reliable meritocracies.⁴ In this way, Chkhartishvili’s creation of Akunin and Fandorin did more than simply bridge the rift between genre fiction and the Russian literary heritage (filling the gap, as one critic puts it, between

³ Chkhartishvili’s first novels appeared under the pseudonym B. Akunin, highlighting the connection to the nineteenth-century Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Chkhartishvili filled out his pseudonym’s first name only in 2000. (See “Biografiia g-na Akunina” Fandorin.ru, accessed through The Internet Archive, 15 Nov 2016: http://web.archive.org/web/20010224070036/http://www.fandorin.ru/akunin/biography.html)

⁴ Chkhartishvili, under both Akunin and other pseudonyms, has gone on to create many other heroes, including several generations of the Fandorin family, and the intrepid detective-nun, Sister Pelagia. In this chapter, I focus on his first two characters: B. Akunin and Erast Fandorin. These two have been, and remain, Chkhartishvili’s most popular creations. Furthermore, their entrance onto the literary field in 1998 marked the first appearance of Chkhartishvili’s literary imagination, and its strongest influence on the further development of the field.
“Pushkin and pulp”\(^5\). Chkhartishvili also helped make success into an acceptable, and even prominent conceptual category through which authors in post-Soviet Russia could understand and perform their own place in the literary field.

In what follows, I argue that Chkhartishvili’s ability to combine mass and elite tastes and, in the process, to communicate an ideology of success to literary elites might be productively understood as “socialist realism inside-out.” Like socialist realism, Chkhartishvili’s Fandorin novels would bring together the needs of the elite with the communication strategies of popular fiction, joining ideological content with popular literature in a new way. Unlike socialist realism, however, Chkhartishvili would use irony, parody, and travesty to expose the devices of genre literature, and would set these devices against a backdrop woven from scraps of the Russian literary tradition. As such, rather than great literature aimed at the masses, Chkhartishvili would create mass literature aimed at the elites, a form analogous to socialist realism, but one that is inverted and intentionally exposes its seams.

To make this argument, I begin by analyzing the development of the literary field in the immediate post-Soviet decade. I argue that the divergent priorities of literary journals, on the one hand, and the book market, on the other, effectively pulled Russian literature between two opposing poles. I then turn to the first Soviet decade, the 1920s, as a somewhat unexpected historical antecedent. I argue that socialist realism, along with other new forms, arose largely in response to a rift in the literary field, which can be seen as analogous to the 1990s literary crisis. Finally, I return to Chkhartishvili and perform a close reading of the pseudonym “B. Akunin” and of the first novel in the Fandorin series, *Azazel* (*Azazel’* 1998). I show how the creation of B. Akunin and Erast Fandorin—Chkhartishvili’s form of “socialist realism inside-out”—helped

stabilize the post-Soviet literary field not only through the creation of hybrid literary forms that
joined genre fiction and the classic Russian tradition, but also, and at least as important, through
the dissemination of an ideology of success.

RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN CRISIS: THE 1990s

In 1990, the most prominent of the monthly periodicals known as “thick” literary journals, *Novyi mir*, reached a circulation of 2.7 million. The same year, *Literaturnaia gazeta* sold an average of 4.2 million copies an issue. Interest in the serious literary fiction and poetry published in these outlets had never been higher in Soviet Russia—at least as measured by circulation numbers. This was the direct result of Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost policies, which allowed for the publication, at long last, of previously censored literature. Everything from Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* to the previously suppressed poetry of Osip Mandel’shtam and Anna Akhmatova to Andrei Bitov’s experimental novel *Pushkin House* appeared in rapid succession in *Novyi mir* and its competitors, *Druzhba narodov*, *Znamia*, and others. Readers, it seemed, could not get enough of the serious, difficult, and at times experimental literature of which they had

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7 Stephen Lovell, for instance, writes that even in the late Soviet period “Popular entertainment culture still existed under very serious constraints. This situation began to change fast in the late 1980s, when the policy of ‘openness’ (glasnost) led to the publication of many forgotten and forbidden works. […] These ideologically controversial works were joined by modern classics that had been taboo for a range of less obviously political reasons: for their formal experimentation, their lewdness, or their foreignness. The sudden appearance of all these ‘rediscovered’ treasures brought a huge reading boom: a mass reading public with enormous curiosity and pent-up demand came into contact with an entire century of literary heritage over a period of two or three years” (Lovell, “Literature and Entertainment in Russia: A Brief History,” in *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, eds. Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (Munich: Verlag Otto Sangner, 2005), 27–28). For legislative details relating to press policy in perestroika and post-Soviet Russia see Andrei M. Il’nitskii, *Knigoizdanie sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: Vremia, 2002).

been deprived for the previous seventy years. Such an optimistic conclusion, however, turned out to be unfounded: 1990 marked the peak of the so-called journal boom, and in the ensuing years circulations would drop even more precipitously than they had grown throughout perestroika. By 1993, Novyi mir would sell only 60,000 copies an issue, and would fall further in the following years to around a tenth of that number.9

Far from sparking a sustained interest in literary fiction and poetry, the spike in journal circulations turned out to be a temporary phenomenon, a momentary flood after a long dry spell. Furthermore, as Lev Gudkov has argued, this flash flood brought more long-term harm than good to the literary field for several reasons.10 First, the legitimacy of literature during glasnost did not depend on critical consecration or even attention, but on a text’s sacral status within the mythologized underground and/or suppressed literary tradition. “Samizdat and tamizdat,” writes Gudkov, “invalidated criticism as a mechanism of organizing the literary process,” because its aura of legitimacy, derived from its political rather than literary qualities, rendered “superfluous the agencies and individuals that had previously determined the success of a literary or journalistic debut, laid the foundations of a writer’s reputation.”11 Second, the popularity of the suppressed texts created incentives for literary journals to devote the majority of their space to older poetry and prose, limiting the pages devoted to contemporary literature and criticism. Finally, the turn to past works meant that current literary production was all but ignored by the prominent journals, giving critics little new material for their work. Gudkov points out,


Chapter 1: Socialist Realism Inside-Out

Since the “thick” journals snubbed the literary avant-garde and stockpiled nothing new (meaning reserves of intellectual understanding and analysis of current events or of liberal or “contemporary”—which in this context are the same—values) and were bereft of spiritual fiber, they proved incapable of subjecting modern forms of literature (even those of the 1970s) to systematic consideration or of being an instrument of topical social criticism.  

As the floodgates of glasnost opened, the incoming tide overwhelmed and, to a large extent, washed away both current literary fiction and the concomitant critical apparatus. In Gudkov’s words, “The journal boom of the late 1980s and the early 1990s ‘wiped out’ literary criticism as such, eliminating it as a distinct sub-system within the institution of literature with responsibility for upholding standards of literary quality.”

In the same year that journal circulation reached its peak, 1990, the publishing industry was fully liberalized. No longer was the printed word legally the exclusive province of the state—anyone with a printing press could, and soon would, print and sell verbal material. While throughout the Soviet Union, between 100 and 190 presses had operated at any one time, between 1991 and 1992, 456 licenses were granted to new publishers, and by 1994, more than 6,500 publishers were registered and working. As Birgit Menzel writes:

In 1991 only 8 percent of all book titles and 21 percent of total copies were released by private publishing houses; by 2002 these figures had risen to 66 percent and 87 percent

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 47.
15 Ibid., 42.
respectively. Commercialization brought the end of the book shortage [that had plagued the late Soviet years], and the variety of available material increased massively.\textsuperscript{16}

This growth was largely driven by the profitability of imported mass or popular literature, usually from the West, and usually of several relatively stable genre paradigms: mystery, romance, thriller, and so on. However unsurprising this might appear in retrospect, neither the book market, the literary system, nor the critical apparatus was prepared for the influx of mass literature.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the weekly newspaper \textit{Knizhnoe obozrenie (The Book Review)}, the major trade publication of the book industry, had not yet developed the technologies necessary to track readers’ tastes or represent popular success to its audience of editors, publishers, and booksellers. Indeed, the creation and development of these technologies in the pages of \textit{Knizhnoe obozrenie} marks an important, and often overlooked, transition in the structure of the literary field. Over the course of a few years in the early 1990s, the book industry moved away from subjective qualitative evaluations towards quantitative models of demand, in the process pushing publishers toward genre literature and marking an ever more distinct split between the book market, on the one hand, and the values of the “thick” literary journals and the associated literary intelligentsia, on the other. This trajectory toward quantitative modeling of reader demand and commercial success can be clearly illustrated by tracing changes in the industry’s self-presentation and self-creation in the pages of \textit{Knizhnoe obozrenie}.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[16] Ibid.
\item[17] \textit{Knizhnoe obozrenie} was not the only publication focused on the book industry. It was joined in 1992 by \textit{Knizhnoe delo} and in 1993 by \textit{Knizhnyi biznes}, both monthly journals published in Moscow. The increasingly market-oriented titles of these publications are indicative of the industry’s general trajectory. I take my examples from \textit{Knizhnoe obozrenie} since it maintained the broadest circulation among industry periodicals and because it engaged in primary market research more than the other journals.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Chapter 1: Socialist Realism Inside-Out

At the end of 1990, the newspaper printed a list of the “100 best books” to appear that year, continuing a long-held Soviet-era tradition that compiled such lists based on a thoroughly subjective methodology of expert opinion.\(^\text{18}\) The next year, the newspaper launched a section entitled “Bestseller-91.” The section’s name, which simply transliterated the English word “bestseller” into the Cyrillic alphabet, suggests an alignment with the quantitative rankings characteristic of capitalist book markets. Nevertheless, the section continued to rely on expert opinion rather than popular taste. An illustrative piece under this rubric entitled “The Opinion of Publishers” (“Mnenie izdatelei”), asked various publishers, “Which books from your press are intended for high reader demand?”\(^\text{19}\) The answers illustrate not only the bold use of the new commercial language of literary success, but perhaps more important, the growing separation between publishers’ intuition and readers’ demand. The first response, for instance, reads:

In the category of bestsellers, undoubtedly, will be Treatises on Eternal Peace; the book contains the humanistic works of Erasmus of Rotterdam, John Amos Comenius, Immanuel Kant, Vasilii Malinovskii, and others. Other books which, of course, will be successful, include the collection Memories of Russian Army Soldiers. 1812, and N. Kostomarov’s book Russian History.\(^\text{20}\)

Other answers were no less naïve. Some betrayed a continued adherence to a paternalistic model of the book industry: “In our times, when the question of national identity is so important,

\(^{18}\) “100 luchshikh knig 1990 goda,” Knizhnoe obozrenie, 7 Jun 1991, 23 (1305): 8–9. According to the paper, the list was “composed by ranking the votes of the readers of KO” (“sostavlen po ubyvaishchey chisla podanych golosov chitatelei ‘KO’”). Because Knizhnoe obozrenie was primarily a trade publication, the majority of its readers comprised critics, scholars, publishers, and editors, that is, the elite of the publishing industry.


\(^{20}\) “К бестселлерам, без сомнения, надо отнести «Трактаты о вечном мире»; книга содержит гуманистические произведения Эразма Роттердамского, Яна Амоса Коменского, Иммануила Канта, Василия Малиновского и других. Успехом станут пользоваться, конечно, сборник «Воспоминания воинов Русской армии. 1812 год», книги Н. Костомарова «Русская история»” (ibid.).
readers will find it useful to encounter L. Mints’s brilliant work *One Hundred Peoples, One Hundred Languages*; while others evinced a purely aspirational understanding of book sales: “We hope that our almanac *Patriot* will become a bestseller.”

![Figure 1.1: “The Opinion of Publishers” *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 17 May 1991.](image)

21 The first quote is from Aleksandr Sudakov, the editor-in-chief of Prosveshchenie (“В наши дни, когда так остро стоит национальный вопрос, учащимся будет небесполезна встреча с яркой книгой Л.Минца “Сто народов, сто языков”). The second comes from Aleksandr Ostrovskii of Patriot (Надеемся, что бестселлером станет наш альманах “Патриот”). Ibid.
Chapter 1: Socialist Realism Inside-Out

In the coming years, however, *Knizhnoe obozrenie* moved away from expert opinion and focused on developing quantitative approaches to measuring reader demand. The first such attempt was a section entitled “Hit-Parade of Print Runs” (“*Khit-parad izdavaemosti*”), which simply ranked the number of copies appearing over the last month, under the assumption that print runs accurately reflected not only publishers’ expectations, but readers’ actual demand.22 Beginning in 1994, the “Hit Parade” was joined by a competing rubric, “Bestsellers of Moscow,” which collected actual sales data from 15 bookstores and 50 newsstands in the capital. Although bestsellers were only tracked within Moscow, where one might assume the tastes of the reading public to align most closely with those of the literary elites, the difference between the two lists is nevertheless striking. In March 1994, for instance, the bestseller for fiction is an anonymous novelization of the popular Peruvian *telenovela*, *Simply Maria (Prosto Mariia)*, while the non-fiction leader is Michael Jackson’s autobiography *Moonwalk, ili lunnaia pokhodka Maikla Dzheksona*.23 Neither could be found in that month’s “Hit Parade,” exposing the disconnect between publishers and their (Moscow) readers.

Over the coming years *Knizhnoe obozrenie* would take on the mission of informing its subscribers—primarily the publishing industry—on the tastes of the broad reading public. It would accomplish this primarily through its continued publication of bestseller lists, which grew from small notices in a bottom corner into full-page charts by 1995.24 Additionally, the

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newspaper published more sophisticated sociological data on Russian reading habits produced by
the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (Vserossiiskii tsentr izuchenia obshchest-
vennogo mnenia; known most commonly by its Russian acronym VTsIOM). The first of these
studies carefully explains its methodology before presenting the results of a survey of 4,000
residents of Russia, who “by age, sex, education, type of activities, and so forth, present a model
of the country’s population.”

Respondents were asked what genres they most often read, and

Figure 1.2: Bestsellers in Knizhnoe obozrenie, 14 March 1994

Figure 1.3: Bestsellers in Knizhnoe obozrenie, 17 October 1995

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25 “На этот раз было опрошено 4000 взрослых жителей России, вся совокупность которых по возрасту, полу,
образованию, роду занятий и т.д. представляет собой модель населения страны” Boris Dubin, “Chto chitaiut
rossiane” (Knizhnoe obozrenie, 15 Mar 1994, no. 11 (1449): 26).
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their answers inform four separate bar graphs representing the preferences of different demographic segments. Such sophisticated statistical models not only mark a cardinal change in understanding reader preferences—from relying on expert intuition to seeking out broad representative samples—they also mark an important transformation in the way the book market was understood, represented, and produced in the pages of its major publication throughout the early 1990s.

![Image of bar graphs](image.png)

*Figure 1.4: “What Russians are Reading,” the first sociological study of reading habits from VTsIOM to appear in Knizhnoe obozrenie (Knizhnoe obozrenie, 15 Mar 1994).*
In contradistinction to the “thick” literary journals, which continued to pursue a “classicism” agenda of “cultural guardianship” well into the 1990s, the book industry (at least as reflected in Knizhnoe obozrenie) increasingly represented itself and reproduced itself in accordance with the parameters of capitalist markets. Here, books are represented as increasingly reified nodes in a system of exchange, subjected to ever more complex statistical modeling, while their content is largely ignored. Such a vision of the book market inevitably values mass literature, whose stable genre paradigms allow for both replacement and reproduction at relatively low cost to producers (authors, editors, and publishers). Unsurprisingly, as the book industry’s sociological apparatus became better equipped to measure the demands of the reading public, it encouraged publishers to shift focus away from literary fiction and poetry towards popular literature, a shift demonstrated by the transformation of the newspaper’s advertisements throughout the decade. If a full-page ad in 1991 announced the first release of Max Weber’s works in Russia since 1923, then by 1994 the Tulbytservis publishing house chose to display its thrillers most prominently, proclaiming above a row of garishly illustrated Rambo novels, “You know us by the books from our series: adventures, mysteries, scifi,” before mentioning or displaying their more respectable offerings.


Figure 1.5: Full-page advertisement for the Tulbytservis publishing house, *Knizhnoe obozrenie* 15 March 1994.

Taken together, the trajectories of the “thick” literary journals and the book market effectively pulled the literary field in the directions of two almost diametrically opposed poles.\(^{28}\) One pole valued reader interest with little attention to literary quality, while the other paid little heed to reader interest while valuing the literature itself. It is important to note, however, that this second pole valued not so much literary quality as the Russian literary heritage. This distinction is important. A pole that values literary quality over commercial success can often become a vital scene of literary production, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested. Indeed, Bourdieu argues that the elite pole of the literary field often constitutes “an economic world turned upside down,” where

\(^{28}\) I do not mean to suggest that these two tendencies organized every agent, author, and publisher in the literary field. To the contrary, many publishers such as Pushkinskii dom, for instance, were more closely aligned with the values of the literary journals than with those of the commercial book market. Nevertheless, the book market exercised certain influences even on such idealistic publishers. As the current editor-in-chief of LenIzdat Aleksei Gordin told me, he left Pushkinskii dom in 1992 for the trade publisher Severo-zapad because he was frustrated with the former’s willful ignorance of market principles (Personal interview with Aleksei Gordin, 14 Jun 2016, St. Petersburg, Russia).
commercial failure can be worn as a badge of honor.\textsuperscript{29} In a “symbolic revolution,” he writes, “artists free themselves from the bourgeois demands [of the market] by refusing to recognize any master except their art,” and by doing so they make “the market disappear.”\textsuperscript{30} For Bourdieu’s nineteenth-century French authors, as the market disappeared, the resulting inverted economic world became the locus of avant-garde aesthetics, of art for art’s sake, and the most vital laboratory for new literary forms and genre paradigms. This model, however, cannot be applied directly to the Russian literary field of the 1990s. Though Russian literary journals of the time may have willfully ignored the demands of the market, they focused on literary heritage instead of innovation. For this reason, rather than becoming laboratories of new forms and paradigms, they became, as Lev Gudkov puts it, sites for the “museification” of literature.\textsuperscript{31}

In fact, the structure of the 1990s Russian literary field I am sketching out here should be clearly distinguished from Bourdieu’s model of French nineteenth-century literature. First, the mechanisms that drove the field’s bifurcation in 1990s Russia were primarily extra-authorial, that is, it was not the authors (as Bourdieu suggests of nineteenth-century France) but the institutions of the post-Soviet literary world that drove its bipolar development. The literary field’s structure in the 1990s should be seen largely as the product of institutional transition, rather than as the result of the efforts or failures of any individuals. The retrospective tendencies of the literary journals were no more the product of individual authors’ or critics’ works than was the boom in mass imported culture the product of the singular efforts of James Hadley Chase or


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Gudkov, “The Institutional Framework of Reading,” 49. While Gudkov maintains an unqualified pessimism about the role of literary journals, I find ample cause for mitigating such negativity. Important post-Soviet authors such as Liudmila Ulitskaia and Viktor Pelevin found their way to prominence through traditional thick journals in the early 1990s, suggesting that the form still carried some ability to influence the broader culture.
Danielle Steele (or their translators or publishers). Second, as I argued above, although the rejection of market principles in literary journals might have created something of an inverse economy (in which the symbolic capital of literary heritage took the place of economic capital connected to market success), its retrospective orientation precluded much literary experimentation and dynamism. The consequences of these tendencies included the crisis in criticism outlined above and, perhaps most important, the absence of an obvious site for the development of new literary forms. It was this situation that led to much public hand-wringing from cultural critics about the state of Russian literature and of the intelligentsia more broadly, as exemplified by Natalia Ivanova’s elegy to the era of the great Russian writers, *The Death of the Gods* (*Gibel’ bogov*).32

Of course, this is not to say that no new literary forms were produced at this time. Indeed, the early 1990s saw the height of *chernukha* and the blossoming of Russian postmodernism.33 The latter included theoretical debates about the place of postmodernity in the history of Russian literature and culture, and about the place of its Russian strand in the global trend.34 But as the critic and scholar Mikhail Berg argues in “The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism in Crisis,” even as the new literary movement produced innovative forms, it failed to point a way out of the

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broader crisis of Russian literature. The “field of cultural production,” Berg wrote, had never reached autonomy, and had not produced “those institutions, which would be capable of integrating innovative impulses into the broader culture.” In fact, Berg concludes his analysis by suggesting that the deficiencies of Russian postmodernism were themselves symptomatic of the critical condition of Russian cultural production at large:

The crisis of postmodernism can be understood as part of a general crisis of literature-centrism (and the even broader institutional crisis of Russian culture) [...] [and also] as the inheritance of the specificity of the field of Russian culture, which did not pass through a period of autonomization and which blocks the recognition of the value of innovative impulses.

Because the Russian literary field of the 1990s lacked those institutions that would be capable of recognizing and disseminating innovative impulses, Berg argues, it proved incapable of encouraging literary innovation and rendering it more broadly productive. The problem—the inability to “adapt radical devices within the field of mass culture”—in Berg’s estimation, stems precisely from the lack of institutional structures (specifically a critical apparatus) able to understand and evaluate innovative cultural forms and disseminate them among other segments of the culture.

In this way, when Russian literature of the early 1990s was understood to be in a critical state, it was most often framed as part of a broader crisis of the critical apparatus, literary

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36 Ibid., 24.

37 Ibid., 26.

38 Ibid.
journals, and the intelligentsia at large.\textsuperscript{39} Put differently, contemporary analyses of mid-1990s literary production most often approached the field from an elite perspective, asking, like Berg and Ivanova, how serious literary fiction and poetry lost its connection with a broad reading public and what it could do to reclaim its former place in the culture. While this perspective was able to produce valid diagnoses of the literary field’s ailments, it fell short in suggesting cures. It would be the inverse perspective, a perspective that took the position of popular literature and looked to incorporate the tropes of serious literary fiction that would prove capable of bringing together the mass market with the demands of the intelligentsia elite. In the late 1990s, Grigori Chkhartishvili would explore this perspective, bringing the communication strategies of popular culture into contact with the Russian literary heritage in order to mend the growing rift in the literary field and help pull post-Soviet Russian literature out of its crisis.

RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN CRISIS: THE 1920s

Some seventy years earlier, in the immediate post-revolutionary decade, a similar crisis faced the fledgling field of Soviet literature. Indeed, an examination of the Soviet 1920s reveals several productive parallels with the post-Soviet 1990s.\textsuperscript{40} Beginning in August 1921, NEP economic liberalization allowed private firms to operate printing presses after a three-year state monopoly, while the Bolshevik censors and state control over the publishing industry remained relatively


\textsuperscript{40} It is worth noting that the Russian version of Evgeny Dobrenko’s classic study on \textit{The Making of The State Reader} (\textit{Formovka sovetskogo chitatelia}) appeared in \textit{Novyi mir} in 1992 and 1993, just as the contemporary literary field was undergoing many changes analogous to the 1920s transformations Dobrenko investigates.
weak throughout the decade.\textsuperscript{41} Though the central Bolshevik censor, Glavlit (or \textit{Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel’tv}) was founded in 1922, it largely failed to control the output of private printing presses during the NEP years.\textsuperscript{42} The influx of imported mass literature largely bypassed censors while its popularity precipitated a critical crisis in the 1920s that was no less acute than its 1990s analogue, though the future orientation and ideological prescriptiveness of the post-revolutionary decade gave the crisis a very different character. Nevertheless, warring factions—from the RAPP to the Proletkult to the Formalists to LEF—all argued about the future development of literature, while the market was flooded with mass literature on a scale not seen before or since, at least until the 1990s.\textsuperscript{43}

In a state-sponsored study carried out in workers’ libraries in Odessa from 1926 to 1927, researchers found an “unheard of ‘Americanization’ of the working-class reader,” who requested specifically American books at more than 40 times the rate they did those of Russian and Ukrainian authors.\textsuperscript{44} For the new socialist power structures that saw mass literature as a product of decadent western societies, this preference for imported popular literature was problematic. The state would have preferred workers to read texts produced by proletarian authors, but it had no reliable mechanism to redirect preferences. Readers largely ignored the critical elite from


\textsuperscript{44} Dobrenko, \textit{Making of the State Reader}, 88.
throughout the ideological spectrum, and at the same time, elite criticism seemed to pay little attention to the popular reader. As Evgeny Dobrenko summarizes,

All polls of readers about criticism gave one and the same picture: criticism goes unread and sparks no interest; its proportional importance in readers’ demands is insignificant. The generally recognized flowering of criticism in the 1920s, which was stimulated by the relative pluralism of the aesthetic programs and by the presence of the contending literary camps ignored or overlooked the reader.  

This impasse precipitated an unprecedented collection of qualitative and quantitative data on mass reading habits and preferences, which asked readers to step into the role of critics. As Dobrenko has shown, the result was a set of readers’ priorities for literary fiction like “the plot should develop sequentially/logically,” “it should be ‘entertaining’ and ‘with adventures,’” “The narration should be simple,” “written in understandable language,” “without those futurism things,” and so on.  

Readers showed a distinct preference for the communication strategies associated with popular literature, rather than the avant-garde or elite literature produced by either the revolutionary or reactionary camps.

When the state-mandated literary mode, socialist realism, was developed, it stabilized the literary field not only by fiat, but also by bridging the gap between the demands of the new Bolshevik elites and the tastes of the masses.  

In Katerina Clark’s formulation, socialist realism was meant to “produce a literature that would be internationally acclaimed as literature [that is,  

\[\text{Ibid.}\]  

\[\text{Ibid., 129–32.}\]  

\[\text{47 As Katerina Clark has shown, the \textit{literary} formation of socialist realism was largely accomplished by 1927, when standard-bearers, like Dmitry Furmanov’s \textit{Chapaev} and Fedor Gladkov’s \textit{Cement}, had already achieved popularity. It was the institutional consolidation of power that began only in 1932. See Katerina Clark, \textit{The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual}, third ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000), 27–45.}\]
satisfy the demands of the elite] yet remain accessible to the masses."\textsuperscript{48} It did this by coopting the styles and modes preferred by the general reading public for a literature that would “match in significance the place […] Marxism-Leninism occupied in the evolution of human thought.”\textsuperscript{49} In other words, it used the communication strategies taken from the “realism” of popular fiction in an essentially rhetorical mode that communicated socialist values of the new Soviet elite.\textsuperscript{50} Among socialist realism’s major successes, writes Clark, was its ability to “popularize ideology, to disseminate it in a form both attractive and accessible to the masses.”\textsuperscript{51} Whether or not socialist realism truly managed to produce works that were broadly attractive and accessible, Clark’s point is that it was both perceived and presented by the Soviet state as having done so.

If socialist realism successfully bridged the “gulf between high culture and popular culture” that plagued the 1920s, it was not the only effort to do so. Other literary projects attempted different modes of reconciliation. In a 1922 article in \textit{Pravda}, Nikolai Bukharin famously called for a mass literature that would embody socialist ideals. Recalling that “Marx, as is generally known, read crime novels with great enthusiasm,” Bukharin argued that the popularity of mass literature should not be condemned but was rather the result of the universal fact that “the mind requires a light, entertaining, interesting plot and unfolding of events.” That interesting plot, however, can be filled with any ideological content. “The bourgeoisie knows and understand this,” he concluded, “We do not yet have this, and this must be overcome.”\textsuperscript{52}

Bukharin’s call resulted in a new strand of Soviet popular fiction known as “Red Pinkertons,”

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 44.
often written by anonymous Russian authors, that coopted the characters, plotlines, and even settings of the popular American Nat Pinkerton novels and colored them with a more socialist ideology.\(^5\)

More originally, novels like Marietta Shaginian’s *Mess-Mend, or Yankees in Petrograd* (*Mess-Mend, ili Ianki v Petrograde* 1924) and Viktor Shklovskii and Vsevolod Ivanov’s *Mustard Gas* (*Iprit* 1929) adapted and parodied various genre conventions from imported mass literature into their own original revolutionary plots and settings.\(^4\) Like socialist realism, these works deploy communication strategies from popular fiction to popularize apparently incongruent, revolutionary Soviet content. They might be understood, adapting another Bolshevik phrase, as popular in form, socialist in content. Unlike socialist realism, however, these works use irony, mockery, and travesty to expose and even exaggerate the devices of genre fiction that they co-opt. If socialist realism brought together high and low culture by taking the demands of each equally seriously (leading to what Clark calls the characteristic “modal schizophrenia” of the genre), Shaginian, Shklovskii, and Ivanov undermine the formula in order to expose and question its sources. In their irreverent alternative to socialist realism, these authors parody mass literature. They borrow plotting mechanisms, character archetypes, and genre conventions, and then amplify these elements in order to lay bare the devices of mass literature and questioning its content.


Within the first ten pages of Shaginian’s *Mess-Mend*, for instance, the main character is abandoned by his parents, raised by a railway porter, and inherits a mysterious fortune. Shklovskii and Ivanov’s *Mustard Gas* takes place during an international chemical war and includes a fugitive Russian sailor, a trained bear, and a beautiful girl, whom the Russian saves from certain death. As one critic puts it, “The authors of *Mustard Gas* mock […] pulp fiction. For plot twists, not only do [they] use ‘deus ex machina,’ but they do it in such a pointed and exaggerated way, that it creates the sense of a phantasmagoria.”55 Parodying the forms and devices of mass literature allowed Shklovskii and Ivanov to borrow the entertainment potential of popular genres while attempting to raise the literary value of that fiction through ironic and self-conscious play. Similar aspects of Shaginian’s *Mess-Mend* drew the approval of Nikolai Meshcheriakov, then the director of the state publishing house Gosizdat. In his forward to the book’s first edition, Meshcheriakov concedes that *Mess-Mend* “is a fantastical novel,” in which the “characters perform improbable, impossible acts.”56 But instead of finding fault with Shaginian’s use of genre elements, Meshcheriakov finds revolutionary content:

But is our entire era not fantastical? And during the Revolution—especially the Great Proletarian World Revolution—is not our entire life fantastical? Have we and do we not constantly witness the most common, seemingly ordinary people accomplishing great,


fantastical deeds? And as a fantastical novel *Yankees* [or *Mess-Mend*] fully responds to the taste of the revolutionary era’s reader.\(^5^7\)

While Shaginian’s *Mess-Mend* would soon find itself out of political favor, it was indeed intended, like Shklovskii and Ivanov’s *Mustard Gas*, to appeal to the tastes of revolutionary era readers. These novels very explicitly borrowed devices from the popular literature of the era, but through parody and exaggeration, they hoped to go beyond mere imitation of mass fiction to accomplish a more serious literary task. All three authors belonged to the loose grouping of writers known as the Serapion Brothers, who were dedicated to exploring the potential of plot-driven prose as a way to push forward the development of Russian literature.\(^5^8\) The Serapions’ chief ideologue Lev Lunts complained that “Russian prose has ceased to move [*perestala dvigat’sia*], it just lies there. Nothing takes place, nothing happens.”\(^5^9\) The solution, he declared in a 1922 speech entitled “Go West!” (“*Na zapad!*”), was to “learn the techniques of plot” (“*uchit’sia fabul’noi tekhnike*”) from western mass literature in order to create prose that would match the success but improve upon the quality of western imports.\(^6^0\) Lunts saw “low” forms of plot-driven culture as the most vital, and worthy of imitation, not only for their popularity, but

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\(^{57}\) Ibid.

\(^{58}\) While Ivanov was a core Serapion, Shaginian and Shklovskii were more peripheral members. For a time, Shaginian lived with Serapions in Maksim Gor’kii’s “*Dom iskusstva*” and was often referred to, affectionately, as the Serapion’s “sister-croaker” (“*sestra-kvakersha*”) (T.M. Vakhitova, “Marietta Shaginian,” in *Russkaiia literatura XX veka. Prozaiki, poety, dramaturgi. Biobliograficheskii slovar’*, vol. 3 P-Ja, N.N. Skatov, ed. (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2005), 672). Shklovskii, who was of the older generation, and more involved in theoretical exploration than the other members, was referred to by Konstantin Fedin as “either the eleventh, or the first” of the Serapion Brothers (Konstantin Fedin, *Gor’kii sredi nas: Kartiny literaturnoi zhizni* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1968), 86).

\(^{59}\) Fedin, *Gor’kii sredi nas*, 73.

\(^{60}\) Lev Lunts, “*Na zapad! Rech’ na sobranii Serapionovykh Brat’ev 2-go dekabria 1922 g.*,” in “*Rodina*’ i drugie proizvedeniia” (Israel: Pamiat’, 1981).
more important, for their ability to “fertilize the soil […] for a new Russian literature” that would be driven by plot (fabula).61

Both Mess-Mend and Mustard Gas can be seen as efforts to experiment with the devices of popular literature in order to bring them into the Russian literary tradition, and to renew that tradition from within.62 Both novels not only borrow devices from mass literature, they also parody those devices—using them both to drive the plot and to ironize plot construction as such. For Shklovskii’s contemporary and Formalist colleague Iurii Tynianov, such “dialectical play with the device” is the “essence of parody,” and one of the major drivers behind literary evolution.63 Put another way, when successful, the kind of play with devices of low literary genres that Shaginian, Shklovskii, and Ivanov perform, can bring new forms and paradigms into the greater literary tradition.

The Serapions’ efforts, however, were stymied by political developments. Shaginian’s Mess-Mend fell out of favor in 1925, while Shklovsky and Ivanov’s Mustard Gas never achieved popular success.64 When the institutional processes that would mandate socialist realism were set in motion over the coming decade, they both prevented further experimentation and removed the need for it. Strengthened censorship restricted access to undesirable mass literature, while socialist realism provided a broadly common culture that stabilized the rift between mass

61 Ibid. “удобрить почву […] для новой русской литературы.”


audiences and cultural authorities. Some seventy years later, however, institutional structures would once again be thrown into turmoil. In the late 1990s, in the midst of the new post-Soviet institutional uncertainty, a renewed attempt to bring elements of mass literature together with the Russian literary tradition would find an extraordinarily successful incarnation in Grigori Chkhartishvili’s creation of B. Akunin and his series of Erast Fandorin detective novels.

FANDORIN AND AZAZEL: SLEUTHING BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW
Throughout the 1990s, Chkhartishvili showed an abiding interest in the forms of mass literature, even as he worked in the realm of serious literary fiction. Not only did he playfully propose founding a second Inostrannaiia literatura, an IL-2, as we have seen, completely devoted to “intellectual murder mysteries, provocative memoirs, literary games and further amusements,” he also took very real steps to promote the quality of entertainment reading. In 1996, along with colleagues from the Inostranka publishing house, Chkhartishvili launched a book series called “Worldwide Mystery” (“Mirovoi detektiv”) that translated internationally renowned mysteries by classic authors of the genre from G.K. Chesterton and Arthur Conan Doyle to Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon. Chkhartishvili’s decision to translate detective fiction specifically was no accident. As shown by the 1994 survey published in Knizhnoe obozrenie mentioned above, detective fiction was by far the most popular genre among the general reading public at the time. Like the proposed IL-2, the “Mirovoi detektiv” series was intended in part to raise the culture of entertainment by bringing classic authors of supposedly higher literary quality into a market saturated with the latest genre pulp. In a similar fashion, when B. Akunin and the Erast Fandorin

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65 Personal interview with co-editor of the series, Varvara Gornostaeva, 15 June 2016, Moscow. The series continued after Chkhartishvili’s departure from Inostranka in 2001, and is now published by Eksmo. Its current incarnation includes mostly contemporary mystery novels from all over the world.
mystery series appeared in 1998, they bridged an analogous divide between popular detective fiction and intelligentsia values (and along the way, they attracted many more readers than either IL-2 or “Mirovoi detektiv” could have ever imagined).

Whatever the specific aim of Chkhartishvili’s many projects, their cumulative effect was much more than simply to “raise the culture of entertainment.” The Fandorin series specifically, as I argue below, had a twofold effect on Russian literature of the 1990s: first, it brought the plots and forms of popular fiction into contact with the Russian literary tradition, and, second, it imported a particular ideology of success, one that was already current among the general populace, into the realm of serious literary fiction. Read in this way, Chkhartishvili’s Fandorin series can be seen as “socialist realism inside-out.” That is, if socialist realism was meant to bring great literature to the masses, then the Fandorin series can be seen as mass literature for the elites. It combined the structures and genre paradigms of popular fiction with literary allusions and a prose style designed to appeal to readers of serious literary fiction. Furthermore, by doing so, the series ultimately managed to smuggle a popular ideology of success into the field of respectable Russian literature.

The first book in the Fandorin series, Azazel, which appeared in 1998, introduced both Erast Petrovich and “B. Akunin” to the world.66 In this section, my analysis remains within the confines of the novel; I explore the meta-fictional implications of “B. Akunin” in the following section. Set in 1876, Azazel takes its name from the vast underground conspiracy at the center of the novel’s mystery plot. That conspiracy comprises an international network of orphanages and is bent on nothing less than world domination. The novel’s hero, Erast Petrovich Fandorin, a

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lowly Collegiate Registrar in the Moscow police, peels away layers of the conspiracy through hard work, investigative brilliance, daring, and charm. As he does so, he climbs in the official ranks and blossoms into a full-fledged detective-protagonist, leading the reader’s epistemological journey through the clues, intrigues, and false leads of the mystery plot. Along the way, the novel compiles genre clichés nearly as gleefully as Shaginian’s *Mess-Mend* or Shklovskii and Ivanov’s *Mustard Gas*. No fewer than five chapters end under the assumption that Fandorin has been killed. He is stabbed in a dark Moscow alleyway (chapter five), drowned off the docks in London (chapter eleven), shot at by his former mentor (chapter thirteen), tortured by a mad scientist (chapter fourteen), among several other forms of certain death. Every time, however, he finds miraculous salvation in modes characteristic of genre fiction, “ex machina,” and otherwise: a gun fails to fire, a knife is blocked by an undergarment, hand-to-hand combat overcomes firepower, and so on. The trope overload suggests parody, and indeed, the playful, overwrought language used around these scenes marks them out as ironically intended.

For instance, at the end of chapter thirteen, Fandorin, along with his boss, police captain Brilling, confronts suspected members of the criminal conspiracy, when, without warning, Brilling turns his gun on a suspect named Cunningham and kills him in cold blood. Shocked, Fandorin asks,

“Oh Lord, boss, why [did you kill Cunningham]?!?”

He [Fandorin] turned to the window. The black of Brilling’s gun barrel was now staring him directly in the face.
“It was you who destroyed him,” Brilling pronounced in some kind of unnatural voice. “You are too good a detective. And for that reason, my young friend, I have to kill you, which I sincerely regret.”

The chapter closes, once again, on Fandorin’s certain death. But in the opening of the next chapter, a genre cliché saves the protagonist once again. Instead of shooting “the poor, uncomprehending Erast Petrovich,” Brilling spends two pages explaining the full extent of his iniquity in tones of arch irony: “I shall place [this revolver] in the hands of the unfortunate Cunningham, and it will look as if you killed each other in a shoot out. You’ll receive an honorable burial. A deeply felt eulogy is all but guaranteed. I know such things are important to you.” Naturally, the drawn out explanation provides Fandorin the time to regroup, and

With a blood-curdling shriek, eyes tightly shut, Erast Petrovich threw himself forward, aiming his head at the boss’s [Brilling’s] chin. They were separated by no more than five paces. Fandorin never heard the click of the safety, but the shot thundered into the ceiling, as both of them—Brilling and Erast Petrovich, flew over the low sill and through the window.

The fall from the second-story window impales Brilling on a tree branch, while Fandorin tumbles away unscathed, and the plot marches on to its next cluster of genre clichés.

– Его погубили вы, – каким-то ненатуральным тоном произнес Бриллинг. – Вы слишком хороший сыщик. И поэтому, мой юный друг, мне придется вас убить, о чем я искренне сожалею.”

68 Ibid., 171. “Бедный, ничего не понимающий Эраст Петрович”; “Я вложу его в руку невежественного Каннингема, и получится, что вы убили друг друга в перестрелке. Почтенные похороны и прочувствованные речи вам гарантированы. Я вижу, что для вас это важно.”

69 “С истошным воплем, зажмурив глаза, Эраст Петрович ринулся вперед, целя шефу головой в подбородок. Их разделяло не более пяти шагов. Щелчка предохранителя Фандорин не слышал, а выстрел прогремел уже в потолок, потому что оба — и Бриллинг, и Эраст Петрович, передетев через низкий подоконник, ухнули в окно” (Ibid., 172).
If borrowings from mass literature predominate in the plot’s construction, then allusions to the classic Russian tradition are not far behind, nor are they treated with any less ironic distance. The novel, helpfully titled Azazel, opens on an idyllic park bench scene marred by an unexpected visitor and a death (alluding to Bulgakov’s Master and Margarita). Later, conspirators are suspected of Dostoevskian nihilism (Demons), and Erast Fandorin courts a character named Liza, who will end the novel, alas, in no better shape than her Karamzinian predecessor (“Poor Liza”). In the course of his investigations, Fandorin wagers his life on a game of cards in order to avoid dueling a famed marksman, mixing fate and gambling in a mode reminiscent of Mikhail Lermontov’s Pechorin (from A Hero of Our Time). At another point, he finds himself in the shoes of a yet another nineteenth-century hero, Prince Myshkin from Dostoevsky’s The Idiot:

But before Fandorin’s impatient hand could touch the creaking leather [dossier], his gaze fell on a photo-portrait in a silver frame, standing just here, on the table in the most visible place. The face in the portrait was so remarkable that Erast Petrovich forgot entirely about the dossier: at a half-turn, a Cleopatra with luxuriant hair looked out at him with enormous black-matte eyes, a proudly curved long neck and a subtly drawn cruelty in the willful line of her mouth. More than anything, the Collegiate Registrar was enchanted by the expression of calm and confident power.70

70 “Но прежде чем нетерпеливые руки Фандорина коснулись коричневой скрипучей кожи, взгляд его упал на фотопортрет в серебряной рамке, стоящий здесь же, на столе, на самом видном месте. Лицо на портрете было настолько примечательным, что Эраст Петрович и о бюваре забыл: вполоборота смотрела на него пышноволосая Клеопатра с огромными матово-черными глазами, гордым изгибом высокой шеи и чуть прорисованной жесточинкой в своенравной линии рта. Более же всего заворожило коллежского регистратора выражение спокойной и уверенной властности” (Ibid., 18–19).

Compare to the parallel passage from The Idiot: “— Удивительно хороша! […] На портрете была изображена действительно необыкновенной красоты женщина. Она была сфотографирована в черном шелковом платье, чрезвычайно простого и изящного фасона; волосы, по-видимому темно-русые, были убраны просто, по-домашнему; глаза темные, глубокие, лоб задумчивый; выражение лица страстное и как
The woman whose portrait so resembles that of Nastasya Fillipovna turns out to be Amalia Bezhetskaia, a femme fatale and murderous lieutenant in the Azazel conspiracy. (If the Dostoevskian connection were not enough, the character’s surname derives from Bezhetsk, the location of Anna Akhmatova’s family dacha, and the title of her 1921 poem, doubly inscribing this villain’s provenance in the Russian literary canon.) Just as much as genre conventions, tropes from classic Russian literature form the building blocks of the plot and the fictional world of *Azazel* and of the entire Fandorin series.\(^\text{71}\)

The thickly woven quilt of borrowings suggests a case of equal opportunity parody: Akunin brings popular literature together with the classic tradition by treating both with equal irony. Indeed, many critics read the novel in this way.\(^\text{72}\) Others see the references to the classic Russian tradition as little more than a patina of respectability used to mask a straightforward caper—however successfully. One early reviewer’s delight became emblematic of such a reading: “Finally a mystery writer has appeared in our country whose books aren’t embarrassing for an intelligent person [intelligent] to hold in his hands.”\(^\text{73}\) Certainly, the joining of high and low culture became the calling card of the series. But, I would argue, a closer look reveals a patterning more intricate than a mere marketing ploy or postmodern pastiche.

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\(^{71}\) As the series advanced, Akunin would become even bolder in his borrowings. The tenth book in the series, *The Diamond Wheel* (*Almaznaia kolesnitsa*), for instance, opens with an entire passage borrowed unaltered from Aleksandr Kuprin’s 1905 story “Staff-Captain Rybnikov” (“*Shtabs-kapitan Rybnikov*”).

\(^{72}\) See for instance Natalia Ivanova, “Zhizn’ i smert’ simulakra v Rossii,” *Druzhba narodov* 8 (2000); or Alena Solntseva, “Mirovaia literatura mozhet byt’ vozvyshenny,” *Vremia novostei*, no. 121 (6 Dec 2000). In contrast to these critics, I see Chkhartishvili’s project motivated by more than a desire to fill a market niche. Rather, I believe that the particular way he combines high and low sources suggests a much more serious attempt to bring genre forms into the realm of serious literary fiction.

Throughout *Azazel*, references to classic Russian literature are most often associated with the novel’s villains, with danger, and with investigative dead ends. The murderous Amalia Bezhetskaia, as noted above, incorporates elements of both Nastasya Fillipovna and Anna Akhmatova; Fandorin nearly dies from a card game reminiscent of Lermontov’s “Fatalist”; and, even more explicitly, an investigator outlines the dangers of a potential nihilist conspiracy with a direct literary reference: “[The revolutionaries] won’t let us grow old in peace, mark my words. Have you read *Demons* by Mr. Dostoevsky?”

Though the conspiracy at the center of this novel turns out to be not from Dostoevsky, it is nevertheless associated with a different Russian classic, as the reader is reminded each time a villain breathes the word “Azazel” before shooting, stabbing, or drowning the hero. Classic literature seems constantly to threaten Fandorin, while it is, conversely, the tropes of genre fiction that save him from certain death—he wakes from feigned unconsciousness, a gun fails to fire, a friend unexpectedly shoots his assailant from the shadows, and so on.

This network of clichés and borrowings seems to indicate something beyond the formless postmodernist play that many critics and scholars have suggested. If taken seriously, the pattern of allusions and genre tropes reveals a subject—Fandorin—who is constantly led into danger by the classical literary tradition, only to be saved by the conventions of genre literature. This sets up a value system that is somewhat unexpected for an *intellektual’nyi detektiv* written by the co-editor of a prestigious literary journal. Beyond simply “raising the culture of entertainment” or

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74 “Если опухоль в самом зародыше не прооперировать, эти романтики нам лет через тридцать, а то и ранее такой революцион законят, что французская гильотина милой юностью покажется. Не дадут нам с вами спокойно состариться, помните мое слово. Читали роман «Бесы» господина Достоевского? Зря. Там красноречиво спрогнозировано” (Akunin, *Azazel’,* 71).

even elevating genre literature to something closer to literary fiction, this novel’s combination of high and low elements might have something much more substantive to say about the development of Russian literature. Rather than bringing classical literary references into genre fiction simply to attract sophisticated readers, as has often been assumed and as Akunin has said publicly, this novel—and the subsequent Fandorin series—suggest a critical stance against the over-idealization of Russia’s literary heritage, something closer to what Elena Baraban reads in Akunin’s use of Russia’s historical past. Like the Serapions’ project of genre-based literature, the Fandorin project puts genre fiction on a collision course with the classical literary tradition in order to question that tradition, to puncture its hermetic seal, and ultimately to renew it through the introduction of new forms.

As demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, it was, in part, an over-veneration of Russia’s literary heritage that led to the crisis in contemporary literature of the 1990s. Azazel not only elevates entertainment literature by infusing it with references to the classic tradition, it also points a way forward for that tradition. On both a rhetorical and thematic level, it argues for the incorporation of the tropes and devices of genre literature. Like socialist realism, Chkhartishvili’s Azazel relies on the communication strategies of mass culture; like Shaginian’s Mess-Mend and Shklovskii and Ivanov’s Mustard Gas, the novel uses exaggeration, irony, and travesty to bare the device, to expose its genre borrowings; but unlike either of its early-twentieth-century analogues, Azazel’s message for the elite largely is its mass culture codes, its genre borrowings, its entertainment literature.


77 Baraban argues that Chkhartishvili’s use of historical elements in his Fandorin novels pushes back against the characteristically post-Soviet idealization of pre-revolutionary Russia by first representing that idealized past, and then emphasizing several of its negative aspects—such as his depiction of the Khodynka tragedy at the end of the seventh book in the series Coronation (Koronatsia, ili, poslednii iz Romanov 2000). See Elena V. Baraban, “A Country Resembling Russia: The Use of History in Boris Akunin’s Detective Novels,” The Slavic and East European Journal, 48(3), Special Forum Issue: “Innovation through Iteration: Russian Popular Culture Today” (2004): 397 and passim.
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and its entertainment value. As he turns the formula of socialist realism inside-out, Chkhartishvili creates a mass literature for the elite not merely to fill a market niche or to create respectable genre fiction, but because mass literature is precisely what the elite needed in order to create the conditions under which “Russian literature would blossom.” Moreover, the Fandorin series borrows more than simply literary forms and plot constructions from mass literature. It imports an entire ideology from one pole of the literary field into the other. As I argue in the next section, that ideology is one based around the central value of success, which gained currency in the early 1990s book market and the culture at large. With the creation of B. Akunin and Erast Fandorin, Chkhartishvili created a set of literary worlds designed to appeal to intelligentsia readers, and to import an ideology of success from the book market into the realm of the literary elite.

“B. AKUNIN”: SUCCESS AS LITERARY COMMUNICATION

In the immediate post-Soviet era, individual success took on an unprecedented importance in the Russian popular imagination. According to statistics collected by VTsIOM, in 1994, a majority of Russians (56% of 2947 surveyed) for the first time said they related “most closely to those who aspire to success in everything they do” (while only 24% preferred “those who aspire to live like everyone else and not to stand out,” while 20% had difficulty answering). Another survey the same year found that a full 60% of respondents counted themselves among those who “in all their activities are oriented towards success.” The sociologist Boris Dubin (of VTsIOM) analyzes this development in the statistical data as a “noticeable break in the declared


79 Ibid.
relationship to success at the beginning of the 1990s” that arose due to the fall of Soviet institutions and norms. Specifically, he cites the “erosion of a general framework for social existence within the Soviet system’s ideological norms and standards for behavior and judgment, including professional roles, evaluations of status, standards of prestige, and so on.” The failed Soviet system was replaced by a privatized market economy, which appeared designed primarily to reward individual success.

That new economic regime also gave rise to an emergent “rhetoric of mass communication,” which structured narratives around this new value of individual success. In an essay entitled “The New Russian Dream and Its Heroes” (“Novaia russkaia mechta i ee geroi”), Dubin argues that by 1995 a Russian version of the “American success-story” had become one of the dominant structuring principles in Russian mass communication.80 Pointing to popular fiction, films, and especially television commercials, Dubin argues that the basic plot of this new mass communication strategy was constructed around a “new positive hero” (the Russian phrase “novyi polozhitel’nyi geroi” is a direct allusion to the socialist realist formula) and presents scenes which “follow one after another according to a single model of ‘action-reward’,” propagating a straightforward understanding of success.81 The attractiveness of this transparent model of success, Dubin suggests, lies in the promise of what he calls a “utopia of social order,” in which positive actions are always rewarded, and in which one can “in a very simple manner bring order into life, and control it with elementary and generally understood […] methods.”82 In other words, these mass media models of success, the “American success stories,” not only


81 Ibid., 205–6.

82 Ibid., 201.
suggest the possibility for individual advancement in the new capitalist environment, they also project a world equipped to bestow predictable rewards for positive actions—a system of meritocracy that would be fair to all participants. In short they are built to project the very attractive fantasy that lies at the heart of the capitalist worldview.

The “new Russian dream” of Dubin’s essay, he makes clear, is predominantly a phenomenon of mass culture. High culture, especially literary culture, as Dubin would write in another essay, “The Failure Plot” (“Siuzhet porazheniia”), often avoids understanding the world through the prism of success:

Whenever an attempt is made to somehow discuss the problem of success [in literary history] it immediately turns to the theme of failure [krakh] […]. One could say that the inability, unwillingness, refusal to explain success and the norms behind it—including the recognition of classics, where the analytical abilities of the traditional historian of literature are paralyzed by the supra-valuation of the object, and only the poorest explanatory models are applied, if any at all—is compensated for by a moral evaluation (a disqualifying over-evaluation).83

In such analyses, the “classic” or otherwise “worthy” literary object is evaluated as superior to the very system of success. Dubin claims that such “evaluation makes historians (especially “advanced” historians) concentrate on negative phenomena—deviations, aberrations from the

system, marginal phenomena, creative un-success, and so forth.” The very lack of attention to the accepted metrics of success can be framed as a value in itself, allowing authors and literary historians to supersede the social systems around success while nevertheless formulating their own alternative version of literary accomplishment. 

For Dubin, the divergence in understandings of success in the mid-1990s was emblematic of a broader divide in the culture, namely the divide between the forms of mass culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ways in which the intelligentsia and cultural elites understood the place of culture in society. For Dubin, each year of the 1990s saw the decline “of those forms, which for decades had served as the foundation for the self-understanding and the production of the social role of the intelligent, for the self-affirmation of the intelligentsia in society.” As these forms of high culture lost their potency, mass culture provided the communication strategies most capable of appealing to the broad populace. This was no less true with understandings of success. As highlighted in the first section of this chapter, when the literary field developed in two divergent directions, the book market came to value success at the expense of content, while increasingly niche intelligentsia-controlled publications concentrated on literary heritage and largely ignored indicators of success.

When B. Akunin’s Fandorin series appeared in bookstores beginning in 1998, it worked not only to bring together the two poles of the literary field, but also to bridge these two divergent understandings of success. Specifically, as I argue in this section, the Fandorin series

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84 “А уже эта оценка заставляет историка (тем более — «продвинутого») сосредоточивать интерес исключительно на негативных феноменах — отклонениях, выпаде из системы, маргинализме, творческой неудаче и т. д.” (Ibid.)

85 For example, see Boris Eikhenbaum’s analyses of both Pushkin and Tolstoi as writers who avoided the norms of success that developed in their times in his “Literatura i pisatel’” [1927] Formal’nyi metod: Antologiia russkogo modernizma. Tom 2: Tekhnologiiia, Sergei Ushakin, ed. (Ekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2016), 630–42.

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did this by making the mass understanding of success, what Dubin dubbed the “new Russian
dream,” palatable to intelligentsia readers, and, perhaps most important for the further
development of Russian literature, to the literary elite and the literary field as a whole.

In this light, Azazel was more than just a mystery novel that would not be “embarrassing
for an intelligent to hold in his hands,” it was also the beginning of a fictional world deeply
informed by the values of meritocracy and success. In the broadest sense, as a successful
sleuth, the unfailing protagonist Erast Fandorin confirms the expectations of the mystery genre,
namely, that dogged pursuit, sharp observation, and logical reasoning can overcome any
structural disadvantages the detective-protagonist might face. But beyond that, Akunin situates
Fandorin in a well known hierarchical system originally designed to instantiate a specific vision
of success: the Russian imperial table of ranks. The very first appearance of the protagonist’s
name in the entire series identifies him first as “civil servant of the 14th rank [chinovnik 14
klassa] Erast Petrovich Fandorin.” A hardworking clerk (“pis’movoditel’”), he has already
rewritten a police report three times, but completes the task once more without complaint for his
boss, who “sincerely wished the boy well, as a father would.” The next paragraph makes clear

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89 Chkhartishvili’s emphasis on the table of ranks also situates the Fandorin novels within the Russian literary canon, whose nineteenth-century exemplars were particularly fascinated with the imperial system of meritocracy. On the table of ranks in Russian literature, see Irina Reyfman, *Rank and Style: Russians in State Service, Life, and Literature* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012).


91 Ibid.
that this paternal model of civil service takes the place of Fandorin’s biological family and—perhaps more topical for the Russian reader of 1998—gives him much needed relief from the caprices of high capitalism:

At twelve years old he was left an orphan. He never knew his mother, and his father, a hot head, put their wealth into empty projects […]. In the railroad rush he struck it rich, but went broke during the bank rush. Just like last year, when the commercial banks went under one after the other and several respectable people all over the world went the same way. The most trusted securities turned to rubbish, to nothing. Such was Mr. Fandorin, retired lieutenant, suddenly deceased from the shock of it, having left his son nothing but promissory notes. The boy should have finished preparatory school, then university, but instead it was out on the street to earn his bread. […] The orphan decided to take the [civil service] exam to become a Collegiate Registrar.92

In this way, the very first characteristics the reader learns of Fandorin include his work ethic, difficult circumstances, and his embrace of government service as a meritocratic surrogate for his lost family. As the novel unfolds, Fandorin is revealed to be possessed of extraordinary intrinsic qualities. He is handsome, intelligent, brave, dogged, and lucky. And the system to which he has entrusted his fate, the imperial civil service, recognizes these qualities and promotes him. By the end of the first novel, Fandorin leaps from Collegiate Registrar (the lowest, fourteenth, rank) to Titular Councilor (the ninth rank). Five more books and fourteen years later in the fictional

92 “Девятнадцати лет от роду остался круглым сиротой – матери сызмальства не знал, а отец, горячая голова, пустил состояние на пустые прожекты, да и приказал долго жить. В железнодорожную лихорадку разбогател, в банковскую лихорадку разорился. Как начали в прошлый год коммерческие банки лопаться один за другим, так многие достойные люди по миру пошли. Надежнейшие процентные бумаги превратились в мусор, в ничто. Вот и господин Фандорин, отставной поручик, в одночасье преставившийся от удара, ничего кроме векселей единственному сыну не оставил. Мальчику бы гимназию закончить, да в университет, а вместо этого – изъять из родных стен на улицу, зарабатывай кусок хлеба. […] Экзамен-то на коллежского регистратора сирота сдал” (Ibid., 8–9).
series, Fandorin would reach the fifth rank of State Councilor (in the eponymous novel *Statskii Sovetnik* 1999).

As much as any other signs of personal or professional growth, Fandorin’s rise through the imperial ranks defines the series’ trajectory. His steady promotion recognizes hard work, integrity, bravery, and patriotism—that is, it arises from a meritocracy working exactly as it should, untroubled by corruption, nepotism, or incompetence. In this way, Fandorin’s trajectory through the series projects a world structured around a reliable meritocracy, capable of recognizing and rewarding extraordinary personal merit with extraordinary success.

The general ideology of success that informs Fandorin’s world—and that Chkhartishvili would extend beyond his fiction through the persona of B. Akunin—is itself fairly straightforward, but its consequences and its potential to connect with a large audience in late 1990s Russia proved grand in scope. Put simply, this ideology of success holds that an extremely gifted and talented person should be recognized as such by contemporaries and by social institutions, should gain accolades for his or her accomplishments, and should be able to achieve prominence in the world. Crucially, this fairly standard, if rather idealistic, understanding of success implicitly depends upon a surrounding system of perfectly benevolent meritocracy, through which the gifted individual would be recognized as such. By creating such an individual in Fandorin and showing his successful advancement through the table of ranks, Chkhartishvili instantiates this vision of success and projects an idealized meritocracy that pervades Fandorin’s fictional world.

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93 It should be noted that several times throughout the series, Fandorin meets with precisely these vices, often in government service. (The corrupt police captain Brilling from *Azazel*, mentioned above, is one such example.) But they are treated as aberrations, frustrating Fandorin’s uncompromising work, rather than intrinsic characteristics of the system itself.
With the creation of the alter ego B. Akunin, Chkhartishvili imports that vision of success into the field of literary production and of authorial self-presentation. Constructed specifically as a successful writer, the “author” B. Akunin is, in Chkhartishvili’s words, “disciplined, loquacious, and elegant. […] Even his surname, which is easy to pronounce, testifies to his suitability for high society.”

Everything Akunin approaches he accomplishes with grace and outstanding success. For instance, when Chkhartishvili (along with designer Art Lebedev) launched a personal website for the pseudonymous author (akunin.ru), the site explained Akunin’s approach in the following terms:

B. Akunin is an extremely advanced Internet user. This comes through in how he describes the World Wide Web: without the excessive elation of a novice and without the blunders often committed by authors who know the Internet only by hearsay. Sooner or later the experienced Internet user arrives at the conclusion that he needs a home page. […] This is not trendy, it is contemporary, [“eto ne modno, eto sovremenno” — emphasis in the original] and Akunin takes an interest in everything contemporary.

The framing of an author as already-successful finds its antecedents in the commercialized book market. By the mid-1990s, the transliterated word “bestseller,” the very marker of commercial success, had already become an advertising slogan for authors both domestic and foreign. A 1994 series by the Moscow publisher Vedo, for instance, translated western genre writers like James Hadley Chase and Sidney Sheldon under the banner “World Bestseller” (“Mirovoi

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*bestseller*), framing previous success abroad as a selling point for readers in Russia. Following suit, many aspiring Russian writers borrowed the names of successful foreign authors or created “bestselling” alter egos in order to market under the banner of proven success.

Chkhartishvili’s presentation of Akunin, however, differs in important ways. First, Akunin is not framed as a foreign author who has achieved success elsewhere, but rather as a Russian author of a past epoch (the copyright claim on akunin.ru reads “© 1856–2001 Boris Akunin”). Second, his success is not primarily expressed through extrinsic markers like bestseller status or cultural prominence, but through his intrinsic qualities (“disciplined, loquacious, and elegant,” “extremely advanced,” “contemporary,” etc.). Put differently, if the marketing behind “Mirovoi bestseller” asked the reader to believe that James Hadley Chase is good because he has been proven successful, Chkhartishvili leads one to understand that Akunin is successful because he is good. In addition to importing the rhetoric of success into his Akunin project, Chkhartishvili’s particular understanding of the vector of success—from intrinsic to extrinsic, rather than the other way around—implies a literary system capable of recognizing an author’s intrinsic qualities and translating them into the extrinsic markers of success. In this way, Chkhartishvili’s particular framing of Akunin as a successful writer not only creates a successful alter ego, it also projects an entire literary system of benevolent meritocracy. Crucially, that

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97 See, for instance, the popular series of (unauthorized) sequels to Margaret Mitchell’s bestselling (in Russia and the U.S.) *Gone with the Wind* including *Rhett Butler (Rett Butler)* and *Scarlett’s Last Love (Posledniaia liubov’ Skarlett)* by the pseudonymous D. Khilpatrik (Lev Lobarev, “Kak my pisali bestseller,” *Elinor*, 2005, accessed 15 Nov 2016: http://elinor.fbit.ru/arxiv/texts/lin20.htm). By the end of the 1990s, the trend became so pervasive that it was parodied by a group of Russian writers, led by Viacheslav Rybakov and Igor’ Alimov, who created the patently ridiculous pseudonym Khol’m van Zaichik, meant to be a bestselling Chinese author of mystery novels set in an alternate reality. See, for instance, the first in the series “Eurasian Symphony”: Khol’m van Zaichik, *Delo zhadinogo varvara* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000).
imagined system is projected to exist not in a different country, but in an alternative past of Russia itself, suggesting the possibility of recovering such a system in the present day.

Indeed, in the essay with which this chapter began, “If I Were a Newspaper Magnate,” Chkhartishvili seems to suggest that importing an ideology of success into the contemporary literary landscape might help bridge the gap between popular culture and the literary elites. His playful plan borrows something from the Serapions’ insistence on bringing the plot-driven forms of mass culture into the realm of serious literature, but primarily, Chkhartishvili insists on the importance of attracting an enormous readership (“ten times” the size of the standard journal), as if success itself were his overriding aim. In fact, a mythology of success seems to inform Chkhartishvili’s entire essay. Written in a jocular tone throughout, the article begins in a curious way:

If only I were not I, but the most handsome, intelligent and best person in the world (and, of course, the richest)—in a word, Gusinskii-Berezovskii—I would immediately found a news-and-magazine empire. Why, one might ask, does Chkhartishvili need to be a handsome, intelligent, and good person to found his empire—would not “richest” be enough? And what are the oligarchs Vladimir Gusinskii and Boris Berezovskii (neither of whom was known as a particularly handsome or good person) doing here? I would argue that the answers to these questions point towards an ideology of success similar to that which informs the creation of both B. Akunin and his character Erast Fandorin: that extraordinary personal qualities should reliably translate into success. Notice how in this opening paragraph, the composite oligarch Gusinskii-Berezovskii—whose real life analogues were seen as economically successful, but corrupt at best, and more

98 Chkhartishvili, “Esli by ia byl…”
likely criminally suspect—turns into “the most handsome, intelligent and best person in the world (and, of course, the richest).” The marker “Gusinskii-Berezovskii,” meant to stand in for success writ large, when placed within Chkhartishvili’s fantastical ideology of success, becomes a signifier of all things good. In this way, the essay “If I Were a Newspaper Magnate” contains an implicit prescription for the crisis ailing Russian literature in the 1990s. Beyond the plans for new periodical publications, the essay imagines a literary world structured around success, where literary publications would once again attract large popular audiences, and at least as important, where the literary system would be able to recognize merit and reward it with success.

CONCLUSION

Chkhartishvili’s entire project involving both B. Akunin and Erast Fandorin is built, in large part, around an ideology of success and meritocracy, both of which become structuring values for the worlds these characters inhabit. For each, success is imagined as the natural consequence of extraordinary intrinsic qualities within a system equipped to recognize them. It is this vision of success that defines the ideology of the Akunin/Fandorin universe at least as much as the interplay between genre tropes and allusions to classic literature. And it is this ideology of success that finally completes the connection between the Fandorin project and what I am calling “socialist realism inside-out.” As the series combines tropes from high and low culture, it projects an implicit and pervasive worldview of success and meritocracy, a worldview that, as shown above, gained currency among the broad populace in the 1990s, and which animated the newly capitalist book market. By bringing a sincere belief in meritocracy and success into a cultural product capable of appealing to elite readers—including members of the intelligentsia—
Chkhartishvili not only helped introduce new genre forms into literary art, he also helped bring (for better and for worse) the ideology of the book market into the elite pole of the literary field. If socialist realism used popular communication strategies to create art that would transmit a socialist ideology to the masses, then Chkhartishvili’s project uses literary allusions along with genre tropes to create literature that communicates a mass ideology to the elites. Many of the literary elites, it seems, have been receptive to that message. In 2003, the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote about the “Akuninization” of Russian literature, quoting the author, who said that since the release of his first book, the literary landscape in Russia has changed: “First, it is no longer considered shameful to write detective stories. Second, reading this literature is no longer seen as a bad thing.”  

In the article, “Akuninization” is framed as the process of making genre literature more acceptable to the elites. Certainly, this has been one of Chkhartishvili’s major contributions; however, an important aspect of the “Akuninization” of Russian literature, as I have argued in this chapter, has been in the shifting valuation of success within the literary field. Since Akunin’s appearance at the turn of the millennium, Russian authors have much more openly and explicitly conceived of, discussed, and pursued their own visions of success. Akunin brought literary success out into the open, and, following suit, other authors have re-imagined, reformulated, and redefined what success can mean. They have also reconsidered how the pursuit of success can move the literary field and the development of Russian literature in new and unexpected directions. The remaining chapters of this dissertation explore how some of the most innovative authors of the twenty-first century have envisioned and pursued success in the newly “Akuninized” Russian literary landscape.

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CHAPTER 2
Success Without Readers:
Olga Slavnikova, Literary Prizes, and Recognition Beyond the Market

INTRODUCTION

Olga Slavnikova’s dense prose and languorous plotting make her works largely inaccessible to the broad audiences that might bring commercial success. Her first novel appeared completely without dialogue, a point mentioned often in reviews, and almost never in a positive light.¹ When her second novel appeared, Dmitrii Bavil’skii complained that the “slow, plotless concoction” confirms her “desire not to think about the reader.”² Slavnikova might well agree with such an assessment. In one interview, Slavnikova herself denied the importance of the reader:

*Olga Slavnikova:* Why are you always saying: the reader, the reader… It doesn’t matter if he follows [the author through formal innovations] or not! If he doesn’t want to, let him stay behind.

*Rakhaeva:* Do you really think a writer can exist without a reader?

*Slavnikova:* Of course. The reader is a third party. The dialogue runs between a writer and the universe, the reader is merely present. If he wants to be. Or is not present. It’s his choice.³

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О.С.: Что ты все: читатель, читатель… Да все равно, пойдет он или не пойдет! Не хочет, пускай не идет.
Ю.Р.: Разве существует писатель без читателя?
О.С.: Существует, конечно. Читатель — это третий. Диалог идет между писателем и мирозданием, а читатель только присутствует. Если, конечно, хочет. Или не присутствует. Это его дело.
In this exchange, Slavnikova admits to willfully ignoring reader demands, a position that apparently cuts against the very nature of cultural capitalism and sets her at a remove from the market forces we saw unfolding in the previous chapter. Indeed, for Bavil’skii, Slavnikova’s stance seemed completely at odds with the post-Soviet literary field in which she appeared: “Under our current capitalism, writing like this is already indecent [neprilichno].”

Far from indecent, however, Olga Slavnikova’s prose found its way to a different, non-market-based prominence in post-Soviet literature. As Slavnikova pursued her own vision of success, she did so without directly appealing to broad readerships or mass audiences. Instead, she worked through the growing institutions of post-Soviet literary prizes, especially the prestigious Russian Booker. Her first novel was short-listed for the prize in 1996, lifting her to national prominence. In the following years she reviewed several finalists and prize-winners, analyzed the award in a series of essays, and even served as a member of the prize jury, before finally winning the award with her fourth novel a decade later in 2006. Her long history with the Russian Booker Prize displays a vision of success that appeals not to the market, but to external recognition structures ostensibly removed from market paradigms. For Slavnikova, neither broad readership nor sales define success. Nevertheless, she insists, writers need external recognition in order to “feel like writers.” Such external recognition can come in several varieties—publication, positive reviews, film adaptations, translations, etc.—but in the environment of post-Soviet Russia, in Slavnikova’s view, it is best ensured through literary prizes.

By appealing to such prizes, Slavnikova defines a vision of success different from the one Grigorii Chkhartishvili advances through his Akunin project. Slavnikova’s vision hews closer to

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4 Ibid. “При нашем нынешнем капиталнее так писать уже ведь просто неприлично.”

the elite pole of the literary field where recognition is granted by other artists and experts in the field rather than by unqualified audiences. But by defining elite success through literary prizes—insti-
tutions, as I show in this chapter, deeply infused with capitalist provenance and orientation—she further entrenches many of the principles of cultural capitalism within the realm of elite literature. Success defined through literary prizes does not resemble Bourdieu’s vision of “an economic world turned upside down,” filled with writers “refusing to recognize any master but their art;” rather, it is a world dependent on capitalist structures only slightly removed from direct interaction with the marketplace itself.

In this chapter, I explore how literary prizes have restructured the elite pole of the post-Soviet literary field and have influenced the development of literature itself. I do this by following Olga Slavnikova on her path to literary prominence. In the first section of the chapter, I examine several of Slavnikova’s public statements about the meaning of literary success, the relationship between the writer and the reader, and the role of literary prizes. I show that Slavnikova specifically rejects market principles as the primary indicator of success and, in search of a reliable external recognition structure, turns to literary prizes instead. In the second section, I trace the history of the first and most prominent post-Soviet literary prize, the Russian Booker. I argue that the prize’s rise to prominence both depended on capitalist values and structures and helped introduce those values and structures into elite literary production. Third, I turn to Slavnikova’s prose, considering three of her novels, *A Dragonfly Enlarged to the Size of a Dog* (*Strekoza, uvelichennaia do razmerov sobaki* 1996), *Alone in the Mirror* (*Odin v zerkale*

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6 Other artists, critics, and related professionals, are empowered, in Bourdieu’s words, “with a specific authority founded on their belonging to the relatively autonomous world of art, science and literature, and with all the values associated with that autonomy—disinterestedness, expertise, etc.” See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1996), 340.

7 Ibid., 81.
1999), and 2017 (2006). I argue that these three novels show the development of Slavnikova’s art and worldview as she interacts with the Booker Prize as an institution. I focus on three key features of her prose: her portrayal of the post-Soviet transition, her move away from postmodern metatextuality, and the simplification of her prose style. Through these three features, I show how she responded to the implicit demands of the Booker Prize to develop an innovative and appealing literary voice. Finally, I turn to Slavnikova’s work with the Debut Prize for young writers, in which she attempted to create a better system of recognition and development for young authors, but one that, nonetheless, relies on capitalist principles in both its selection and promotion processes. Through her prose and her extra-literary work, I argue, Olga Slavnikova has pursued a vision of success that intentionally ignores the direct demands of the reader and the market, and instead aligns itself with literary prizes. The structures and rhetoric of these prizes, however, make them function effectively as mediators between market demands and elite literature. In this way, Slavnikova’s vision of success represents another aspect of cultural capitalism as it came to structure the literary field in the post-Soviet decades.

SLAVNIKOVA’S SUCCESS

Olga Slavnikova’s relationship to success is complicated. When asked directly, she often denies the importance of success outright. One interviewer suggests that her first two novels were written “in order to avoid [mass] success completely,” and Slavnikova agrees: “I didn’t think about mass success then, and I don’t think about it now. A Dragonfly [Slavnikova’s first novel] was written for the desk drawer. On principle.”

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8 Rakhaeva, “Dialog idet…” “[Rakhaeva: …] два твоих первых романа не просто не подразумевают массовый успех, — они написаны так, чтобы этого успеха не было ни в коем случае. О.С.: Ты знаешь, я не думала о массовом успехе тогда, не думаю о нем и сейчас. “Стрекоза” — это роман, который писался в стол. Принципиально.”
there is a secret to writerly success, she evokes the same formula: “If you want your own success, intended for you alone, then don’t desire success, write as if only for the desk drawer.”

But this interviewer and others besides premise their very questions on the assumed fact of Slavnikova’s success. “Tell us the secret to Olga Slavnikova’s success,” begs another such interview. Slavnikova once again provides a similar answer: “Honestly follow your own nature, work to your limit. Don’t do hack work [Ne khalturit’].” These answers contain two different versions of success simultaneously. The first can be defined as the “mass success,” which Slavnikova denies considering when writing her first novel. The second, however, is a different kind of success; it is the success that comes out of not wanting success, out of “following your own nature.” This is what the third interviewer means when she asks about “Olga Slavnikova’s success.” In Slavnikova’s answers, these two definitions of success are not only distinct, they seem directly opposed to one another. In this section, I explore how this opposition is possible. How can “Slavnikova’s success” be opposed to commercial success, while nevertheless remaining success? What does success mean without the broad readership that defines mass or commercial success? How does one conceive of literary success without the reader?

In a series of essays published at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, Slavnikova provides some clues. Though these essays do not explicitly evoke the notion of success, they implicitly address the issues that undergird Slavnikova’s understanding of the term through their analyses of the central problems in the institutional structures of contemporary

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literature. In one such essay, “Love Us Clothed. Notes On Secondary Writerly Attributes” (“Poliubite nas odetymi. Zametki o vtorichnykh pisatel’skikh priznakakh”), Slavnikova argues that a good prose writer disappears behind her characters when she writes, becoming all but invisible to the reader, and by extension, to the public. In order to rectify this situation, to become once again evident in society, the writer requires secondary attributes, which, like the clothing of H.G. Wells’s invisible man, can make the invisible visible. “It seems to me,” she writes, “that Soviet power wisely looked after writers in the sense that it ensured secondary attributes and made them incontestable.” Such secondary attributes during Soviet times included membership in a Writers Unions, which came with benefits, including food rations, “trips to creative houses, apartments and honorary titles, state prizes and print runs.” Slavnikova continues:

Having received something, a writer felt precisely like a writer, not just behind his desk, but everywhere in life. Suddenly a terrible thing happened: the kind, good Sof’ia Vlas’evna [or “Soviet power,” “sovetskaia vlast’” —B.G.] left for the other world. And it turned out that the job “writer” in the new society simply did not exist.

In this new society, writers have to create space for themselves, they have to become their own “image-makers” by consciously creating their own legitimacy. “Today, secondary writerly attributes derive from [nazhivaiutsia] behavioral strategies. People do something sort of conceptual and then sort of describe what they’ve done. And thanks to this small circulation, a

11 Slavnikova, “Poliubite nas odetymi.”

12 Ibid. “Мне кажется, советская власть мудро заботилась о писателе в том смысле, что обеспечивала его вторичные признаки и делала их неоспоримыми.”

13 Ibid. “Распределялось, как мы помним, не только мясо, но и путевки в дома творчества, квартиры и почетные звания, государственные премии и книжные тиражи. Получив нечто, писатель не только за своим столом, но и вообще в жизни ощущал себя именно писателем. Вдруг случилось страшное: милая, добрая Софья Власьевна отошла в мир иной. И оказалось, что такой вакансии - писатель - в новом обществе попросту нет.”
Chapter 2: Success Without Readers

literary gag turns into a personal literary myth.”\(^{14}\) Slavnikova rejects this kind of conscious authorial myth-building as self-interested and too calculating. The secondary attributes writers need, Slavnikova argues, should not have to be generated by the writer, but should be bestowed by an outside entity.

In another essay entitled “The Critic of My Dreams” ("Kritik moei mechy"), Slavnikova envisions the role of such an outside entity being played by a super-critic, a critic capable of reading and fully appreciating her and other writers’ literary output.\(^{15}\) Such criticism, she half-seriously hopes, might be capable of saving writers from their current situation, which has become “unprestigious and completely without perspective.”\(^{16}\) Though it is not clear precisely how a perceptive critical apparatus would drastically alter the prestige and perspectives of contemporary literature, it could provide the authoritative external recognition structure capable of bestowing the “secondary writerly attributes” so important to the writer in society. Aside from criticism, however, another institution appears in this essay, though only briefly: the “galvanizing influence of the Russian Booker.”\(^{17}\)

It would be in a third essay, “The Desire for Glory” (“Zhelan’ e slavy”), that Slavnikova would treat prizes more directly.\(^{18}\) Starting once again from the premise that writers’ place in society is not properly valued, Slavnikova suggests that “much has changed for the writer over

\(^{14}\) Ibid. “сегодня вторичные писательские признаки наживаются за счет поведенческих стратегий. Люди делают что-то как бы концептуальное, а потом как бы описывают то, что они совершили. Так, благодаря малому круговороту вещей в литературе гэ превращается в персональный писательский миф.”

\(^{15}\) Olga Slavnikova, “Kritik moei mechy,” Oktiabr’, No. 6 (2000).

\(^{16}\) Ibid. “непрестижно и совсем неперспективно.”

\(^{17}\) Ibid. “гальванизирующее воздействие русского Букера.”

the past decade and a half. The problem [however] is that as a natural and instinctive creature, the writer has not changed almost at all. Secretly he still dreams of being recognized on the street.”

In the new post-Soviet environment, “one should not” (“не следует”) expect the type of external recognition enjoyed by Soviet poets and writers; no one pays any attention to literature at all. “However, in recent years a relatively new mechanism” has appeared, what she calls “the prize process.” Not only might prizes help in supplementing Russia’s “disappearingly small royalties” as a “possible source of income,” they also promise “to set apart the best novel of the year,” bringing necessary external recognition to its author and to literature at large. In this way, literary prizes might provide the “secondary attributes” necessary to make writers “feel precisely like writers.” Indeed, working on her own literary prize several years later, Slavnikova would employ a similar formulation. In answer to a question about the role of the Debut Prize for young writers, Slavnikova responded: “It is so important that someone say to a person — you’re a writer.” Such external confirmation, especially by a panel of experts of the type assembled through prizes, represents an essential marker of recognition for Slavnikova, one that is not based on sales or the book market, but that, instead, conceives a different kind of success.

In my own interview with the author, I asked her to define what literary success (“literaturnyi uspekh”) meant for her personally. Instead of answering the question directly, she

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19 Ibid. “Очень много изменилось для писателя за последние полтора десятилетия. Проблема в том, что само- то он как существо природное и инстинктивное не изменился практически никак. Втайне он по-прежнему мечтает, чтобы его узнавали на улице.”

20 Ibid. “Однако в последние годы появился и сравнительно новый механизм искушения писателя славой, а именно — премиальный процесс.”

21 Ibid. “Известно, что гонорары от некоммерческих изданий столь исчезающе малы, что литературная премия невольно воспринимается писателем как возможный источник дохода”; “возможность выделить из нескольких заметных романов года самый лучший роман.”

generalized how “a young writer always draws the same picture for himself.” Nevertheless, her answer is instructive for what vision of success she attributes to the generalized “young writer”:

He delivers his manuscript and the next morning they call him and say, “you’re a genius!” “You’ve reinvented Russian literature!” […] The editor changes three words and immediately sends it off to the printer. Then he wins a prestigious prize. Then they make a movie out of the book, translate it into every language. And everything finishes off with a Nobel Prize. That’s more or less how a young author sees reality, understanding, of course, that it’s unlikely, but nevertheless dreaming of it. […] The temptation is irresistible. Everyone dreams of waking up famous, of hearing lots of compliments, receiving great reviews, receiving prestigious literary prizes.23

In this response, Slavnikova provides a whole litany of markers of success, all based on expert opinion—from the rapturous compliments of the imagined editor, to a “prestigious prize,” to film adaptations, international publications, the Nobel Prize, compliments, reviews, and for the third time, “prestigious literary prizes.” Conspicuously absent from this list are any popular or market-based recognition structures. Slavnikova’s imagined young author does not become a bestseller, nor does he fill up stadiums of adoring fans (as several late-Soviet poets did, and as Vera Polozkova does in contemporary Russia, as explored in chapter four). Instead, he receives all the possible “secondary attributes” of a visible author in society, most prominent among them are

23 Slavnikova, personal interview, Moscow, 28 May 2017. “Молодой писатель всегда рисует для себя одну и ту же картину. Вот он приносит рукопись. На другое утро ему начинают звонить и говорить, вы гений! Вы открытие русской литературы! Мы вас будем на руках носить! Три слова редактор поправит и тут же отправит в печать. Потом он получит престижную премию. Потом по его книге снимут фильм. Потом переведут не все языки. И все закончится Нобелевской премией. Вот так примерно он представляет реальность. Понимает, что это вряд ли, но мечтает об этом. […] Соблазн этот непреодолим. Каждый мечтает проснуться знаменитым, услышать много комплиментов, получить прекрасные рецензии, получить престижную литературную премию.”
literary prizes—mentioned three times, while all other recognition structures are mentioned only once.

Indeed, when asked to think about her own past success or the success of others, Slavnikova often appeals to the authority of literary prizes. In an answer to an interviewer’s question in 2002, when she had not yet won any major literary prizes, she described her disappointment when her latest novel was not named a finalist for the Booker:

In my literary biography there is a sensitive moment connected with the short list of last year’s Booker. At that time many people said to me “If they don’t include you in the final six — that’s just too much.” Then [after not being included among the finalists] I really did have the feeling that an unjust thing had happened, that something of my potential was absolutely not valued. The sharpness of that experience is connected with my special relationship to the Booker Prize.\textsuperscript{24}

For her, not being included among the finalists of the Booker Prize was not merely an affront, it was unjust (“nespravedlivyi”) and represented the undervaluing of her position as a writer. After she won the Booker Prize in 2006, that accomplishment began to appear in all of her author bios, attesting to her very status as a writer, framed as a version of success. The Russian PEN Club site, for instance, introduces her writerly bona fides with the lines:

Already in 1997, her \textit{A Dragonfly Enlarged to the Size of a Dog} was included among the finalists for the Russian Booker. Success grew \textit{[Uspekh narastal]. Her 2017 […] was a}

\textsuperscript{24} Oleg Proskurin, “\textit{Ia — odinokii chelovek v literature,}” \textit{Russkii zhurnal}, 28 May 2002. “У меня в литературной биографии был щекотливый момент, связанный с шорт-листом предыдущего "Букера". Тогда мне говорили многие: "Если вас не включат в шестерку - это будет уже слишком". Тогда у меня, действительно, было ощущение, что вот, произошла вещь несправедливая, что некий мой потенциал абсолютно не оценен. Острота тогдашних переживаний связана с моим особым отношением к Букеровской премии.”
Chapter 2: Success Without Readers

finalist for the Big Book Award and several days later it took the laurels of the Russian Booker.25

In her capacity as coordinator of the Debut Prize for young writers, she was asked about the subsequent success of past winners. She immediately appealed to the “many ‘grown up’ ['vzroslyi'] literary prizes” that “our finalists and laureates have already won,” including the New Pushkin Prize, the Russian Prize, Youth Triumph Awards, and the Russian Booker.26

The type of success that Slavnikova most often turns to when asked about the concept (and the type of success with which critics and journalists often associate Slavnikova) depends on external recognition outside of mass popularity and the book market. Slavnikova sees this external recognition as allowing the writer to “feel precisely like a writer,” or in other words, to validate the writer’s status in society. This vision of success through external, non-market recognition structures bears much in common with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “consecration.”

Consecration, in Bourdieu’s understanding, is legitimacy bestowed on a work or artist by a cultural institution, which has or claims the authority to do so. Such cultural institutions, or “instances of consecration,” as Bourdieu calls them, are essential to establishing the autonomy of artistic production apart from the demands of market.27 In many ways, Slavnikova’s understanding of success aligns with Bourdieu’s analysis of artistic autonomy in this essay, and


so it is worth examining the affinities between the two before turning to the point where Slavnikova’s vision of success diverges from Bourdieu’s analysis of consecration.

In “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” Bourdieu develops a history of the autonomy of artistic production beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Freed from patronage systems by the bourgeois market for cultural production, Bourdieu writes, artists immediately begin to insist on “the representation of culture as a kind of superior reality, irreducible to the vulgar demands of economics, and the ideology of free, disinterested ‘creation’.”28 They do this in order to “distinguish the artist and intellectual from other commoners by positing the unique products of ‘creative genius’ against the interchangeable products, utterly and completely reducible to their commodity value.”29 For Bourdieu, such rhetorical strategies defined the “‘inventions’ of Romanticism” as well as the positioning of the early twentieth-century avant-garde as an elite movement focused on the development of artistic forms as such apart from the demands of audiences. Slavnikova situates herself, and literary prize culture, alongside these historical antecedents, specifically juxtaposing her vision of success to the demands of the market, and emphasizing an economically disinterested type of success. Serving on the jury of the Booker Prize in 2000, for instance, she was asked why several commercially successful novels did not make the short list. “The jury understands this prize,” Slavnikova explained, “as a prize for quality, for intellectual and literary merit. Such things should be unsuccessful.”30 In Russian, the last phrase “Takie veshchi dolzhny imet’ neuspekh” ends with the word “neuspekh” or “unsuccess,” in effect creating a virtue out of market failure.

28 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 114.
29 Ibid.
For Bourdieu the creation of such virtues, free of—and often directly opposed to—the market, is precisely the point of such instances of consecration. They create a hierarchy within the artistic field that does not appeal to the market, broader audiences, or other factors outside of the artistic field proper. In fact, the most effective consecration structures, Bourdieu writes, are “those which most completely express the specificity of a determinate type of practice.”

In working to both define and adhere to the standards of the Booker Prize, Slavnikova helped create precisely this kind of consecration structure. “Literature needs hierarchies,” she responded in answer to a question about the role of literary prizes, and such hierarchies should be formed according to aesthetic, not market, criteria. “Literary prizes in the current situation,” she wrote in a different context, “exist precisely in order to insist on the necessity of aesthetic criteria, on the fact that such criteria are relevant and applicable.”

She continued,

Our major problem in the literary process in general is precisely that the very existence of aesthetic criteria, of the criteria of authenticity and depth, are coming under a radical challenge. […] I’m talking about commercial fiction, about that which the market is inclined to represent as achievements of literary art for the sake of marketing.

For Slavnikova, literary prizes are precisely those “instances of consecration” capable of producing distinction within the literary field apparently independent of market principles.

31 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 117.


34 Ibid. “Главная наша проблема в литературном процессе вообще — это именно то, что само существование эстетических критериев, критериев подлинности и глубины, радикально подвергается сейчас сомнению. […] Я говорю о коммерческой бельгетристике, о том, что рынок склонен выдавать за достижения художественной литературы и делать на этом “пиары”.”
Slavnikova sees prizes as capable of ensuring such consecration in part because they are run and operated entirely by literary experts.\textsuperscript{35} She envisions a type of success mediated through the expertise of these literary elites.\textsuperscript{36} As in Bourdieu’s analysis, such a vision of success apparently insists on the autonomy of literary production from the demands of the market by removing judgment structures from the populace and placing them in the sure hands of a trusted elite.

The point at which Slavnikova diverges from Bourdieu’s analysis comes in her specific choice of consecration structure. While Bourdieu highlights museums and the education system, Slavnikova favors literary prizes, and especially the Russian Booker Prize. The immediate difference among these consecration structures can be conceptualized in their relationship to symbolic capital in the cultural sphere. Museums primarily preserve symbolic capital, and schools pass on the capital associated with certain kinds of cultural knowledge to the next generation. Both of these instances, as they preserve and pass on symbolic capital, also reproduce and amplify that capital, so that a work in a museum is not only preserved for another generation, it also acquires capital by its very position in the museum. Prizes also produce such symbolic capital, but the difference is that prizes do so directly and as their primary function. For this reason, prizes, unlike museums and schools, explicitly undertake (and often dramatize) the process of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, and most important for my argument here, prizes are inextricably related to capitalist systems of exchange. Though her own rhetoric pits the Booker against market forces and “commercial fiction,” the prize itself takes a different approach. As shown in the next section, the Booker Prize is deeply embedded in and committed

\textsuperscript{35} In a similar way, Bourdieu insists that artists seeking autonomy appeal precisely to experts in their own field, trusting the judgments only of those “whose understanding of works of art presupposes an identical ‘creative’ disposition.” Bourdieu, \textit{The Field of Cultural Production}, 114.

\textsuperscript{36} Recall Slavnikova’s answer to my interview question about literary success. Though she mentions much more recognition structures than just literary prizes, all of them are mediated by cultural elites.
to principles of capitalism, including the mechanisms of the commercial book market.

Furthermore, the prominence and prestige that made it such a powerful structure for literary consecration in the post-Soviet 1990s derive in large part from the prize’s capitalist provenance and structures. As Slavnikova defines her success against the demands of the market, she in fact chooses an “instance of consecration” that itself is aligned with the market. In this way, “Slavnikova’s success” occupies an ambiguous position, both dependent on and set in opposition to the capitalist structures of the post-Soviet book market.

LITERARY PRIZES: A CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

A small note in a December 1992 issue of Knizhnoe obozrenie announced the winner of the first Russian Booker Prize, Mark Kharitonov, for a novel called Lines of Fate (Linii sud’ by 1991). The same note also announced the creation of the Triumph Foundation ("Fond Triumf") for the support of literature and the arts, which among other activities would sponsor the Triumph Prize.\(^\text{37}\) These two prizes, the Booker and the Triumph, were the first independent cultural awards to appear in post-Soviet Russia.\(^\text{38}\) The Booker was funded by a British food wholesaler and was modeled on the the London-based annual award for English-language novels. The Triumph was funded by one of the rising Russian oligarchs, Boris Berezovsky, and it drew its models and symbolic structures from a motley collection of mostly Soviet sources. Over the first post-Soviet decades, the Booker would become one of the most powerful institutions in the new


literary landscape, while the Triumph would fall into obscurity and eventually cease to exist altogether.

In this section, I tell the story of these two prizes in order to examine the literary prize as an institution that mediates between economic interests and the elite pole of the literary field, where such interests are often rhetorically denied. Deriving from the investment of private capital and the promise of cash payouts, any literary prize brings economic structures of investment and returns into contact with the symbolic economy of cultural goods, as James F. English has argued. Beyond the broad mechanisms of cultural prizes in general, however, I argue that the specific structural and symbolic differences between Triumph and the Booker prizes can account for their divergent fates. The Triumph prize, which was built according to Soviet models of broad support for the arts, dwindled and disappeared, while the Booker, premised on the imported values of cultural capitalism, rose in prominence. The Booker explicitly worked to integrate aesthetic criteria with the demands of the book market, promising to make “serious” literature successful in the new post-Soviet economy. Furthermore, the Booker mobilized core capitalist values of transparency and meritocracy to create media events around itself and the literature it promoted. It was largely for these reasons, all tied to the prize’s capitalist provenance and structure, that the Booker won out over the Triumph in the struggle for symbolic authority in the post-Soviet literary field. By integrating the demands of the market with criteria for “serious” literature, the Booker imports several of the core principles of cultural capitalism into the elite pole of the literary field. When authors like Olga Slavnikova turn to the Booker Prize as an authoritative “instance of consecration,” they work against their explicit intentions. Far from opposing the “vulgar demands of the market” (to borrow again from

Bourdieu) they in fact turn to the prize as a mediator that connects elite literary recognition with the demands of the marketplace, even while avoiding direct contact.

“The simply tremendous growth in cultural prizes, which have been expanding in number and economic value much faster than the cultural economy in general” can be attributed to a single characteristic of the prize as an institution, writes James F. English in *The Economy of Prestige*. Though English’s work concentrates on the Anglophone world, much of his analysis could apply to post-Soviet Russia, where throughout the 1990s cultural prizes grew in importance and number at an extraordinary rate. Such growth, according to English comes from prizes’ ability to negotiate between different kinds of capital. For authors, prizes can mean “cultural capital” (value in the cultural sphere) will pay out in “economic capital” (money), while for patrons, the prestige, or “symbolic capital,” of great art can transfer to a name otherwise associated only with “economic capital” (like Alfred Nobel’s fortune). In fact, English writes, prizes “are the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital—which is to say that they are our most effective institutional agents of *capital intraconversion*.” Because they allow the “intraconversion” of one kind of capital, or value, into another, prizes also induce structural similarities among the fields of capital exchange, creating a “cultural economics,” or what English calls “the economics of cultural prestige.” Though this economics is not itself based only on money, it “is woven together with, and cannot be understood apart from, the money

40 Ibid., 10.


42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 4.
economy.” It involves economic terms such as capital, investment, return, and market, and “it assumes certain basic continuities between economic behavior (that is, interested or advantage-seeking exchange) and the behavior proper to artists, critics, intellectuals, and other important players in the field of culture.”

What this means is that the institutions of cultural prizes—and the artists who invest emotional and creative energies in such institutions—facilitate the deeper integration of economic principles and the cultural sphere. Though prizes and affiliated artists might well be genuinely committed to disinterested and inspired acts of artistic creation, the very mechanisms of the institution serve to both recognize such creation and to integrate it into a broader economic system. Economics, however, is not reducible to capitalism or any single system of exchange. Various prizes—through their choices of symbols and structures—can project various values onto the cultural economy they create. The two prizes examined here, the Triumph and the Booker, took different approaches to structuring a cultural economy. The struggle between these two prizes can be seen as, in Bourdieu’s terms, “the scene of competition for the power to grant cultural consecration,” the winner of which not only gains the authority for consecration, but also shapes the broader field through its own structures and values. Before turning to the more prominent Booker, which emerged victorious from this competition, I begin with a brief look at the Triumph Prize, which emphasized its Russian roots and proclaimed a specifically non-capitalist relationship to the arts.

44 Ibid.

45 Olga Slavnikova’s commitment, for example, to her own work as artistic creation uninterested in market success seems consistent and all but unimpeachable throughout her career.

46 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 121.
From its very first press conference, the Triumph Foundation borrowed from the symbolic capital of Soviet institutions, announcing its founding in the main building of the Russian (formerly Soviet) Academy of Sciences, where it promised to recognize cultural figures in various categories for their “extraordinary contribution to the development of Russian culture.” The prizes were announced ahead of time, but awarded in an official ceremony on stage at the Bolshoi Theater, an institution operated by and closely associated with the Ministry of Culture both of the USSR and of the post-Soviet Russian Federation. Beyond the mobilization of these state symbols of culture, the Triumph Prize also projected a relationship to the arts reminiscent of the socialist welfare state. In announcing the prize, the Triumph’s secretary, Zoia Boguslavskaya directly appealed to the Yeltsin administration to consider tax deductions for the support of culture. She then declared that the Triumph foundation would support the development of the arts because “culture cannot (and should not) support [soderzhat’] itself.”

Aside from cash awards for prizewinners themselves, the foundation also promised a multifaceted program of broad funding for artists. The inaugural press released announced:

Alongside awarding the prize, the Triumph Foundation:

— institutes 10 Triumph Grants for the most talented young creators and performers without means;
— facilitates the realization of exhibitions, concerts and film screenings, the publication of literary works of outstanding cultural figures;
— establishes international connections with philanthropic foundations and world organizations that support culture;

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48 Ibid.
will provide support to cultural figures who have lost the ability to work or who have fallen into difficult situations.\(^{49}\)

In this way, the Triumph Prize represents a distinctly post-Soviet twist on the practice of wealthy donors endowing prizes as a strategy of what English calls “capital intraconversion.”\(^{50}\) In contrast to the Nobel and other Western awards, the Triumph used Soviet state symbols and socialist priorities in order to effect that “capital intraconversion” not only away from the direct source of its capital (Berezovskii’s LogoVAZ auto manufacturer), but also away from capitalism itself: The Triumph Prize emphasized both its association with the best art of post-Soviet Russia and its rejection of the art market as a viable mechanism for culture’s survival. In its place, it resurrected a Soviet-era commitment to the social welfare of cultural figures and of culture itself.

The Russian Booker took a different tack, while also responding to a perceived need to support writers in post-Soviet Russia. As one of the founders recalls, at the time, “opportunities for young and unknown authors were hazy […] [and] the official aid of the Soviet times, on which ‘hopeful’ authors could depend, came to an end. It was precisely this situation of uncertainty that served as the reason for founding the Russian Booker.”\(^{51}\) But the Booker approached this problem in a very different way from the social-welfare strategy of the

\(^{49}\) Ibid. “помимо присуждения премий, фонд “Триумф”:
— учреждает 10 стипендий “Триумф” наиболее талантливым молодым творцам и исполнителям, не имеющим средств;
— способствует проведению выставок, концертов и просмотров фильмов, изданию литературных произведений выдающихся деятелей культуры;
— устанавливает международные связи с благотворительными фондами и организациями мира, поддерживающими культуру;
— будет оказывать поддержку деятелям культуры, потерявшим трудоспособность или попавшим в бедственное положение.”

\(^{50}\) English, The Economy of Prestige, 10.

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Triumph—namely through capitalist means. Part of the Booker’s explicit aim was to “enliven the publishing process” (“озхит’ издатель’ский процесс”) in Russia by bridging what it called “serious literature” and the new capitalist book market. The brochure for the first award ceremony, for instance, includes the following phrasing of its mission statement:

The goal of the prize is to support serious literature in the conditions of the contemporary market, to help it become competitive in store windows that are filled with glossy covers, and to once again open the path to readers.

Instead of positioning itself against the new economic realities, the Booker suggested that it would have the power to influence those realities. In other words, if the Triumph Foundation aimed to insulate the arts from the caprices of capitalism, the Russia Booker promised to make authors the beneficiaries of those very same caprices, suggesting that with its help, serious literature and the new book market could form a viable alliance.

Though the Russian Booker took few active steps to ensure the market success of its winning novels, its rhetorical framing tells an important story. Not only does the Booker position itself unequivocally as part of the new post-Soviet Russia (and not as a holdover or renewal of the Soviet system of cultural patronage), it also does so in a specifically capitalist

52 Ibid.


54 The Russian Booker hired a consultant named Gilbert Doctorow in the early 2000 to examine possible strategies for increasing sales of Booker laureates. The initiatives included devoted stands in major bookstores, a boxed-set of short-list nominees, and others. According to the director of the Russian Booker prize, Igor’ Shaitanov, none of these initiatives were implemented (Interview with Igor’ Shaitanov, 29 May 2017, Moscow). From 2006–12, when the British Petroleum was among the prize’s major sponsors, winners were sold at BP gas stations throughout Russia, and in 2013, a small grant was provided for an English translation of one of the short-listed work (though not necessarily the winner). (Russkii Buker. Literaturnaia premiia. 2017. Buklet (Moscow, 2017))
Through the Booker Prize, this rhetoric promises, “serious literature” would become a marketable commodity whose commercial value corresponded to its cultural worth. The prize not only explicitly aspires to market-based success for the novels it recognizes, it measures its own success through indicators taken directly from the book market. The British version of the prize even provides the following statistics on its website:

Every year, the Man Booker Prize winner is guaranteed international recognition and a huge increase in sales, firstly in hardback and then in paperback. The announcement of the winner is covered by television, radio and press worldwide. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan sold over 300,000 copies in the UK and almost 800,000 worldwide after his win, more than the combined sales of his previous novels; 12,466 physical copies of Marlon James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings* were sold in the week following his 2016 win, a 933% increase on the week before.

Though the Russian award’s site provides no such data, its current secretary, Igor’ Shaitanov, told me that Booker winners are likely to see a renewed print run of at least 15,000 copies for their winning novel, and up to 100,000 if the novel already sells well. Such statistics underscore the economic aspirations behind the prize. The Russian Booker, like the Triumph and

55 The foreign provenance of the Booker prize was also an important aspect of its success. In a 2017 retrospective of the prize, Igor’ Shaitanov writes that the “enormous renown” that the Booker gained over the 1990s can be linked to “both the non-governmental provenance of the award and its status in Europe” (Igor’ Shaitanov, “Mezhdu dvukh kul’tur. Povestovovanie s dokumentami i vospominaniami uchastnikov (1992–1996),” *Russkii Buker 25* (Moscow: Boslen, 2016), 9).

56 I have in mind Bourdieu’s definition of “Symbolic goods” as “a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic object. Their specifically cultural value and their commercial value remain relatively independent, although the economic sanction may come to reinforce their cultural consecration.” The Booker promises to collapse the two values of novels, bringing commercial value into alignment with cultural value as judged by a panel of experts. See Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 113.


58 According to Shaitanov, Liudmila Ulitskaya’s *The Kukotsky Case* (the winner in 2001) was printed in an additional 100,000 copies after she won the prize. Igor’ Shaitanov, personal interview, Moscow, 29 May 2017.
other prizes, is founded on the investment of economic capital, and it awards its winners a substantive sum (10,000 pounds sterling when the prize was founded). But the success of the prize’s outcome is not simply the money given; more important is the further market success of the winning novel. For the prize itself, success is counted (in both meanings of the word) as the ability “to support serious literature in the conditions of the contemporary market.”

Beyond the market principles displayed here, this passage from the British prize’s site also hints at the mechanisms of the Booker’s ability to generate that success: “The announcement of the winner is covered by television, radio and press worldwide.” Just like its British counterpart, the structure of the Russian Booker derives much of its prestige from its ability to create media-ready events and controversy. As James English points out about the British award, “It is an increasingly open secret that the success of the Booker Prize—its seemingly magical power to attract the attention both of the broad book-reading public and of the most critically respected British novelists—is bound up with the annual flurry of scandal that attends it in dailies and in the literary press.” This model of influence through scandal has been adopted by the Russian version, which has sparked scandals nearly every year since its founding.

Such scandals are no accident. They are the direct result of the prize’s structure, which emphasizes the core values of transparency and meritocratic judgment while building suspense and inviting speculation and debate from the literary press. Each year in late spring, the award competition and any changes to its rules are announced alongside the names of the members of


60 English, *Economy of Prestige*, 198. For a lengthier discussion of how “The Booker is a particularly glaring instance of how, in the world of prizes, rapid prestige accumulation is often coupled with nearly constant ridicule and disparagement on the part of experts in the arts press and the popular media,” see ibid., 198–205.

61 In recognition of the constructive role of these controversies, the prize’s 25th-anniversary promotional materials included an essay detailing the reliable uproars around the prize’s rules, integrity, and judgment. Igor’ Shaitanov, “Bukerovskie skandaly,” *Russkii Buker* 25 (Moscow: Boslen, 2016), 64–88.
the jury. In early fall, a short list of three to six finalists is announced at a press conference at which members of the jury also field questions.\(^6\) The remaining months of the year provide literary journalists and critics time to review the nominations, pick favorites, and even construct narratives about literary trends highlighted by the list. The awards ceremony in December gathers the nominated authors, but keeps them in suspense, and announces the winner at the culmination of the evening. The apparent transparency of the award’s various stages allows for speculation on each of the finalists, on the tastes of individual judges, and on broader questions about the development of contemporary literature.\(^6\) At the same time, such speculation is energized by repeated public assurances by both the prize itself and members of the jury, that all judgments are based strictly on literary merit.\(^6\)

As in Britain, in Russia the Booker’s structure successfully drew the attention of the literary press, which began to use the prize as an occasion to organize reviews and commentary on the state of contemporary literature. In the prize’s second year, the literary supplement to \emph{Nezavisimaia gazeta}, for instance, devoted an acerbic and scandalous series of articles to the works nominated for the Booker prize, which itself spawned a series of responses in other

\(^6\) See Shaitanov, “Booker-97.”

\(^6\) On the tastes of individual judges, see, for instance Efim Liamport’s series for \emph{Nezavisimaia gazeta} in 1993, under the title “10 000 funtov likha,” in which he speculates ad hominem about how each judge might react to specific works. For instance: “Taking into account the members of the jury… B. Okudzhava – he simply won’t get to the reading – he’s an old unwell man. Even in the best of time he wasn’t a reader or a writer – a bard, in a word. V.V. Ivanov – wonderfully educated, but completely separated from living literature” etc. (“Учитывая состав жюри… Б. Окуджава – ему просто не до чтения – старый, больной человек. Да и в лучшие времена – не читатель, не писатель – бард, одним словом.. В. В. Иванов - великолепно образован, но оторван полностью от живой литературы.” Efim Liamport, “10 000 funtov likha. Merkantil’nye zametki o premii Bukera,” \emph{Nezavisimaia gazeta}, 31 July 1993.)

\(^6\) Though many authors and critics have accused the Booker and other prizes of non-meritocratic results—whether based on insider connections, political leanings, or other factors—such accusations are the direct result of the public rhetoric of meritocracy. Neither the prize, nor such accusations, can function without repeated assurances of meritocratic standards. Furthermore, those who insist on the prize’s meritocracy, like Olga Slavnikova and Igor’ Shaitanov, should be taken at face value. Their (and others’) professed belief in the prize’s principles and commitment to enacting those principles should be taken as genuine, rather than cynical, and knowing (if striving), rather than naïve.
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outlets. Writing in *Literaturnaia gazeta* later that year, Vyacheslav Kuritsyn summed up how the “almost authentic polemic” around the Booker had “substantially enlivened the previously weak literary process”:

> The “personal” system (the institute of nominators, the changing jury) + the sporting nature (the distance, the close finish, the intrigue of the awards ceremony) = a lively reaction (no matter whether positive or negative) from an interested public. The Booker has quickly managed to become the most prestigious of prizes.  

By formulating his analysis as an equation, Kuritsyn emphasizes the calculated nature of the prize’s structure. The transparency of nominations and juries, the rhetoric of meritocracy, along with the sporting finish, intentionally draw attention to the prize, increasing its influence in the broader literary field.

The Booker’s influence reached something of a turning point in its forth season, 1996. In October of that year, the Yekaterinburg-based literary journal *Ural* devoted its entire section of book reviews to the six novels being considered for the Russian Booker Prize. Though other periodicals had organized book reviews in similar fashion (like the *Nezavisimaia gazeta* series mentioned above), this was the first time one of the “thick” literary journals deferred to the Booker in its choice of titles to review. This is particularly significant because, when the Booker

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65 The first article in this series was Efim Liamport, “10 000 funtov likha. Merkantil’nye zametki o premii Bukera,” *Nezvisimaia gazeta*, 31 July 1993. Subsequent entries in the series were by the same author with the same headline and slight variations on the subhead throughout the year. For responses to the series, see M. Romm, “Voina so starikami, ili piat’ ‘bez’. O shumikhe vokrug tsikla statei, posviashchennykh premii Bukera,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 23 Oct 1993; and A. Latynina, “A chem dinamit Nobelia luchshe tsypliat Bukera? Razmysleniia nakanune vtorogo prisuzhdeniia angliiskoi premii russkomu romanu,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 1 Dec 1993.

came to Russia, it empowered precisely the thick journals—and not publishers, as in the prize’s British incarnation—to nominate prose worthy of consideration for the prize. *Ural* was among the nominating thick journals meant to help orient the fledgling prize in the Russian literary field. When *Ural* then chose to organize its own book review section around the Russian Booker’s “short list,” it flipped that orientation. Now it was the prize that was guiding the thick journal, suggesting what should (and by implication, should not) be reviewed for its readership. The editor who organized the section and wrote the first review was a young critic and aspiring writer by the name of Olga Slavnikova.

If Slavnikova helped to bolster the rising influence of the Booker, many other critics recognized the prize’s increasing prominence as well, but approached it with more skepticism. Pavel Krusanov, for instance, suggested that the prize could be “definitely good for literature at large,” but only if it represented an “honest affirmation of the situation in contemporary literature, and not some closed-door deal.” Krusanov’s worry combines two common anxieties: that the prize would not live up to its expressed ideals of transparency and meritocracy, and by so doing that it would not merely “affirm the situation in contemporary literature,” but that the prize might lead literature astray. Natalia Ivanova argued that all of Russian literature had already been led astray by the charms of the Booker: no longer creating art for its own sake, literature had become, in Ivanova’s memorable phrase, “The Bride of the Booker.” Tatiana Garmash-Roffe developed Ivanova’s matrimonial metaphor, attributing the Booker’s influence to its promise of

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67 See Maria Cherniak, “Literaturnaia premiia kak diagnos aktual’noi slovesnosti,” *Labirint: Zhurnal sotsial’no-gumanitarnykh issledovanii*, No. 3/4 (2016): 9. Cherniak’s article includes the results of a survey she conducted asking authors about the influence of the Booker and other prizes on literature as a whole. I quote from those answers here. “И в этом смысле институт литературных премий, если это честная констатация положения вещей в текущей литературе, а не какие-то клановые междусобойчики, — безусловное благо для литературы в целом.”

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prestige and profit: “This is precisely why literature has become ‘The Bride of the Booker’—like a gold-digger [prodazhnaia krasotka] looking for a rich husband to bring her out into the world.”⁶⁹ In these metaphors, the Booker takes on the leading role, and literature follows, inverting the original orientation of the prize, and not to positive effect. If the Booker originally took “serious literature” as a given, which it aspired to “support in the conditions of the contemporary market,” then by the mid-1990s, the Booker was increasingly (and with increasing alarm) seen as exerting much more active influence on the development of contemporary literature.

In a retrospective of the Booker’s first two years, the critic K. Koksheneva undertook to analyze the prize’s influence. At first, she wrote, the prize appeared to help release literature from Soviet ideology: “The greatest joy for criticism in the last two years has been the tendency of freeing literature from ideology. Liberation from ideology has been presented as almost an act of social hygiene.”⁷⁰ But the act of social hygiene offered by the Booker, Koksheneva continued, came with its own ideological baggage. “Having freed ideology from literature, criticism found itself paralyzed by its own taboo.”⁷¹ Booker judges, afraid to advance politically incorrect or openly ideological novels, had created a consensus around a new kind of “Booker prose.” This Booker prose had its own ideology, Koksheneva argues, which more often than not presented an individual protagonist struggling against an evil and overpowering state.⁷² Many critics also

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⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Though the precise characteristics of the prose favored by the prize have shifted over the years, common points include character- and plot-driven novels, mostly free of explicit metafictional elements, whose relatively rare departures from realism veer more towards the mystical than the postmodern. See Evgenii Abdullaev, “Bol’shoi
noted the Booker’s tendency to choose realistic, character- and plot-driven prose over the literary games and metaphysical questions characteristic of postmodernism. Such tendencies soon became more than passive preferences and took on actively normative dimensions. For instance, when Viktor Pelevin’s postmodernist novel *Chapaev and the Void* (*Chapaev i pustota* 1996), was excluded from the short list in 1997, “The members of the jury explained their decision by saying that they consciously decided to support a certain tendency and to exclude the ‘filth’ of another literary tendency [postmodernism].” This phrasing and especially the ethical weight implicit in the word “filth” (“*merzost*” in the Russian) suggest that the jury’s ostensibly disinterested aesthetic decision had in fact been undertaken in order to exert a normative and proscriptive influence on what was included and what was excluded from “serious literature.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the imported Booker Prize, with its British provenance and capitalist structures, does not merely avoid the Soviet ideological legacies of prizes like the Triumph; it in fact offers an alternative ideology of its own, imbued with the values of capitalist markets of culture. The Booker Prize projects transparency and meritocracy while establishing a vision of elite literary success that is based on market indicators. Somewhat unexpectedly, this ideology, which seems to offer a clean break with the Soviet tradition, has led to relatively conservative aesthetic choices, a point which has been at the center of the polemic around prize culture. But the relevant point here is that this ideological position stems from the very structure of the prize itself. The Booker’s commitment to transparency, meritocracy, and market principles pushes the prize to promote certain exemplars of “serious literature” over others.

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74 For more on these debates, see Natalia Selivanova, “Buker i pustota: Nachal’nik literaturnoi premii zakryl postmodernizm,” *Izvestiia*, 20 Sep 1997; and Ivanova, “Preodelevshie postmodernizm.”
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When literary journals like *Ural* in 1996, followed the Booker’s lead in choosing which novels to review, they adopted the value system created within prize culture back into the literary field at large. As more of the thick literary journals followed suit, the Booker’s short list became a leading tastemaker among the critical elites, making “Booker prose” into a central tendency in “serious literature.” No matter how much critics disagreed with the prize’s nominations, they nevertheless devoted more attention to Booker nominees, and created incentives for writers to imitate past nominees and winners. Writers, asked about the influence of prizes on literature, suggested that many authors do indeed write for the prize. “An author who dreams of the Booker,” writes Tatiana Garmash-Roffe, “‘hones’ [‘zatachivaet’] a book according to the requirements of the prize.”75 Maria Galina suggests that many authors, often “subconsciously,” try to “make themselves agreeable to the requirements of the prize process.”76 Though authors avoid implicating themselves as “prisoners of the prize process” (in the words of another author) the active pull of the Booker on literary production is widely acknowledged.77

When authors like Olga Slavnikova define their vision of literary success through the external recognition bestowed by literary prizes, they bolster the influence of those prizes on literary production. In her endorsements of such awards, as shown above, Slavnikova insists on the strictly meritocratic basis of their judgments, and specifically opposes them to the demands of the capitalist book market. In this section, however, I have demonstrated how the very structures underlying post-Soviet Russia’s most prestigious literary prize both derive from and project values of cultural capitalism. In the next section, I turn to Slavnikova’s Booker-nominated and Booker-winning prose, produced during the years when she had her most

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 10.
intensive interaction with the prize as author, critic, essayist, and juror. Though Slavnikova’s work cannot and should not be reduced to her interaction with the literary prize, I argue that her intensive interest in the questions of capitalism, success, and the transition to new post-Soviet social and especially economic structures—all reflected in her fiction—can be perceived in a new light through her involvement and interest in the growing institution of the Booker Prize.

SLAVNIKOVA’S PROSE: COMING TO TERMS WITH CAPITALISM

In this section, I examine Slavnikova’s literary production to understand how her vision of success through the consecration of literary prizes interacts with the style, structure, and themes of her writing. My analysis focuses on three of Slavnikova’s novels, each of which was nominated for or won the Russian Booker Prize: *A Dragonfly, Enlarged to the Size of a Dog* (*Strekoza, uvelichennaia do razmerov sobaki* 1996, short-listed for the prize in 1997), *Alone in the Mirror* (*Odin v zerkale* 1999, long-listed in 2000), and *2017* (2006, laureate in 2006).\(^{78}\) I highlight three major tendencies that interest Slavnikova as a writer and I connect each to her work as a critic and prize administrator. First, I focus on Slavnikova’s interest in the transition between an old and a new world, roughly corresponding to Soviet and post-Soviet existence. I show how her portrayals of these transitions from her first novel to her Booker-winning *2017* take on more explicitly economic characteristics, and build first a critique of, then a compromise with post-Soviet capitalism. Next, I trace the different ways Slavnikova constructs what she calls a “fifth dimension,” in her prose, that is, a dimension beyond the space and time, which she

\(^{78}\) Two of Slavnikova’s other works that do not enter my analysis have been nominated for the prize: *Immortal* (*Bessmertnyi* 2001) and *Light Head* (*Legkaia golova* 2012). I leave *Immortal* out of my analysis largely because it is not set in post-Soviet Russia, but in the early 1980s; though it treats many of the themes of transition and historical break as Slavnikova’s other works, it does so through the death of Leonid Brezhnev, rather than through the fall of the Soviet Union. I do not treat *Light Head* because it was written after Slavnikova had already won the Booker Prize, and, therefore falls out of the scope of my analysis.
argues is a necessary aspect of any literary work. I suggest that her construction of such fifth dimensions moved away from the metafiction of an explicit authorial presence (which was not favored by Booker juries) towards a mysticism grounded in local folklore (which she herself found attractive when serving as a Booker juror). Finally, I analyze Slavnikova’s prose style to show how it reflects both an adjustment to the demands of the Booker prize, and an increasingly open position towards the proactivity characteristic of the new worlds she depicts. Finally, I suggest that Slavnikova’s Booker-winning prose in 2017 reflects her accommodation to a certain kind of capitalism—a capitalism based on fate and luck, rather than on the bourgeois values of hard work, ingenuity, and stability.

For Slavnikova, writing in the immediate post-Soviet period, the transition to a new social and economic system has been a central theme throughout her work. Her first novel, *A Dragonfly Enlarged to the Size of a Dog*, begins as the protagonist’s mother is lowered into her grave and the daughter, Katerina Ivanova, finds herself for the first time alone. “From her very childhood she had never been left alone. […] She had never found herself one-on-one with the inviolable, integral world.” While freedom from her mother’s unrelenting presence should, in the opinion of others, give her the chance to finally “start to live,” Katerina Ivanovna herself faces her impending solitude with existential trepidation. Her mother has always been her model in life, the example she has lived by, willingly or not. Now, looking at her own face in the mirror, she thinks that “not having an example, it [her face] might turn into nothing at all,

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80 Ibid., 9. “Многие здесь, конечно, зная, что Катерина Ивановна только сегодня начинает жить.”

81 The mother’s name, Sof’ia Andreevna, brings to mind Sof’ia Vlas’evna, the play on “Soviet power” (or “sovetskaia vlast”) that Slavnikova invoked in an essay quoted above. (Slavnikova, “Liubite nas odetymi.”)
into a smooth, inhuman muzzle."\textsuperscript{82} The loss of her connection to the past generation means both newfound freedom and a deep sense of loss, not only of a loved one, but of her own sense of self. Throughout the novel, Katerina Ivanovna struggles to find a new, independent way of being in the world, without the model of her mother. The task, however, proves impossible, as the social structures and the lines of fate that Slavnikova builds around her never allow her to escape her mother’s example. When, in a last heroic act, she finally seems almost to break loose of the bonds of the old, she is killed in a traffic accident, irrevocably stymying her chances of living her own way. Instead of finally “starting to live,” as others had hoped, she joins her mother in death.

The novel’s structure, which features a lone protagonist, struggling to break free of an antiquated world and forge her own path could be seen as a miniaturized, domestic interpretation of the formula for “Booker prose” proposed by Koksheneva two years before. There, Koksheneva had picked up on a trend in Booker nominees and winners that highlighted protagonists struggling against the vast bureaucracies or other intractable systems—most often meant to stand in for the Soviet state—that were aligned against them. Whether or not \textit{A Dragonfly}’s success can be attributed to this affinity with “Booker prose,” it was nominated for the prize, and it became a breakthrough work for Slavnikova precisely because of its inclusion on the prize’s short list.

In this first novel, the old and new systems are conceived of as primarily social constructs, not political or economic structures. Furthermore, they are dramatized in domestic relationships and spaces, in interactions between Katerina Ivanovna, her mother, her memories, and a smattering of other characters. Slavnikova’s next work, \textit{Alone in the Mirror}, would explore

\textsuperscript{82} \textsuperscript{Ibid.}, 15.”Лицо отражения было белое и рыхлое, как кусок подтаившего сахара, и Катерина Ивановна подумала, что теперь, не имея образца, оно может сделать и вовсе никаким, превратиться в гладкую нечеловеческую морду.”
many of the same themes of transition, while more explicitly drawing out their economic component, even characterizing the transition at one point as “market transformations” ("рыночные преобразования").

This novel mirrors, but in many ways inverts, the structure of *A Dragonfly*: the protagonist, Antonov, finds himself pulled inexorably into a new world, while he would rather remain in the old. Himself a professor of mathematics working on an ingenious monograph, Antonov falls in love with one of his students, Vika, or Viktoria. In contrast to Antonov, for whom mathematics represents a creative pursuit, and for whom that pursuit is an end in itself, Vika sees the world in exclusively capitalist terms. “The content of all mathematical abstractions, the subject of mathematics itself, she saw as money […] It seemed natural to her that if things had within themselves, aside from their physical presence, something invisible to the eyes and expressible in numbers, then that ‘something’ was a price.” Vika’s mother, who works in advertising, more directly instantiates the transition from old to new, from abstract to economic values. Her ad agency outfits the city with “threateningly bright billboards, visible from the most unexpected places, and much more noticeable than the real buildings.” The billboards’ “threat” arises from their apparent intention to supersede the old and “real” world with a new one, projected from a set of desires, measured in price tags, and “completely apart from the objective and real world, where many things […] were old and already in no way

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84 Ibid., 47. “Каким–то образом содержимым всех математических абстракций, предметом математики вообще, ей виделись деньги. […] ей представлялось естественным, что если вещи и имеют в себе нечто помимо своего физического присутствия, нечто не видное глазом и выражаемое цифрами, то это ‘что–то’ – цена.”

85 Ibid., 81. “Угрожающе яркими щитами, видными из самых неожиданных точек и гораздо более заметными, чем настолько здания.”
expressed themselves in money.”

Indeed, everything about Vika’s world seems saturated with the new capitalist forms of value structuring society.

After she finishes the university, Vika moves away from pure mathematics and reetrains in management and accounting: “Numbers did not serve as adjectives for symbols lacking substance and were not reflected with their inverse sign in the monstrous mirror of zero, but dependably signified money.” Soon, she finds work in a company that ostensibly buys and sells imported goods. “That trade, however, was an ancillary process – nothing more than one of the mechanisms for extracting money from air, where rubles and even dollars multiplied much more actively than on the harsh ground.” The company’s profits seem directly tied to its ability to “cleanse its financial streams from everything material,” and to operate in a purely financial space, described as an “enormous air pocket, much larger than the real economy.” Vika is drawn into the “strangeness and beauty of the financial space, all the paradisiacal patterns of its weightlessness,” and no sooner has she settled into her work than she begins to romantically pursue her boss, in hopes of exchanging her brilliant but economically unsuccessful mathematician husband for a successful capitalist. She secretly hopes that “the boss’s wife […] would quietly disappear somewhere, go away, for instance, to live in Switzerland, and Vika

86 Ibid. “совершенно помимо предметного и реального мира, где многие вещи, особенно сваленные на железных балконах, были стары и уже никак не выражались в деньгах.”

87 Ibid., 191. “числа не служили прилагательными для лишенных существенности символов и не отражались с противоположным знаком в чудовищном зеркале нуля, но исправно означали деньги.”

88 Ibid., 178. “Торговля эта, впрочем, была процессом вспомогательным – всего лишь одним из механизмов извлечения денег из воздуха, где рубли и даже доллары размножались гораздо активней, чем на жесткой земле.”

89 Ibid. “очистки финансовых потоков от всего материального”; “в этой громадной, гораздо больше настоящей экономики, воздушной яме.”

90 Ibid. “странности и красоты финансового пространства.”
would get a normal, successful man.”91 As Vika’s romantic entanglement develops, she is drawn further into the world of the firm and pulls Antonov along, with disastrous consequences for them both.

Once again, the major conflict in Alone in the Mirror is between old and new systems, but here the new system is explicitly the world of post-Soviet capitalism. That world is conceptualized as an empty space, where the ghostly circulation of capital far eclipses the exchange value of the goods and services it is supposed to facilitate. Vika’s company produces nothing so much as capital itself, along with the promise of success. The model of capitalist success is so pervasive that it restructures the fate of all the characters and even of their creative endeavors according to monetary models. As Antonov is pulled into Vika’s world, he too abandons his creative work—his brilliant mathematical monograph—as unprofitable and therefore useless. He even “cannot resurrect by memory, exactly where” he abandoned his work for Vika.92 Soon, he discovers that Vika’s stepfather, Gera, has published a low-quality historical novel by cozying up to a commercial sponsor. The death of Antonov’s brilliant manuscript alongside the commercial publication of Gera’s uninspired novel suggests that even in the realm of creative production, the new order recognizes no standards beyond money.

Like A Dragonfly, Alone in the Mirror depicts a protagonist struggling against the world, “a person in a country of evil” (“chelovek v gosudarstve zla”), to borrow from Koksheneva’s definition of Booker prose. But between the two novels, a transition has taken place. No longer is the “evil country” defined by the restrictive mores of the past, implicitly referencing the Soviet Union, from which the protagonist fights to break free (as was the case in A Dragonfly and in the

91 Ibid., 154. “когда жена начальника, […] куда-нибудь тихо исчезнет, уедет, например, на постоянное жительство в Швейцарию, а Вика заполучит нормального, успешного мужчину.”

92 Ibid., 113. “Антонов, из-за силы и свежести первоначального замысла, не мог восстановить по памяти, где именно, на каком разбеге мысли, прервалась из-за прогулянщицы его желанная работа.”
novels Koksheneva analyzed). Now the protagonist struggles against a distinctly post-Soviet world of capitalism and its hollow, if permissive, values. The contrast between these two novels shows that the transition to a new post-Soviet world, which might have seemed impossible in *A Dragonfly*, has not only taken place, but has taken on a dreadful inevitability. Furthermore, the dread that haunts *Alone in the Mirror* is framed as the invasion of a new economic system, unavoidable, and pervasive, which affects and even redefines all aspects of life, from business, to romantic relationships, to creative projects like Antonov’s manuscript and Gera’s historical novel. In this way, *Alone in the Mirror* inhabits the still-forming genre of Booker prose but updates it from critiquing the Soviet system to critiquing the new post-Soviet world. Not only does it critique capitalism at large, but in the contrast between Antonov’s failed but potentially brilliant manuscript and Gera’s hollow but published novel, it specifically targets the effects of capitalist values on cultural production. In a world where everything is defined by its relationship to money, a brilliant but non-commercial project has no chance of success and finds itself simply abandoned.

Critiquing the economic transition (especially as it relates to cultural production) might at first seem a counter-intuitive tactic in pursuit of the Booker Prize, which represented that transition as much as any other institution in the cultural sphere. However, Slavnikova saw the Booker differently. In the world of over-commercialized post-Soviet culture, Slavnikova framed the Booker Prize as a bulwark *against* capitalist values. As we have seen, she insisted that prizes exist in order to establish a set of “aesthetic criteria” of “authenticity and depth” that would exist free of the market. In the year she was completing *Alone in the Mirror*, Slavnikova worked as a judge for Booker Prize, during which she insisted that the prize should support novels that “have unsuccess” (“*imet’ neuspekh*”). For Slavnikova, the Booker stood for an external recognition
structure that might be capable of encouraging the production of good work. Though constructed and publicized specifically as an award that would help “serious literature” meet the demands of the post-Soviet book market, Slavnikova saw it as a refuge from those very market demands. Through her own interpretation of the prize’s priorities, Slavnikova framed the prize as opposed to market principles, while the prize itself, as we have seen, embodies those very principles. This paradoxical position—at once both embodying and opposing the burgeoning book market—reflected the literary field’s own anxieties about the place of sales in literature and helped the Booker occupy such a central position in the changing field.

It was a similarly paradoxical position that Slavnikova occupied. Even as she critiqued capitalist values (in works like _Alone in the Mirror_) and the very pursuit of success (in interviews), she made certain adjustments in her own work in apparent pursuit of an external marker of success, and a capitalist one at that, in the Booker Prize. Perhaps nowhere else is this more visible than in Slavnikova’s evolving relationship to what she calls a “fifth dimension” in her prose. The term arises in a critical article from 1999, which Slavnikova wrote while serving on the Booker jury. “The four dimensions of the reality where writers have to live,” she writes, are “inadequate for the creative mind.”93 “The really attractive task, almost the limit of ambition for the literary demiurge,” is the creation of a “fifth dimension” that goes beyond the three dimensions of space plus the fourth of time, to give a literary work an essential connection with the beyond.94 The article goes on to praise Iurii Buida’s collection _Prussian Bride (Prusskaia nevesta)_ 1999 for its successful creation of such a fifth dimension. Buida’s collection, Slavnikova writes, activates the local mythology and collective imagination of its setting, the

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94 Ibid. “собственные области пятого измерения”; “вот по-настоящему привлекательная задача, едва ли не предел амбиций литературного демиурга.”


96 Slavnikova, “Obitaemyi ostrov.” “всяких несметных сокровищ — посуды, украшений, серебряных ложек и рыцарских мечей.”

comments on the constructedness of the plot, characters, and setting. As the title indicates, *Alone in the Mirror* might be best understood not as an interpersonal drama, but as a solitary struggle with a changing world. Slavnikova suggests as much through extended metaphors of writing and reading that seem to at times subsume the whole novel into a plot about writing itself. For instance, Vika at one point seems to transform into a figment of her own writing: “Vika’s unexpected kisses, which resembled the illiterate commas of her quick babble, were nothing but manifestations of her own punctuation and caprice.” At the same time, Antonov, often referred to as “the protagonist” (“*glavnyi geroi*”), at one point feels as if “the author was Antonov’s second self” (“*avtor byl vtorym antonovskim ‘ia’*”). Indeed, both Vika and Antonov come to resemble not so much real characters as projections of the author’s imagination, different modes of writing, clashing as they interact with a changing world. A chapter in the middle of the novel delves into the characters’ past and reveals the author (apparently Slavnikova) occupying the same physical space as the characters and even foreseeing the current novel. To emphasize the metafictional nature of her presence, the author writes about herself in the third person using the grammatically masculine word “author” (“*avtor*”), but adds verbs with feminine endings in parentheses. I have attempted to approximate the effect in my translation. I also include the Russian original:

> And this is exactly what the author thought and imagined, as he sat (she sat) on the very same remarkably thick rug […] the author fully grasped (she grasped) and immediately understood (she understood), that he received (she received) the sought-after psychological key [to Vika’s character].

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98 Slavnikova, *Odin v zerkale*, 64. “неожиданные Викины поцелуи, похожие на безграмотные запятые в скорой ее болтовне, были всего лишь проявлениями собственной ее пунктуации и прихоти.”

99 Ibid., 24.
Such explicitly metafictional elements allow the novel to expand beyond the realism of four dimensions that Slavnikova finds so limiting. Throughout the novel, a powerful presence— that of the author— hovers over the characters, exercising a power over them that both undermines and enhances their reality.

Such explicit metafictional play, however, did not find favor with the Booker prize. As mentioned above, a major complaint about the Booker and the nascent genre of Booker prose was its continued rejection of postmodern elements. The prize was never awarded to the major Russian postmodernists, Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin, and often even excluded them from short lists, while judges expressed anything but sympathy for postmodernism as a broad trend.  

Alone in the Mirror, which contains Slavnikova’s most explicit postmodern metafictive elements, fared no better with the prize. After being nominated, it was excluded from the short list. By the time Slavnikova finally won the Booker with her 2006 novel 2017, metafictive elements had disappeared from her prose, replaced by a “fifth dimension” constructed from local

100 Ibid., 151.

101 In the last chapter, for instance, Antonov feels himself to be part of a novel: “On сознавал, что, как главный герой, неотразимо следует на чужом автомобиле к центру и главному действию романа. И внезапно Антонов понял, что больше просто не в силах служить для автора оптическим прибором, видеть для него (для нее!)” (274). As Antonov seems to break free of the author’s intention here, his very act of defiance claims a reality that a character never troubled by a meddling author might never achieve.

102 Recall the response to the Booker’s 1997 shortlist (mentioned above): “The members of the jury explained their decision by saying that they consciously decided to support a certain tendency and to exclude the ‘filth’ of another literary tendency [postmodernism].” (Natalia Ivanova, “Preodelevshie postmodernizm.”)
mythologies (similar to those she had admired in Buida’s work) and the mystical power of the land in her native Ural region.

Like Slavnikova’s earlier work, 2017 concerns a transition to a new world order, which is framed implicitly as the post-Soviet era. This novel, however, innovates on the theme, bringing Slavnikova’s depiction of post-Soviet Russia into closer alignment with what she had admired in Buida’s work, and in the process creating her own successful (in terms of the prize) version of Booker prose. Slavnikova’s innovation draws on references to local Ural mythology, especially the tales of Pavel Bazhov, in order to create a “fifth dimension” free of explicit metafiction, which allows Slavnikova to portray the transition to the post-Soviet era as more than an economic and social shift, but also as a geographic movement into an almost magical realm.

The central protagonist, Krylov grows up on the southern periphery of the Soviet Union, where he and his family live a comfortable and stable life. Soon, however, something changes, and everything becomes unfamiliar. Though the change is not explicitly described as the fall of the Soviet Union, context provides clues. Krylov’s “unstealing father” (“nevoriushchii otets”) loses favor at work, and the family falls into poverty. Strangers, “who look like they are from the bazar,” come to his apartment to examine his mother’s jewelry and other belongings, offering miniscule sums alongside veiled threats. The family moves out of its southern home to a “tiny apartment” in a “cold northern city” in the Ural Mountains (referred to here as the “Ripheans”). The trauma of the relocation seems to Krylov to divide life into “before” and

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103 Ol’ga Slavnikova, 2017 (Moscow: Vagrius, 2007), 59.
104 Ibid., 60. “Несколько раз в квартиру Крыловых приходили чужие: двое по виду с рынка, оба в одинаковых пиджаках, словно наклеенных изнутри на покоробленный картон.”
105 Ibid., 61. “в холодном северном городе, где летняя зелень деревьев была как плащи от дождя, в крошечной квартире, еле освещаемой окнами размером с раскрытую газету.” Slavnikova’s “Riphean Mountains,” or “Rifeiskie gory,” are a fictionalized version of the Urals. The word Riphean is mentioned in several ancient sources in reference to a northern mountain range that some have connected to the present-day Urals. In the
“after,” and reveals in him an “ability to commit terrible acts.” In his new surroundings, he finds, “it is necessary to take risks — a lot and mindlessly.” The teenage Krylov soon falls into petty criminality: stealing from a local supermarket, fighting for racketeering territory, and so on. Like Vika in Alone in the Mirror, he begins to see the world as a “virtual accounting office” where everything—objects of his desire and acts in his “business”—are associated with specific sums of money. Krylov’s new world is defined by money and risks, and Krylov fits in well.

Within this new world, Krylov finds something that stems from his interest in money and risk, while at the same time transcending the petty profiteering of his early criminal activity. He begins to work for an underground gem-runner, who is also (and not incidentally) a professor of philosophy. Professor Anfilogov’s dual role reflects the duality of precious stones and their pursuit in 2017. Trade in gemstones, on the one hand, is motivated by their cash value on international markets; at the same time, however, their pursuit in 2017 provides a connection to a higher power. Gem-hunters, or “khitniki,” are guided by intuition, knowledge of the land, and by a special connection to the “mountain spirits.” The Riphean “always knew that veins of ore and precious stones are the mineral roots of his consciousness,” and that the land has a mystical power animated by “mountain spirits.” A “Mistress of the Mountains” appears before the chosen Ripheans in various forms, beguiling them with her beauty or her plainness, and bringing

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106 Ibid., 63. “а открывшаяся в нем самом способность совершать ужасные поступки”
107 Ibid., 65. “чтобы сделать истинным рифейцем, надо рисковать – много и бессмысленно.”
108 Ibid., 66. “в голове у подростка Крылова образовалось что-то вроде виртуальной бухгалтерии.”
109 Ibid., 84. “он знал всегда, что рудные и самоцветные жилы есть каменные корни его сознания.”

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novel, the city to which Krylov and his family relocate is recognizable as contemporary Yekaterinburg, but is never referred to as such. Nor is the region ever called the Urals. Local residents are called “rifeitsy,” or “Ripheans,” who have a “rifeiskaia mental’nost” or “Riphean mentality”; the surrounding mountains are the “rifeiskie gory” or “Riphean Mountains,” and a restaurant in town is called “Rifei” or “Riphea,” while an investment group calls itself “Zoloto Rifeia” or “The Gold of Riphea.” In my discussion of the novel, I refer to the city as Riphea, and use the toponym and demonym Riphean.
them luck in their searches for the pockets of precious stones hidden in the dangerous hills. A “Great Snake” ("Velikii Poloz") also marks the path towards seams of crystals and other mineral riches. Riphean risk-takers rely on their relationships with these mountain spirits as they prospect for diamonds and rubies in hopes of striking it rich, and at risk of death.

Slavnikova borrows this mythology from Pavel Bazhov’s cycle of *Ural Tales*, written in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and passed off as collected folklore. But she presents it as a deep authentic mythology animating the Riphean land and weaves it through the mostly realistic storylines of the novel. In this way, Slavnikova creates a “fifth dimension” in 2017 that is both literarily rich and not explicitly postmodern. This innovation aligns Slavnikova with a trend that Mark Lipovetsky calls “postrealism,” a narrative mode “rooted in the realistic tradition but […] which has] learned from the experience of postmodernism.” Indeed, Slavnikova’s earlier work, as well as her critical and administrative work with the Booker prize show her learning from and moving beyond the “experience of postmodernism” to replace metafictive authorial interventions with the presence of a mystical world associated with local mythology.

Whether or not Slavnikova’s “postrealist” innovations can be credited with winning her the Booker Prize for 2017, they offered her a way out of the self-referentiality of metafiction, while also retaining the “fifth dimension” Slavnikova found necessary in good prose. At the same time, these innovations allowed her to explore the world of the post-Soviet transition in a

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110 Pavel Bazhov’s *Ural Tales (Ural’skie skazy)* were published between 1936 and 1941, and won him the Stalin Prize in 1943. Often collected under the title of the best-known story, “The Malachite Casket” (“Malakhitovaia shkatulka”), the tales have never gone out of print in Russia since. They have been adapted into at least eight Soviet and post-Soviet films, and have inspired countless other works, including Sergei Prokofiev’s 1957 ballet “The Stone Flower” (“Kamennyi tsvetok”). Despite this ongoing influence and popularity, Bazhov is little known outside of Russia. The only (to my knowledge) scholarly article devoted to Bazhov contains a useful, if brief, sketch of the artist and his work along with an insightful reading of the tales in their historical context. See Mark Lipovetsky, “Pavel Bazhov’s *Skazy*: Discovering the Soviet Uncanny,” in *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture*, eds. Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova (New York: Routledge, 2008), 263–83.

new way. Here, the caprices of the half-mystical, half-monetary underground trade in gemstones connect luck and riches to a higher power, to a realm of fate, where the intrinsic qualities of the seeker—authenticity, connection to the land, rather than knowledge or hard work—determine the outcome of the search. Those who find gem-grade crystals do so because they are in some way special, they have forged a special connection with the natural world, and they have been chosen by the “mountain spirits.”

In contrast, the world of enterprise capitalism is portrayed in 2017 as empty, unnatural, and destructive. The richest woman in town, and the protagonist’s ex-wife, Tamara Krylova, runs an elite funeral and burial service, which works precisely to halt the work of nature by offering the latest “cryo-technology” and “high-tech sarcophagi, which exclude all the unattractive and disorderly processes which usually happen with corpses.”112 By the end of the novel, Tamara’s burial service and her reputation fall into ruin when she is revealed to have caused an ecological disaster during one of her earlier business dealings. Enterprise capitalism, as portrayed in 2017, seems to be governed by a hubris that believes it can overcome natural processes and undermine ecologies in the pursuit of profit. The semi-mystical gem trade, on the other hand, while still motivated by a profit-motive, represents a different kind of capitalism, an adventure capitalism. The term is borrowed from Max Weber, who contrasted “capitalist acquisition as an adventure” against bourgeois capitalism, which he saw as energized by the “protestant ethic” of hard work, reliable return on investment, and stability.113 Adventure capitalism is a system largely based on luck and, in the world of 2017, it offers a connection to a

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112 Некрополь нового типа, оснащенный крио-техникой последнего поколения (289); высокотехнологичные саркофаги, которые исключают все некрасивые и неопрятные процессы, происходящие обычно с трупами (295).

Chapter 2: Success Without Readers

higher power. As the corporate world of enterprise capitalism falls apart in the novel’s conclusion, the pursuit of gemstones provides Krylov his only outlet to a higher power. In the novel’s final scene, Krylov leaves the city behind as he sets off on an expedition in search of rubies and other mineral riches.

By depicting these two modes of economic activity—one based on fate, luck, and the mountain spirits, the other on enterprise and underhanded dealings—Slavnikova splits the new Riphean world in two. Unlike in A Dragonfly or Alone in the Mirror, the choice here is not between old and new worlds, but between two different possibilities within the new world. Though both are based on profit and monetary exchange, one allows for the possibility of transcendence, while the other proves empty. In this way, in 2017 Slavnikova finally offers an acceptable way to integrate in the new world, a way to come to terms with capitalism, and it is through the “fifth dimension” of mysticism and local mythology.

Slavnikova’s changing relationship to the transition is also reflected in her prose style, which becomes both more accessible and more dynamic through the three novels discussed here. If the plot of A Dragonfly keeps its protagonist from breaking away from the influence of her mother, the book’s language reflects that stultification. Completely free of dialogue (a fact often mentioned by critics), the novel is also short on movement. Long sentences with verbs in the imperfective describe states of being more often than actions. When something happens it is rarely the result of the exertion of will, or goal-directed activity, but an adjustment to circumstances, or a repeated, often unwilling behavior. A typical sentence, for instance, reads:

At night, in bed, among the heavy feather blankets, lumpy like sacks in a warehouse, her unslipping body would burn, as if with strep throat,—but when she would get up for work in the morning and would throw off the blanket, leaving behind a sweated-through emptiness, she would envelop Ivan in such a damp cold that he would not be able to warm up and would feel like a pile of sticks that burned on the fire and had now been poured over with water.\textsuperscript{115}

Filled with six verbs in past imperfective (indicated in my translation with the helping verb “would”), this sentence describes no completed action, nor does it allow for the will of either of the characters. Their bodies act and react (“her unslipping body would burn,” “would feel like a pile of sticks”), Katerina Ivanovna repeats habitual action (“she would get up for work […] and would throw off the blanket”), and Ivan fails to warm up. But nothing is done to purpose. The prose, the very syntax, will not allow it.

The prose of enterprise capitalism, as Franco Moretti points out, is characterized by precisely the opposite. Goal-directed “instrumental reason” structures the syntax of such bourgeois narrative classics as Robinson Crusoe. In that novel, Moretti discovers the surprising predominance of “an extremely rare verb form—the past gerund,” which allows Defoe to construct single sentences that contain several goal-directed actions and their results in causal order: “Having fitted my mast and sail, and tried the boat, I found she would sail very well.”\textsuperscript{116} If one were to look for a perfect opposite to this active, goal-oriented syntax, with its three perfective verbs in a single sentence, one might land on something like Slavnikova’s prose in A

\textsuperscript{115} Slavnikova, Strekoza, 260. “Ночью, в постели, среди тяжелых, будто мешки на складе, комковатых перин, ее размаянное тело пылало, как в ангине, — но когда она вставала утром на работу и откидывала одеяло, оставя после себя пропотевшую пустоту, то обдавала Ивана таким промозглым холодом, что ему уже не удавалось угреться и он ощущал себя будто куча жердин, горевших в пожаре и залитых водой.”

\textsuperscript{116} Franco Moretti, Bourgeois: Between History and Literature (New York: Verso, 2013), 52.
Chapter 2: Success Without Readers

*Dragonfly*. This prose style effectively conveys Katerina Ivanovna’s inability to exert her will on the world, but it also raised the rankles of some critics, who saw it as “very slow and drawn into itself,” and unable to stimulate the reader’s “interest in the text.”¹¹⁷

Slavnikova’s next novel, *Alone in the Mirror*, would include dialogue and more directly willful activity among its characters. Nevertheless, Slavnikova’s long sentences continue to favor imperfective verbs suggesting that the actions described happen out of time, without direct causal relation to one another: “Vika would go ahead, her small strong calves, painted as if by a brush with the grey whiteness of her twisted nylons, would flex in turn, the heel of her pink right shoe would fall,—and her lawful husband Antonov, striding two steps behind in an unbuttoned jacket that touched his knees, would wave his arms like an unskilled skier.”¹¹⁸ By the time she completed 2017, however, Slavnikova would enliven her syntax with more active verbs, creating more dynamic pacing without losing the distinctiveness of her prose style. In the following passage, for instance, a character by the name of Kolyan appears to find a ruby while panning for gemstones in a river:

Kolyan unexpectedly froze over his rinsed aggregate as if he suddenly decided to eat its filtered content. But Kolyan peered doubtfully at a tiny shard, which suddenly flashed from the loose sediment with a triangular, raspberry flame. Calming himself that it probably only looked like it, he carefully pulled out the pebble with his grey fingers, stiff from cold […]. Having left his crooked pan on the bent rock, which was embraced like a

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¹¹⁸ Slavnikova, *Odin v zerkale*, 5. “Вика шла впереди, ее небольшие крепкие икры, окрашенные, точно мальярной кистью, серой белизною перекрученных чулок, поочередно напрягались, спадала пятка правой розовой туфли, – и ее законный муж Антонов, шагая следом через две ступени в расстегнутом, касавшемся коленей пиджаке, махал руками, точно неумелый лыжник.”
pillow by the half-asleep water falling on it, he worked his waterproof commander’s watch free from his sleeve and scratched the glass.  

Here the scene unfolds in a series of perfective verbs, as the character undertakes actions towards a set goal—Kolyan wants to scratch the glass of his watch face to test if the stone is indeed a ruby. Though not devoid of the lyricism of Slavnikova’s earlier works, 2017 contains much more sequential, purposeful action, and the prose style develops accordingly. However, even such sequences of action as Kolyan’s quoted above are often oriented toward luck and fate. Kolyan’s goal, after all, is not to exert his will on the world, but to find out if fate has smiled on him and placed a ruby in his hands. If this is a prose of capitalism, it is certainly one of adventure capitalism, rather than the bourgeois variety of Robinson Crusoe (as analyzed by Moretti).

Over the course of the three novels analyzed here, Slavnikova’s sentences shorten, activity takes on causal sequences, and characters’ actions more often reflect their own free will. While these developments respond directly to the criticism of her earlier work, they also reflect the value of active risk-taking that animates the adventure capitalism of 2017. This development in prose style dovetails with the other developments analyzed in this section: the more explicit treatment of the economic side of post-Soviet transition, and Slavnikova’s mystical construction of a “fifth dimension.” All of these elements combined in 2017 to create a novel that was attractive enough to the Booker jury to win the prize in 2006, but perhaps just as important, they combined to create a prose style that helped characterize a certain compromise or coming to terms with the post-Soviet transition. Through Slavnikova’s style, that compromise begins to

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119 Slavnikova, 2017, 124. “Колян внезапно замер над своим промывочным агрегатом, словно вдруг собрался съесть его отчужденное содержимое. А Коллян недоверчиво всматривался в крошечный осколок, вдруг сверкнувший из рыхлой гущи треугольным малиновым огнём. Успокаивая себя, что это, наверное, так, показалось, он осторожно выбрал камешек сведенным от холода сизыми пальцами; […] Отставив кривую плошку на горбатый камень, который, будто подушку, обнимала, падая на него, полусонная вода, он выпростал из рукава водонепроницаемые командирские часы — и чиркнул.”
accept capitalist structures—and requires more active initiative on the part of the subject—but it nevertheless recognizes the role of risk, luck, and fate. It is this compromise—between active initiative and fate—that Slavnikova finally lands upon by the end of 2017, both in terms of plot lines and of style. As we will see in the next section, it would be a similar approach to literary prizes, and literary recognition more broadly, that would inform Slavnikova’s work as administrator of the Debut Prize for young authors.

THE DEBUT: A MORE PERFECT PRIZE

In an essay quoted above, “Desire for Glory,” Slavnikova imagines what she calls an “ideal literary prize,” whose goals would “correspond to the goals of literature itself.”\cite{120} The essay was written in 2001, at the height of Slavnikova’s involvement with the Booker Prize, and as she was about to take on her role administering the brand new Debut Prize. In that essay, she suggests that an “ideal literary prize,” would have to avoid preying on authors’ vanity, self-regard, or economic desperation. Such a prize would recognize the achievements of literature at large rather than individual authors, which would require a bold step. It would require the exclusion of “the very fact of authorship with all its intrinsic emotional complexities.”\cite{121} This flight of logical fancy leads her to the following conclusion:

This would require something like the collectivization of the aggregate literary product:

all the novels (poems, plays, essays) should belong immediately to all those who write. It

\begin{footnotes}
\item[120] Slavnikova, “Zhelan’e slavy.” “я попыталась было придумать и идеальную литературную премию. Цель ее, по идее, должна была бы совпадать с целью самой литературы.”
\item[121] Ibid. “То есть идеал в данном случае исключает сам феномен авторства со всем присущим феномену комплексом эмоций.”
\end{footnotes}
turns out that the ideal literary prize is the realization of the communist principle “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.”

In order to mitigate the instability and uncertainty that she sees as the problematic basis of prize culture, Slavnikova proposes not only reimagining the literary prize, but reimagining the entire literary field. In other words, the individual authorship model of cultural capitalism, which rewards sales, profitability, and at times (though on an uncertain basis akin to a lottery) literary quality—this model is itself the problem with prize culture. Consequently, the only way to ameliorate the very problematic vision of success that prizes engender is to move the entire cultural economy away from capitalism altogether, towards a collective, communistic structure of culture.

Written at the height of Slavnikova’s critique of post-Soviet capitalism (just a year after the appearance of *Alone in the Mirror*), and of her frustration with the prize process, it is perhaps no surprise that this utopian literary project fully rejects the tenets of cultural capitalism within the prize process. But when Slavnikova was invited to coordinate a brand new literary prize, the Debut, she did not radically reimagine authorship as a collective enterprise. Instead, she fashioned a compromise with the market-oriented and capitalistic values of previous prizes,

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122 Ibid. “Для этого требуется что-то вроде коллективизации совокупного литературного продукта: все романы (стихотворения, пьесы, эссе) должны принадлежать всем пишущим сразу. Получилось, что идеальная литературная премия есть реализация коммунистического принципа “От каждого по способностям, каждому по потребностям.”

123 The essay’s conclusion gestures towards the global character of Slavnikova’s thinking: “It’s possible that anonymity in literature would be the sole condition for the fullest realization of talent. Which contradicts not only the desire for glory, but the entire contemporary situation.” (“Возможно, анонимность была бы для литератора условием наиболее полной реализации таланта. Что противоречит не только желанию славы, но всему нынешнему положению вещей.”)

124 Recall, for instance, the frustration Slavnikova expressed about the exclusion of her two most recent novels, *Alone in the Mirror* and *Immortal*, from the Booker short list; Proskurin, “Ia — odinokii chelovek v literature,” qtd. above.
which provided more extensive support for developing writers, but which at the same time further emphasized the individual nature of authorship.

Like the Triumph Prize, the Debut was created as part of a larger foundation funded by one of the rising Russian oligarchs. In this case, the funding oligarch was Andrei Skoch and the foundation was The Generation Foundation (*Fond Pokolenie*), dedicated to the development of the younger generation. Following this orientation, the new Debut Prize, beginning in 2001, provided an array of development opportunities for young writers alongside the cash prizes awarded to its laureates. In the weeks before the winners in each category were chosen, all the finalists participated in week-long creative seminars, designed to help them develop their work.¹²⁵ Winners were given the option to publish their works (under the imprint of the prize foundation) to be sold in bookstores and on the prize’s website. In the years after participation, both finalists and winners were invited on domestic and international tours where they would sell their works and meet with translators and publishers abroad. Though not conceived as a broad program of social support for the arts in general (as was the Triumph Foundation), Slavnikova’s vision for the Debut Prize did include a much more robust initiative for the development of authors favored by the prize. Nevertheless, this development remained within the parameters of market capitalism. The tours, discussions with translators and international publishers, as well as the foundation’s own publications were oriented towards sales, meaning that the Debut’s entire program of support itself depended upon the book market. In this way, the Debut positioned itself much like the Booker, promising to help winners benefit from, rather than escape, the demands of the book market. The key difference between the prizes was not their rhetorical positioning, but their programs of support. The Debut devoted more resources to fulfilling the

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¹²⁵ See Debut website. Slavnikova ran the seminars for the finalists in the category of Long-Form Prose, which she described to me as “what you call in America ‘creative writing’” (Interview with Olga Slavnikova).
promise that both prizes made to laureates. As such, the Debut represents perhaps not a compromise between Slavnikova’s imagined “ideal literary prize” and prizes like the Booker, but a more perfect version of the Booker itself.

To many, the Debut Prize’s major innovation was not its program of support, but its submission structure. The Debut completely did away with the institution of authorized nominators and appealed directly to writers, published or not. Anyone could submit a manuscript provided that the writer was under the age of 25 (changed to under 35 in 2006). This led to an enormous number of entrants, averaging over 30,000 in each of the prize’s first five years.126 The Debut emphasized this openness, airing commercials (as “public service announcements” (“kak sotsial’naia reklama”) according to Slavnikova) on federal channels with direct appeals to would-be authors to submit their manuscripts.127 The parameters (or lack thereof) for submission further underscore the prize’s emphasis on openness. In direct, informal, second-person appeals, the Debut’s website encourages potential candidates to send in almost anything:

You DO NOT NEED TO LIMIT yourself by length. The size of a poetry collection or story collection is defined by the candidate. There is no required format for manuscripts. The font size, margins, paragraph styles are all up to you. If you have trouble defining your genre, don’t worry, we’ll do that ourselves.128

The Debut’s active advertising, its option for self-nomination, and its lack of strict parameters emerged from the central goal of the prize itself, which Slavnikova formulates as the


127 Slavnikova, personal interview.

“activation of talented people.” Slavnikova wanted to provide the next generation a way to avoid repeating what she characterizes as her own “long and bitter experience as a young provincial author” struggling to break through on a national level. With this in mind, the prize avoided all the institutions of the literary world that might favor those who already had connections.

We created a fully open competition. All you needed to do was send in your manuscript. That was it. We didn’t require anything else. No recommendations, no nominations, nothing. We started from the experience of nominations [in previous prizes like the Booker] and arrived at something different. We threw the doors wide open and through those doors a flood rushed in.

The enormous, unfiltered flood of submissions became the prize’s calling card, according to Dmitry Kuz’mín, who reported that the figure of 30,000 submissions was repeated several times during the awards ceremony.

Beyond obviating the need for literary connections, the prize’s emphasis on openness confirms, and even amplifies, the values of transparency and meritocracy, which undergird other

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129 Slavnikova, personal interview. “Главная задача Дебюта была инициация талантливых людей.”

130 Slavnikova, personal interview. “У меня к моменту начала Дебюта был большой и горький опыт молодого провинциального автора.”

131 Many critics have suggested that, given the impossibility of reading 30,000 manuscripts in the course of a year, the Debut must give preference to already recognized authors, or writers with inside connections. Slavnikova and the Debut website, on the other hand, maintain that all submissions are considered, and that no outside recommendations are considered. While this is impossible to verify, the rhetorical position itself suggests the Debut’s orientation in theory even if not always in practice.

132 Slavnikova, personal interview. “Мы делали полностью открытый конкурс. Нужно было просто прислать рукопись. Всё. Больше не требовалось ничего. Ни рекомендации, не номинации, ничего. Мы оттолкнулись от этого опыта номинирования и пришли к другому. Мы широко открыли двери и в эти двери хлынул поток.”

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literary prizes. Furthermore, the prize’s confidence in its ability to recognize literary potential among such an enormous field reflects Slavnikova’s understanding of literary talent as a special, inherent characteristic of the writer. Unlike the Booker, which deals with the “work of masters,” in Slavnikova’s words, the Debut looks for writers’ potential, which is visible in even unpublished and unpolished manuscripts.134 “Authorship [Pisatel’stvo] is a genetic program, a special blood type,” she said in one interview. “A person is either born with it or not.”135 For Slavnikova, the role of the Debut is to “acknowledge” (“podtverzhdat’”) that special genetic gift, to support it, so that those born into authorship will flourish as authors. In this way, the Debut Prize in fact emphasizes individual authorship more strongly than the Booker and other prizes. Since the Debut is meant to recognize potential, and not necessarily finished work, it inherently relies on the individual author to later realize that potential. Here again, the Debut Prize does not represent a rejection of the tenets of the Booker prize, but a slight reorientation in structure. That reorientation in fact amplifies, rather than downplays, the value of individual authorship that Slavnikova herself rejected when imagining an “ideal literary prize” several years earlier.

Slavnikova’s evolving relationship to literary prizes in many ways mirrors her treatment of the post-Soviet transition in her prose. An early move towards the new structures (in both A Dragonfly and in her early enthusiasm for the Booker) gives onto a skepticism and critique (Alone in the Mirror and the collective authorship of her imagined “ideal literary prize”), which is finally overcome by an acceptance of the new paradigm (2017 and the Debut Prize). I do not

134 Slavnikova, personal interview. “Букер имеет дело с произведениями мастеров […] с произведениями изданными […] то есть, это продукт уже готовый. Мы имели дело с продуктом сырым. Поэтому мы ориентировались в Дебюте не только на результат конкретный – вот этот роман обладает таким достоинством, а скорее вот этот автор обладает таким-то потенциалом исходя из этого романа. Мы оценивали не просто достигнутое а то, что автор может потенциально.”

mean to suggest any causal relationship between Slavnikova’s artistic production and her critical and administrative work with literary prizes. Indeed, her trajectory in both areas represents a set of relatively common responses to large-scale changes. But what is important is that in both her prose and her work with literary prizes, Slavnikova’s trajectory helped her innovate a distinct understanding of cultural capitalism that adjusted the paradigm rather than simply accepting it. In 2017, as we saw in the previous section, Slavnikova distinguishes between two types of capitalist activities, both of which define the new world of post-Soviet Riphea: a dishonest and empty enterprise capitalism, and a more authentic adventure capitalism that requires risk and luck, while also connecting to higher forces represented by fate and the “mountain spirits.” In her work with literary prizes, Slavnikova’s trajectory also allowed her to innovate the prize paradigm as she accepted it. By excluding the system of nominators, concentrating on literary potential, and including more support for developing artists, Slavnikova builds a literary prize that downplays the importance of hard work, enterprise, or networks of connections and instead requires risk and luck. The huge pool of applicants shrinks the statistical chances of being chosen, while the criteria of literary potential means that the most polished or well-edited manuscripts might lose out to those lucky enough to shine with the “special blood type” of the writer. Like the adventure capitalism in 2017, the Debut Prize derives legitimacy from an appeal to a higher truth, the “special blood type” of the writer. In this way, the heightened risk-and-reward structure of the Debut both amplify elements of cultural capitalism and appeal to a transcendent truth about young writers that reaches beyond the book market to something framed as genetic or even fated: “A person is born with it, or not.”

Slavnikova’s innovation in literary prizes finds a way for the institution, using the mechanisms and structures of capitalist prizes, to transcend strictly market-based indicators of
success and recognize the writer as connected to some greater tradition of authorship. In this way, Slavnikova’s more perfect prize represents a way for the mechanisms of cultural capitalism to move beyond marketability, and to begin to define apparently independent “instances of consecration.” By recognizing the intrinsic writer-ness of winning writers, the Debut conforms to Slavnikova’s vision of success (the winner should “feel precisely like a writer”); by doing so through the literary prize, it defines that success through the mechanisms of cultural capitalism; by emphasizing fate (or genetics) over the quality of completed work, it moves cultural capitalism towards a system that downplays the value of hard work and emphasizes reliance on a higher authority. In this way, Slavnikova’s activities as critic, juror, and administrator of literary prizes represents not only an acceptance, but also a transformation of cultural capitalism, moving it away from direct market success, and towards something that uses market principles and the prestige of capitalist literary prizes to recognize authors as authors, as connected to a greater tradition of literary art.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown how Olga Slavnikova’s vision of success appeals to external recognition structures, or “instances of consecration,” that are not directly connected to the mass reader or the book market, but that nevertheless connect to cultural capitalism. The most prominent and prestigious such structure in the post-Soviet period was literary prizes, specifically the Russian Booker. Though the Booker Prize is not identical to market success, it derives its prominence and prestige from market principles, and it promises to make winners “competitive in the conditions of the contemporary market.” In this way, the Booker Prize
Chapter 2: Success Without Readers

provides a recognition structure apparently separate from market principles, but in fact mediated by those very same principles.

As Slavnikova engaged critically and administratively with the Booker and other prizes, she also engaged, in her prose works, with the post-Soviet transition to a capitalist system. These works, from *A Dragonfly Enlarged to the Size of a Dog* to *Alone in the Mirror* to 2017, demonstrate how Slavnikova’s changing engagement with the new structures of post-Soviet Russia pushed her to innovate new forms, structures, and styles in her verbal art. She increased the dynamism and pacing of her prose, moved away from explicitly postmodernist metaphysics, and developed a new approach to her “fifth dimension” in 2017’s appeal to local Ural mythologies. Along the way, she also came to accept a version of the new economic structures, as represented by the adventure capitalism of 2017’s gem-seekers.

Finally, in her work with the Debut Prize for young writers, Slavnikova implemented several innovative structures that both further emphasized the capitalist elements of previous prizes, and recognized winning authors for their intrinsic qualities as writers, rather than for any single work. In these innovations, both in prose and prizes, Slavnikova has implemented her vision of literary success, as formalized recognition by legitimate cultural institutions. By her choice of those cultural institutions, and her work within them, she has helped legitimate them, and form them into institutions that derive much of their significance from their paradoxical positions vis-à-vis the market. Literary prizes provide a recognition structure outside of the market, but gain their prestige and prominence from market principles; they use capitalist mechanisms to recognize something that transcends the capitalist marketplace. It is this ambivalent position that energizes literary prizes in post-Soviet Russia, and it is this ambivalent
position that Olga Slavnikova, as much as any other figure, has worked to redefine throughout her career.
INTRODUCTION

“In my opinion,” Aleksei Ivanov told me in an interview, “the new type of novel [roman novogo tipa] is not built like a traditional novel.” It would be structured “specifically in the format of a dramatic series, in the format that HBO uses, because it seems to me that the new type of novel will come from cinema.”¹ This new type of novel, however, would not limit itself to the influence of cinema or television. It would also include further interactive elements like festivals, games, and even guidebooks, meant to give new life to the settings and events depicted in its pages. Ivanov had enlivened his previous works with such interactive experiences, including a festival based on his 2003 novel, The Heart of the Parma — or Cherdyn’ the Princess of the Mountains (Serdtse parmy — ili, Cherdyn’ kniaginia gor). His next work was conceived as what he called a “five-part interactive project,” of which the novel itself constituted only one piece:

When I wrote The Gold of the Rebellion [— or, Down the River Narrows (Zoloto bunta — ili, vniz po reke tesnin 2005)], I put out a hiking guide for the Chusovaia River basin, I proposed tourism development projects for the areas where the novel took place, I wrote a concept for a computer game, and I was prepared to write a screenplay for a film.²

For Ivanov, such interactive, immersive, multimedia projects promised to provide a type of literary success that moved away from a literature-centric model of cultural creation, joining the prestige of the novel form to the popularity of other media. Furthermore, such a hybrid vision of

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² Ibid.
success had the added benefit of obviating the need for consecration from the literary
establishment that, Ivanov felt, had rejected him.

In 2003, Ivanov had burst onto the literary scene with much fanfare when his first novel,
the genre-bending historical fantasy *The Heart of the Parma* launched him to immediate national
prominence. The novel recast the history of Russia’s fifteenth-century colonization of the Urals
as a mythic struggle between reluctant Christian conquerors and supernatural powers inherent in
“pagan lands.” Shamans, shape-shifters, and golden idols combined with real historical figures to
create a fantastical past that borrowed as much from Tolkien and George R. R. Martin as from
the canonical Russian histories of Sergei Solov’ev or Nikolai Karamzin. That same year,
Ivanov’s long-dormant manuscript, *The Geographer Drank Away His Globe* (*Geograf globus
propil* 2003 [1995]), was finally published to both critical and popular acclaim. Two years later,
his bestselling follow-up, *The Gold of the Rebellion*, returned to historical fantasy with a
depiction of the Chusovaia River basin in the aftermath of Emelian Pugachev’s eighteenth-
century rebellion. Ivanov’s publisher, Azbuka, began promoting Ivanov as the next “great
Russian writer” and made *The Gold of the Rebellion* into its crown jewel at the Moscow
International Book Fair in 2005.³

This apparent success, however, was mixed with a certain amount of suspicion from the
literary establishment. The prestigious Russian Booker Prize struck *The Heart of the Parma* from
its 2004 long list of nominees as insufficiently literary, a decision which Ivanov has often
recalled as a personal affront.⁴ *The Gold of the Rebellion* also failed to win any major prizes, and

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⁴ Though the Russian Booker does not provide official justifications for any of its decisions, Ivanov has recalled his novel’s disqualification variously as being “for the absence of novelistic traits” (“za otsutstvie priznakov romana” Sergei Kudriashev, “Istoriiia vsegda krovozhadna,” interview with Aleksei Ivanov, *Trud-7*, 9 Jun 2005, accessed 5
was met with mixed reviews. Before his next novel was released, Ivanov withdrew that novel from any prize competitions.

I’ve had enough. […] I would like to announce that I am removing my novel from all literary competitions. No need to nominate it for anything else! Certainly not for any of the most prestigious and well-known prizes—the Booker, the NatsBest, or the Big Book. I’m sure that the literary academics will get along just fine without me, as they have in the past.  

This withdrawal from literary prizes suggests a rejection of the type of success pursued by Olga Slavnikova. In the ensuing years, Ivanov reconfigured his notion of success away from the literary establishment and towards the interactive, immersive model of authorship that he described in his interview with me. This new vision of success allowed him to construe authorship on the edges of literature proper—both outside of the literary establishment, and on the peripheries of literature as a genre of verbal art.

In this chapter, I take up Aleksei Ivanov and trace the development of his idiosyncratic vision of literary success. I suggest that his version of success on the edges of literature derives from his own peripheral position. A writer from the provinces, whose works defied genre categorization, Ivanov operated both within and outside of the literary world. After publishing his first novels, he simultaneously pursued two tentative visions of success, one in the capitals, and the other at home in the Urals. In Moscow, he pursued recognition through established literary institutions including prizes, the critical apparatus, and publishing houses. At home in the

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Urals, he pursued a vision of success that ignored literary institutions and moved beyond literature itself to incorporate several other spheres of culture, including television, cultural festivals, and tourism. As Ivanov found himself rebuffed by the Moscow literary establishment, he refined his alternative vision of success, eventually formulating it as what he called “success within a corporation called Aleksei Ivanov,” that is, success that does not depend on the existing institutions of the literary establishment, but on social formations that built around him and his works. In this vision of creative activity, the literary work stands at the center of a multifaceted, immersive imaginative experience. Readers, meanwhile, become less like individual passive consumers of finished texts and more like brand-loyal users of an array of cultural products. In turn, the place of the writer also changes, from a position separate and apart from other spheres of culture to the very nexus that joins literature to other modes of imaginative activity.

In order to show how this is accomplished, I begin by situating the early critical response to Ivanov within two literary trends of the early 2000s: a renewed interest in the Russian regions, on the one hand, and marketization, on the other. I argue that Ivanov’s surprising popularity and provincial provenance combined to mark him out as a particularly valuable (but provincial) asset for contemporary Russian literature and one that was immediately conceptualized in monetary terms. I then read Ivanov’s early novels to show how their combination of difficult language and obscure historical subject matter inspired such a critical reception and generated Ivanov’s original perceived value. Next, I look at Ivanov’s tentative, and not entirely successful, pursuit of success in Moscow literary society. I argue that Ivanov’s failure to access established “instances of consecration” can be attributed, in part, to his refusal to observe literary etiquette, or to “play

the game,” in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms. Finally, I look at how Ivanov created his own original vision of success, apart from and against the norms of capital literary society, and how this vision of success reconfigures the relationships between literary and non-literary activity. I argue that Ivanov’s various extra-literary activities—from hiking guides to documentary films, to interactive festivals and tourist development—reimagine the writer as a dynamic mediator between different spheres of culture, rather than as an autonomous cultural creator separated from adjacent economic, political, and social spheres.

“PERMSKII SAMORODOK” AND THE GOLD AT THE PERIPHERY

In 2003, a now-defunct publishing house in Perm accepted Aleksei Ivanov’s 600-page manuscript for publication. The manuscript, entitled Cherdyn, Princess of the Mountains (Cherdyn’—kniaginia gor), and later published in St. Petersburg and Moscow under the title The Heart of the Parma (Serdtse parmy), was a strange historical fantasy detailing the fifteenth-century Russian colonization of the northern Ural region in difficult, almost impenetrable language. It was an unexpected success. As its previously-unknown author published another two novels depicting the same almost supernatural power of the Ural lands and their history, Ivanov took on the reputation of an obscure genius, an almost magical writer toiling away somewhere deep in the provinces. Alongside reviews glowing with clichés like “the best Russian novel to appear in the last fifteen years,” a “national treasure,” and the “Leo Tolstoi of the 21st century,” a more specific image began to form around Ivanov. That image came to be marked

7 Bourdieu describes a “kind of practical sense for what is to be done in any given situation—what is called in sport a ‘feel’ for the game.” Ivanov at times seems to lack such a “feel for the game,” and at other times to willfully resist playing the game. For Bourdieu’s elaboration of this idea, see Pierre Bourdieu, Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 25.

8 The quotes are from, respectively, Vadim Nesterov, “Vy s moskovskoi kolokol’ni ne mozhetev poniat’,” interview with Aleksei Ivanov, Gazeta.ru, no date, accessed 2 Dec 2015: http://www.gazeta.ru/2005/09/13/oa_170617.shtml;
by the journalistic stamp “permskii samorodok.” The word “samorodok” derives from samo meaning auto- or self- and rod, the root for birth, so the word might be most literally translated as sui generis, which is one of the possible meanings. Indeed, the phrase points to the fact that Ivanov seems to have come from nowhere. Untrained, out of contact with the literary establishment, Ivanov and his strange, magical, genre-defying novels seemed nothing short of sui generis.

But another meaning of the word “samorodok” is at least as important here. The term can also mean a large nugget of precious metal, usually gold. This meaning is brought to the fore, for instance, by a remark about Ivanov’s prominence in the Moscow weekly Ekspert: “The quantity of clichéd ‘ural’skie samorodki’ in journalistic works devoted to Ivanov would be enough to fund the treasury of a middling country.” This use of the metaphor lays bare some of the mechanisms of symbolic capitalization behind Ivanov’s rise to prominence. Like a precious metal, it was implied, Ivanov developed by remaining untouched in his natural environment until he matured. And like a large nugget of gold, he was available to be mined, but he would need to be cleaned and refined before being brought into the larger economy. Nevertheless, the implication was, he was both naturally developed and potentially very valuable on the broader

9 The stamp became clichéd enough by 2006 that interviews of Ivanov and reviews of his work often use the term without quotation marks as a simple synonym for the author’s name. For instance, the lede to an interview that year reads, “The Dorm of the Spilt Blood is only coming out now, after the publication of the permskii samorodok’s major works.” ("Общага на крови" выходит только теперь, после публикации главных опусов пермского самородка.) Dmitrii Murav’ev, “Aleksei Ivanov: ‘Ia pishu kak chitatel’”, interview with Aleksei Ivanov, Vzgliad: delovaja gazeta, 9 May 2006, accessed 23 October 2015: http://vz.ru/culture/2006/5/9/32952.html).

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market. Lev Danilkin, writing in Afisha, put a slightly finer point on it. “In Russia, whose economy exists on the export of oil and literature,” he writes, Ivanov is “the gold reserves of Russian literature [zolotovalutnye rezervy russkoi literatury].”

Danilkin’s expression recasts Ivanov’s value, the same value implicit in the permskii samorodok stamp, in more openly economic terms. Ivanov becomes a currency, but a special kind of currency. Gold, after all, is not equivalent to the ruble or the dollar; it is the natural anchor, the “real” thing, derived from natural sources, that makes the imaginary and constructed systems of currency and exchange function.

Gold is a standard because it is ostensibly real, and so it has the power to anchor symbolic currencies like paper money or numbers on a computer screen. But of course, gold itself is only valuable because of cultural agreement; it is a “perfectly magical guarantor of an imperfectly magical system.” Likewise, whatever was felt to be “golden” in Ivanov, was such by cultural agreement. Put another way, he was seen as a samorodok, at least in part, because the literary field at the time looked to the peripheries in search of gold.

In the years surrounding the publication of The Heart of the Parma, colonialism, post-colonialism, and Russia’s imperial past became prominent—if at times latent—features of the cultural landscape. Three years before, in 2000, the first issue of Ab imperio appeared,
announcing itself as Russia’s first journal dedicated to “new imperial history and the interdisciplinary and comparative study of nationalism and nationalities in the post-Soviet space.”

In a 2001 issue of Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, Alexander Etkind published his first article on internal colonization, a paradigm that has proved powerful not just in academic circles, but in the culture at large. Alongside these framings of Russia’s imperial history, regional cultural producers turned to local traditions in efforts to promote peripheral peoples and places.

Discourses of empire and colonialism, along with responses emphasizing regional identity had already seen a resurgence in the early 2000s, as the economic straits of the 1990s receded. In the first decade of the new century, post-colonialism, often imported from Western academic paradigms, would be a major theme in cultural and scholarly production within Russia. The critical and popular success of The Heart of the Parma might owe something to its

http://magazines.russ.ru/october/2012/10/b7.html). In many instances, I would argue, including some mentioned by Breininger, modes of thought that borrow from postcolonialism, even if under different names, are important undercurrents, and sometimes even explicit motivations, for both scholarly and creative work in the 2000s.

15 Ab imperio Program Statement, abimperio.net accessed 15 October 2015: http://abimperio.net/cgi-bin/aishow.pl?state=portal/journal/mission&idlang=1


17 One of the most successful of these local studies in the academic press was Vladimir Abashev’s Perm as Text (1999), which studied the geographical and literary semiotics of Ivanov’s own hometown. Vladimir Abashev, Per'm kak tekst: Per'm v russkoj kul'ture i literature XVII-XIX vekov. Perm: Perm State University, 1999. Abashev later worked with Ivanov to produce a series of books on Perm regional identity called Perm as Text and funded by the Perm Regional Ministry of Culture.

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successful positioning within this trend. Not only does Ivanov’s novel reinterpret Russian colonial history from the perspective of the Perm region (which, despite its geographic centrality, has been politically and culturally peripheral throughout Russian imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet history), but its implicit perspective and genre hybridity also play on expectations within postcolonial theory of cultural renewal from the periphery. While colonialism is focused on exploiting natural resources at the periphery and building the authority (including cultural hegemony) of the center, the postcolonial phase, as Homi K. Bhabha argues in The Location of Culture, can offer a different model of cultural interaction. As connections between center and periphery become more complex and fluid, the periphery demands to be heard (as Salman Rushdie put it, “The Empire Writes Back”) and the center, in turn, begins to look to the periphery for cultural innovations and dynamic new forms.\(^{19}\) In Bhabha’s optimistic take, interactions between center and periphery generate new forms of “hybrid” consciousness that can serve as a foundation for cultural regeneration.\(^{20}\)

The Russian literary field in the early 2000s seemed to be reaching for something like new forms of hybridity between the Moscow establishment and the various peripheries of the

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\(^{20}\) Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 10, 13. Clowes also points out that Yuri Lotman’s *Universe of the Mind* (1990) provides another take on renewal from the periphery. “In Lotman’s view,” she writes, “the weakness of the center lies in its tendency toward self-isolation and inflexibility. In contrast, Lotman rethinks the periphery as a culturally dynamic space of new growth, altogether different from the politically and economically exploited outlying areas of empire theorized in postcolonial criticism” (*Russia on the Edge*, 7).
Russian-speaking world. These post-colonial trends adjusted the post-Soviet literary field in such a way that a possible position (to borrow from Bourdieu’s vocabulary) appeared for writers from the Russian periphery to explore issues of empire from an explicitly peripheral perspective—both in content and in form. Written by an outsider, and recasting the history of colonialism and the traumatic loss of local identity, Ivanov’s novels—especially *The Heart of the Parma*, but also *The Geographer Drank Away His Globe* and *The Gold of the Rebellion*—showed the disposition necessary to occupy one of the positions created by these trends.

How much of Ivanov’s success with his early novels might have been conscious strategy can only be a matter of speculation, but the novels’ themes, style, and format—as discussed in the next section—made them particularly well-suited to occupy the developing position within the literary field for work from the periphery about the periphery. In part because of this fortuitous coincidence between a transformation in the literary field and the form and content of Ivanov’s early novels, he took on the value implicit in the metaphor “permskii samorodok.” Like

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21 A further example of this trend is touched on in chapter 2 of this dissertation when Olga Slavnikova praised Iurii Buida’s use of local Kaliningrad mythologies in his *Prussian Bride* and then adopted a similar technique in her own novel, 2017.


23 Indeed, Ivanov was not the only author to claim such a position. German Sadulaev in the very title of his 2006 work, *I am a Chechen!*, announces his intention to occupy an analogous position. Perhaps more entertaining is the story of Gulla Khirachev, an author who never existed. In 2009, a first-person narrative set in the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, and written by “Khirachev” was submitted to the Debut Prize competition. When the novella, called *Salaam, Dalgal!*, was announced as the winner at the prize gala in Moscow, the macho Dagestani author suggested by the novel’s narrator was nowhere in the hall. Instead, a young Moscow literary critic named Alisa Ganieva stood to accept the honor. Ganieva’s youth and personal background—she has family in Makhachkala and spent much of her childhood in Dagestan—helped keep the sensation from souring into scandal as can often happen when representatives of a hegemonic culture appropriate marginal identities. Nevertheless, Ganieva’s central position in the literary field—as a Moscow critic whose articles had already appeared in many of the most prestigious “thick journals”—suggests a knowing, if not necessarily fully conscious, strategy behind the presentation of her fictional persona. Whether by intuition or conscious knowledge, Ganieva understood that the literary field would accept a work like *Salaam, Dalgal!* and that such a work would be more successful if it were written by a man named Gulla Khirachev.
Russia’s mineral wealth, Ivanov comes from the vast expanses east of the capitals, where he has derived his value from long and lonely contact with his native environment. Furthermore, his relationship to the capitals is based on a colonial paradigm, through which he is able to bring cultural value into central Russia by transforming the natural resources he has inherited from his environment (geography, history, pagan cultures) into a form that is at once exotic and recognizable in the metropole. In the next section, I explore precisely how his literary work produces this cultural value before turning to Ivanov’s attempts to convert the capital implicit in his samorodok tag both in the center and on the peripheries of literary culture.

FICTIONAL WORLDS, ENCHANTED GEOGRAPHIES

In his three early novels, *The Geographer Drank Away his Globe*, *The Heart of the Parma*, and *The Gold of the Rebellion*, Ivanov develops a vision of the Urals as a unique Russian region, not least because of its geographic specificity. In contrast to a more familiar image of Russia as the open steppe whose endless vistas give its people either no sense of self (Chaadaev) or an outsized need for freedom (Gogol), Ivanov presents the Urals as a close, almost claustrophobic landscape with cliffs and forests obstructing views and natural riches hidden in the mountainous depths. Geography for Ivanov, however, is more than the sum of geology, topography, flora

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24 The three novels considered in this study are Ivanov’s most commercially successful works, each selling at least 100,000 copies by 2007 (D’iaikova, “Iz murla v glamur”). The editions used for this study are: Aleksei Ivanov, *Serdse parmy* (Moscow: Pal’mira, 2003); *Zoloto bunta, ili Vniz po reke tesnina* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2005); and *Geograf globus propil* (Moscow: ACT, 2013).

25 In his philosophical letters, published in Russia in 1836, Petr Chaadaev wrote that the “geographic fact” of Russia is both an “element of our political greatness and the true reason for our mental impotence.” (Petr Chaadaev, *Sochinenia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1989), 154). Gogol’s famous “troika” passage from *Dead Souls*, on the other hand, shows Russia’s endless expanses as animated and full of potential. They contain “everything” including an “inaccessible secret force” (N.V. Gogol’, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 14-i tomakh, t. 6: Mertvye dushi, t. 1*, Moscow: Akademii nauk, 1951, 220). Gogol is more optimistic than Chaadaev, and he has been part of the Russian school curriculum since at least the early 20th century, and so it is Gogol’s interpretation that has become more canonic. For a full discussion of the Urals as a “geopoetic” zone distinct from Russia at large, see Vladimir
and fauna. It is animated by the ghosts of its past. Histories of colonialism, Christianization, and resource exploitation have left behind a trail of violence against indigenous peoples and against the land itself. The resulting traumatic memories have been suppressed by time or flattened by the creation of a unified Russian space.26

In this section, I explore how Ivanov creates both a sense of traumatic loss and revives local identity through literary representation of the Urals in these three novels. I begin by tracing the plots of the two historical novels to reveal the traumatic vision of colonization that energizes their world. I show how this trauma is framed as endowing the Ural lands with an almost supernatural power that continues to exert influence even up to the present day through the contemporary novel The Geographer Drank Away His Globe. Following the philosopher Jane Bennett, I frame this power as “enchantment.” I argue that the composite effect of the depicted trauma, the landscapes of enchantment, and the difficult language generated Ivanov’s original writerly “resource,” which was framed by critics in terms like “permskii samorodok” or “gold reserves of Russian literature.”

While The Geographer Drank Away His Globe depicts a distinctly post-Soviet engagement with Ural geography (discussed below), The Heart of the Parma and The Gold of the Rebellion reimagine Ural landscapes during, respectively, fifteenth-century colonization and late-eighteenth-century industrial development in the region. In each of these historical novels, the author builds his aesthetic vision from equal parts deep ethnographic, historical, and geographic knowledge, on the one hand, and fantasy, on the other. In these complex fictions, the

Abashev, Russkaia literatura Urala: Problematika geopoetiki (Perm: Permskii natsional’nyi issledovatel’skii universitet, 2012), especially the introduction and first chapter.

details of history and geography correspond to the real world, but also allow space for animism, pantheism, and magic. Such elements of enchantment are presented not merely as folklore or ethnographic curiosities, but rather as inherent characteristics of the land itself. It is not simply that some of Ivanov’s characters see magic in their surroundings, but that the environment itself is enchanted, producing an immanent, undeniable magic.

The combination of historical reconstruction and genre fantasy is by no means unique, especially in contemporary Russian literature. Indeed, as Alexander Etkind has argued, “magical historicism” might even be considered one of the dominant modes of post-Soviet letters.\footnote{Etkind is primarily (and almost exclusively) concerned with narratives that reimagine Soviet and immediately pre-Soviet history as a mechanism for both acting out and working through the trauma of what he calls the “Soviet catastrophe” (“Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” \textit{Slavic Review}, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2009), 631–58). Ivanov’s historical fantasies, in contrast, completely skip the Soviet era, and modernity entirely, landing the reader in a pre-modern world that might have analogues to the present, but whose distance allows for a different kind of enchantment. Etkind’s recent book, \textit{Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied} (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2013) which develops some of the themes from his article, mentions Ivanov only once (imprecisely) as a “major writer” on whose novel Pavel Lunguine’s film \textit{Tsar} (2009) was based (216). Ivanov wrote the screenplay for \textit{Tsar} and his subsequent work, \textit{The Chronology According to John} (Letoischisleniia ot Ioanna} 2009), is based on the film, not the other way around.} As in the works Etkind analyzes, the magic in Ivanov’s worlds can be linked to traumatic histories. But in contrast to Etkind’s analysis, where the elements of fantasy emerge from historical explorations of the immediate Soviet past, in Ivanov’s worlds, the magic is in the land itself. It is a material aspect of the characters’ physical reality.\footnote{Ivanov’s historical fictions share some characteristics with the global phenomenon of magical realism (from which Etkind derives magical historicism). His imagined worlds entertain elements of realism and the supernatural on equal terms. They also deal quite explicitly with post-colonial themes, which is another widely held tenet of the genre. However, Ivanov does not engage the genre as such. Since the term itself is so problematic and debated, and since Ivanov’s work relates to the genre only tangentially, I leave the genre tag, and most of its implications, outside of the framework of this chapter. (For a recent summary of some of the debates around the term, see Christopher Warnes, \textit{Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence} (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), especially chapter 1, “Re-thinking Magical Realism”.}

The settings of both historical novels analyzed here are enchanted realms where shamans exercise control (for good and evil) over human souls, where exchanged amulets or stolen idols can bestow immortality or activate divine wrath, and where, most important, the physical
environment plays an extraordinarily active and agentive role in the characters’ lives. Both novels occupy, almost exclusively, the perspectives of ethnic Russians who stand firm on their Christian faith even as they live in alien territory animated by ancient and mysterious belief systems. Despite these characters’ skeptical resistance to magical thinking, elements of paganism and the supernatural emerge as both true and verifiable. This relationship to the surrounding supernatural—reasoned resistance superseded by acceptance—works as a proxy for the contemporary reader who also might be reluctant to accept the magic of the fictional world. Both readers and Russian characters find themselves in a strange land where the line between rational causality and magic seems to blur. Both feel alienated, unsure how to navigate the strange environment. But if readers experience this alienation as aesthetic pleasure, the characters’ reactions are closer to fear at the incomprehensible powers animating the land.

When the young Russian Prince Mikhail comes to power in the beginning of *The Heart of the Parma*, his reign of intercultural integration promises to resolve the Russians’ sense of alienation from the Ural lands. Raised on the fairytales of his Vogul (Mansi) nanny, and married to a Vogul woman (whose supernatural powers include shape-shifting and communication with wolves), Mikhail is a true cultural hybrid. He “never loses his [Orthodox Christian] faith,” even as he deeply feels the “cunning, wise, and terrifying” nature of the land. Upon seeing a Vogul idol that strikes fear in most Russians, Mikhail feels “simply a blow from the power hidden in the land […] neither evil nor yet good.”

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29 The titular “parma” is an archaic term for “woodland.” I have chosen to leave it in the original because the term is not much more transparent for native Russian readers than for readers of English. It is not in current use in Russian, nor can it be found in authoritative contemporary dictionaries (Ozhegov and Ushakov).


31 Ibid., 63–64. “для Миши это был просто удар той силы, которая таилась в земле, […] еще ни злой, ни доброй.”
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land’s power, he realizes that it is this very mystical force which stymies the Russians’ colonial efforts.

“When will the land become ours?” asks one Russian character in frustration. “We’ve built churches and towns here, we’ve baptized it, we’ve lived here so many years—when will it finally become ours?” The answer, “When we soak it in blood three sazhens deep,” suggests that neither settlement nor political control, but only violence and traumatic experience can resolve the Russians’ sense of alienation from the surrounding environment. In this light, the novel’s many bloody battles aim not so much at territorial annexation, as at symbolic transformation. Speaking about the novel in an interview, Ivanov explains, “Blood, poured into the land during the struggle with paganism, even if at times not justified, changes the nature of the land. On such land pagan gods cannot survive, and they leave.” The trauma of bloodshed is meant to clear the land of ancient deities, to chase away the latent power that Prince Mikhail feels in the land, and to make it safe for Russian interests. But The Heart of the Parma offers no end to the violence. The novel closes on a bloody confrontation in which the Voguls lay siege to a Russian stronghold. By the last page, the land remains alien and dangerous for the Russian colonizers, still populated by pagan gods, still enchanted by supernatural forces.

The Gold of the Rebellion picks up some 300 years later, in the same northern Urals. No longer troubled by constant colonial warfare, the late-eighteenth-century Chusovaia River basin now boasts a bustling economy built around mining, manufacturing, and exporting mineral resources. Apparently rid of pagan mysticism, the land now provides the raw materials for the expansion and entrenchment of Russian civilization. Nevertheless, the natural environment

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32 Ibid., 112. “— Когда же эта земля и нашей станет? Храмы и города на ней строим, крестим ее, живем здесь уже сколько лет — когда же она и нашей станет? — Когда на три сажени вглубь кровью своей ее напоим.”

33 Stogov, “Mne skuchno zhit’ bez tsennosti.”
emerges as an enchanted, agentive force, evincing supernatural powers and structuring relationships among characters in the novel. We enter The Gold of the Rebellion four years after Pugachev’s revolt, as the shadow of the uprising continues to dominate a murky moral landscape. Doubly bereaved by the trauma of Pugachev’s terror and the loss of his father, the protagonist, Ostasha Perekhod (whose last name suggests the importance of both crossings and transitions), sets out to reclaim his rightful place as the captain of his own river barge. Rumors circulate that his father—himself the region’s best river captain—intentionally crashed his vessel and faked his own death in order to sneak off with Pugachev’s gold. To clear his name, Ostasha must find the gold and find the truth. But Ostasha finds himself ethically adrift. Anchored only by his quest, he struggles to hold to his Christian faith, to resist the constant pull of the more mystical beliefs of the factions around him—the shamanistic Voguls, and the Old Believer sect, the istiazhel’tsy or “extractors,” a heretical group capable of extracting human souls (entirely invented by Ivanov).

Meanwhile, the surrounding environment seems to come alive, taking actions that change the course of events at crucial points in the novel. At one such moment, Ostasha has been taken prisoner in an underground hermitage when the cavern suddenly collapses, killing his incarcerators and freeing Ostasha from their grasp. Later, Ostasha escapes captivity once again when a blizzard produces a hallucinogenic effect that swallows up his captors and lets him go free. The environment seems uncannily alive, even agentive, to the point where Ostasha begins to appeal to it as a sort of ultimate authority. He ends an argument at one point by shouting, “The Chusovaia [River] will be the judge of who’s right and who lies!”34 And later, he argues with an

34 Ivanov, Zoloto bunta, 56. “Чусовая рассудит, кто прав, а кто врал!”
Chapter 3: On the Edges of Literature

Ostasha seems to trust in the natural world’s fairness, even if he doesn’t fully understand its mechanisms and fears its powers. When captaining a barge, Ostasha can read the eddies and whorls of the Chusovaia only by a combination of intense concentration and intuition, and even so, he mutters incantations and prayers for intercession.

The environment in The Gold of the Rebellion is an enchanted presence: active, immanent, but beyond human understanding. Throughout the novel, Ostasha resists the pagan belief systems around him, tenaciously holding to his Orthodox faith and modern values of self-reliance and free will, but the land relentlessly reminds him of his own powerlessness. He is constantly pulled back into a pre-modern awareness of the environment as an enchanted presence that cannot be resisted, tamed, or even fully understood.

Struck by Ivanov’s “unusual and intense experience of the landscape,” the cultural theorists Marina and Vladimir Abashev have made Ivanov’s writing a centerpiece of their project on “geopoetics” in the Urals. In Ivanov’s texts, they write, “mountains and rivers live, not in the sense of banal metaphors, but in their essence: their ancient energy determines the march of history and human fates.” “Something inaccessible, primordial, spellbinding,” they continue, turns Ivanov’s landscapes into the types of “geopoetic images” that reveal the land’s inner power and change its very nature for the reader. Developing on this insight, I would suggest that the

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35 Ibid., 114. “Не на чем стоять твоей власти, потому что над Чусовой ты не властен!”

36 Before The Gold of the Rebellion was published, Ivanov spoke about his research into the world of river navigation: “The captains who guided these vessels, they had to have uncommon intelligence, enormous experience, and, I think, a strong connection with the spirit world, because during that kind of navigation a person is very close to God” (Aleksandr Gavrilov, “My vse iznasilovany gollivudom,” Knizhnoe obozrenie (Moscow), 14 March 2004).


locus of Ivanov’s geopoetic power, what the Abashevs call “something inaccessible, primordial, spellbinding,” might be best understood as the aesthetic re-envisioning of traumatic experience.

*The Heart of the Parma* and *The Gold of the Rebellion* bookend Ural colonization, passing over the 300 years between the two novels’ settings, which included such important events as Ivan the Terrible’s reign, Yermak Timofeevich’s conquest, and the development of the Stroganov and Demidov industrial empires. For this reason, the two novels show distinctly different relationships to their supernatural environment. A typical passage from *The Heart of the Parma*, for instance, describes how “Crickets chirped, in the ravine near Vyshkar, frogs sang, and now and again fish in the river surfaced and dove. Untethered spirits wandered the forest, shook branches, sighed, whispered. The Dead Parma hunched over like a lump of underground silence.” This description moves freely between material and mystical planes, suggesting an equivalency between the whispering of “untethered spirits” and the chirping of crickets. Both exist in the same reality, undisturbed by each other’s presence. Descriptions in *The Gold of the Rebellion*, by contrast, highlight conflicts inherent in the environment:

At the top of the *Kokua*, like grey teeth, Vogul *chamii* rose from the land. For centuries wooden Vogul corpses slept in the chicken-legged huts of this roadside cemetery—*kokua*. A wicked, haunted place. Yermak, it seems, didn’t manage to cast all the demons into the Chusovaia. […] Under the mountain, the stream of the *Kokua* flowed into the Serebrianaia River, which shone like chainmail against the firwood banks. Long ago, the

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39 Yermak Timofeevich was the sixteenth-century Cossack leader of the Russian conquest of Siberia during the reign of Ivan IV, when colonial expansion east towards Siberia became a priority of Moscow. Ivan granted the Stroganovs large, semi-autonomous estates along the Chusovaia and Kama rivers in 1558. The Demidovs built their empire later with land grants from Peter I in 1701 and 1702.

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Siberian Tatars, Bukhara swords at their belts, followed the Serebrianaia during raids on the Stroganov forts along the Kama and the lower Chusovaia. Later Yermak’s brigade followed the same path, stomping the undead spirits into the land, as they shook from fear, and rustling the treetops in the cedar hyrst.41

The environment in this passage is animated not only by pagan beliefs but also by its own history of violence. The distant “demons” of colonialism prove “undead” (to highlight one of Etkind’s favored terms), arising unbidden to haunt the territory. If the supernatural in The Heart of the Parma was a matter of course, it returns to Ostasha’s world in The Gold of the Rebellion as something much more disquieting, as an uncanny experience charged with traumatic history.

In his classic essay on the peculiar nature of the uncanny, Freud identifies precisely Ostasha’s experience as one of the sources of this unsettling feeling, namely, “when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”42 The feeling of the uncanny, writes Freud, is produced not by something we have never experienced, but by “something long familiar to the psyche [that] was estranged from it only through being repressed.”43 Here the repressed memories of ancient belief systems, of animism and magic, and of the violence deployed to abolish them, eerily enchant the landscape around Ostasha, haunting him, and pulling him back into a pre-colonial world. His struggle to maintain his own faith in the

41 Ivanov, Zoloto bunta, 175. “На вершине Кокуя, как серые зубы, еще торчали из земли столбы священных вогульских чамий. Здесь в избушках на курых ножках много веков спали деревянные вогульские мертвецы придорожного кладбища — кокуя. Совсем нехорошее, лешачье место. Не всех, видать, бесов Ермак в Чусовую посшибал… Под горой ручей Кокуй впадал в речку кольчужно блестевшую в еловых берегах. По Серебряной сибирские татары с бухарскими саблями у поясов ходили в набеги на строгановские деревянные кремли по Каме и Нижней Чусовой. Потом этой дорогой прошла Ермакова дружина, грузо втаптывая нежить в землю и дьём ужаса топорша священные кедровые рощи на макушках ёкв.”


43 Ibid., 148.
face of the land replays the traumatic experience of colonization and Christianization, but on a personal, psychological level.

For readers of these novels in the twenty-first century, both the history of colonialism and earnest belief in the supernatural seem impossibly remote. That historical distance transforms the characters’ fear of the enchanted environment into a pleasurable (and safe) aesthetic experience. What triggers Ostasha’s trepidation causes, in the reader, something closer to “an uncanny feeling that can be both frightening and comforting,” (to borrow from Jack Zipes’s discussion of fairy tales)—frightening, because we recognize the power looming over Ostasha, and comforting, because we know we are safe. The in-between space opened up by aesthetic representation allows readers to explore repressed memories and violent histories and to connect, through the experience of enchanted geographies, with a common past.

Several passages in Ivanov’s earlier novel, *The Geographer Drank Away his Globe*, show how such distant histories might be powerful for a contemporary audience. Set in the post-Soviet Urals, this novel engages directly with Ural geography. As the titular geography teacher, Viktor Sluzhkin, takes his students on a rafting trip outside the city, the group encounters an environment animated by the traumas of its twentieth-century experience:

Underfoot, the earth seemed to speak. […] It suddenly became filled with meaning, blood, history. That spirituality breathed from it towards the sky and penetrated bodies like the radiation of the lands of Chernobyl. The taiga and the cliffs suddenly ceased

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44 Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 173, emphasis in the original. I am indebted in this line of argumentation to Mark Lipovetsky’s article on another Ural writer, Pavel Bazhov. Written at the height of Stalin’s terror, Bazhov’s collection called *The Malachite Box*, writes Lipovetsky, “exposes one of the deepest traumas” not only of the Soviet 1930s but of modernity in general, that is, the “methodical substitution of traditionalist and local clusters of Heimlich [homely; or, here, local, regional—B.G.] with industrialized, anonymous, state-dominated, and globalized grand narratives” (Mark Lipovetsky, “Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy: Discovering the Soviet Uncanny,” *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture*, eds. Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova (New York: Routledge, 2008), 280–81). Seen through a similar lens, Ivanov’s works might be understood as both exploring and re-enaacting Ural trauma.
being wild, nameless hinterlands, where godforsaken villages and prison camps drowned.

The taiga and the cliffs suddenly became something important for life, more important and more necessary than much else, if not than everything else.\(^{45}\)

Soviet traumas—Chernobyl, the drowning of “godforsaken villages,” and prison camps—animate the land, filling it with meaning. Instead of discussing these issues directly with his students, however, Sluzhkin launches into much more distant history. He tells the group, “Here lived great peoples about whom humanity has long since forgotten. Here there were fortresses, canals, holy places. There were princes, priests, astrologers, poets. There were wars, cities were taken by storm, powerful tribes fought to the death among the cliffs.”\(^{46}\) These lines, which, the reader is told, capture his students’ attention like nothing before, read like a preview of *The Heart of the Parma.*

Several pages later, after the group passes under a bridge built by Soviet prison labor, Sluzhkin once again finds himself inspired to spin out a historical yarn, this time he tells the group, “about barges and river captains, about the spring floods, on the currents of which the iron caravans flew towards Perm, […] about the stone pommels of the warrior-cliffs, about risk and death, about need and love.”\(^{47}\) Here, as Sluzhkin previews Ivanov’s subsequent novel, *The Gold of the Rebellion*, his students feel the natural power of the land, but once again, that land is animated not by its inherent nature, but by the “unexpressed pain” it has witnessed, suggesting

\(^{45}\) Aleksei Ivanov, *Geograf*, 337. “под ногами словно земля заговорила. […] она вдруг оказалась насыщенной смыслом, кровью, историей. Эта одухотворенность дышит из нее к небу и проникает тела, как радиация земли Чернобыля. Тайга и скалы вдруг перестали быть дикой, безымяной глухоманью, в которой тонут убогие деревушки и зэковские лагеря. Тайга и скалы вдруг стали чем-то важным в жизни, важнее и нужнее много — если не всего.”

\(^{46}\) Ibid. “Здесь жили великие народы, о которых человечество уже давно забыло. Здесь были крепости, каналы, капища. Были князья, жрецы, звездочеты, поэты. Шли войны, штурмами брали города, могучие племена насмерть дрались среди скал. Все было. И прошло.”

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 385. “про барки и сплавщиков, про весенний вал, на гребне которого летели к Перми железные караваны, рассказывают про каменные тараны бойцов, про риск и гибель, про нужду и любовь”
Sluzhkin’s (and Ivanov’s) understanding of traumatic experience as harboring an active, perhaps even productive, power.  

When he encounters markers of trauma, Sluzhkin senses a terrifying energy and, instead of confronting it directly, he redirects that energy into the distant past, giving his students a way to process traumatic experience as mythic history, frightening in its violence but comforting in its distance. Sluzhkin’s narrative substitutions—while avoiding the direct “working through” of trauma that is often understood as essential to healthy mourning—provide a common aesthetic experience through which his students come together into a cohesive micro-community.

Building towards what Dominick LaCapra calls the “transformation of traumatic experience into a foundational experience,” Sluzhkin’s historical substitutions become the basis for an improvised sense of community among the students.

Ivanov’s historical novels seem to affect their audiences through similar strategies: they present the distant past as magical landscapes, haunted by its traumas but distant enough from the reader’s reality to produce an effect not of terror, but of enchantment. The nearly supernatural effects of Sluzhkin’s mythologized histories—the earth comes alive and is filled with meaning for his students—is mirrored in readers’ comments about the almost magical effects of Ivanov’s novels. One reader writes that despite “lots of incomprehensible words, […]

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48 Ibid., 386. “невысказанной болью”

49 On “working through” trauma, see Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” Beyond the Pleasure Principle and other Writings, trans. John Reddick (New York: Penguin, 2003). Sluzhkin’s historical flights of fancy might be best understood as what Eric Santner has called “narrative fetishism,” that is, as narratives “designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called [them] into being in the first place.” These narratives, in turn, can become foundational for community formation (Eric Santner, “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), 143).

‘The Heart of the Parma’ is a magical text!” said one reader, while another noted the novel “wraps you in a fairy tale warmth,” and a third simply stated that *The Gold of the Rebellion* “casts a spell [charuet].”

Such reader responses suggest that the power of Ivanov’s texts lies in their ability to evoke a combination of affects that, following the philosopher Jane Bennett, can be called enchantment. “Enchantment involves, in the first instance,” writes Bennett, “a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage.” This initial encounter produces an experience in which the subject is “simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense […] both caught up and carried away.” The peculiar combination of distant subject matter, difficult language, and genre plotting in Ivanov’s texts seems to produce in the reader the “odd combination of somatic effects” that Bennett associates with enchantment: intense concentration, a “suspension of chronological time,” heightened sensory perception, and exhilaration. To be enchanted, Bennett writes, is “to be struck by the extraordinary […] to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound.”

The compelling aesthetic experience of enchantment combines with the peripheral subject matter of the novels to generate Ivanov’s initial literary resource, the same resource conceptualized in the journalistic stamp “permskii samorodok.” But that resource should not be understood as strictly literary: it already contains the potential to move beyond the bounds of the

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54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 4–5.
texts themselves, and reach into the real world. Bennett argues that the feeling of enchantment can encourage affective attachment to the surrounding world. As Ivanov’s novels reactivate a sense of the immanent power in the surrounding environment, they actually alter readers’ experience of that world. Those readers who most intensely experience the enchantment of Ivanov’s texts often find themselves inspired to translate their passive readership into more active engagement with Ural geography and history. Ivanov’s developing vision of success would be shaped by how he could convert the resource of aesthetic enchantment both within the literary world and beyond.

INTRA-LITERARY CONVERSION

These novels’ enchanting effects cultivated the image of the *sui generis* provincial genius underlying the phrase “*permskii samorodok,*” and other similar formulations cited above. But the resources implied in these metaphors turned out to be more difficult to convert into literary legitimacy than Ivanov might have hoped. For every glowing discussion of Ivanov’s work as either a return to the great Russian novelistic tradition, or as an original and productive break from that tradition, other critics found his genre-defying novels to be exemplars of Hollywood-inflected “mass-literature,” or simply pulp fiction (“*chtivo*”). What many readers found enchanting and deeply meaningful struck some in the literary world as suspect at best. The very

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arbiter of literary legitimacy, the Russian Booker Prize (as mentioned above) disqualified *The Heart of the Parma* from its long list of nominees in 2004 as insufficiently literary.

Ivanov saw himself as an author of serious literature whose borrowings from genre fiction and Hollywood were part of an innovative literary project and therefore should not compromise his place in the field.\(^{57}\) For Ivanov, both critical acclaim and commercial success were important aspects of his literary aspirations and he saw no inherent conflict between the two. But as he openly pursued both critical and commercial success he appeared to violate literary etiquette and raised the hackles of established members and institutions of the field. In this section, I show how Ivanov’s initial attempts to pursue literary success through both the critical apparatus and market popularity were met with accusations of commercialism and artificiality, and ultimately resulted in Ivanov’s rejection of Moscow literary society and reorientation towards a different idea of literary success. I suggest that Ivanov’s missteps and his ignorance of the “rules of the game” (to borrow Bourdieu’s term) were partially the result of his peripheral status. In other words, his difficulty integrating into the literary field derived, in part, from the same source as did his value as “permskii samorodok.” In this way, his provincial provenance both endowed him with his original resource, and made that resource difficult to exploit within the Moscow literary establishment.

In answer to an interviewer’s question in 2005, Ivanov defined his early vision of literary success, connecting it directly to his provincial position. “Unquestionable objective success,” Ivanov says, “is when your book is read on the metro. But in my city, there is no metro. So I

\(^{57}\) For instance, when asked about his use of cinematic tropes in *The Gold of the Rebellion*, Ivanov suggested that not only he, but everyone else besides was “against their will” under the influence of Hollywood (Aleksandr Gavrilov, “Vse my iznasilovanye gollivudom,” interview with Aleksei Ivanov, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 14 March 2004.) In another interview, he claims that the “Hollywood technology, special effects” of his prose are a response to the pervasive virtuality of postmodernism, which he frames as his attempt to “imbue that virtual literary environment with real flesh, real life, real blood” (Aleksandr Gavrilov and Aleksandr Shchipin, “Sokrovishche natsii,” *Sobesednik*, 1–7 Mar 2006, accessed 15 Jun 2017: http://ivanproduction.ru/intervyu/sokrovishhe-naczii1.html).
have to trust critics’ opinions. I trust them.”

The conventionalized image of popularity—his book being read in public—is unavailable to the distant Ivanov, so he has to rely on critics to report on his success. His geographically peripheral position makes him more dependent on intermediaries, forcing him to trust representatives of the literary establishment to relay what he cannot see with his own eyes. But aside from underlining his peripheral position vis-à-vis the markers of literary success, this answer also betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the critical apparatus. Ivanov frames critics as essentially reporters of popularity, rather than arbiters of literary quality. He diminishes their independence from the dictates of the book market and either conflates critical acclaim with popular success, or perhaps even assumes that critical acclaim is an epiphenomenon of popular success.

Ivanov’s undifferentiated attitude towards critical consecration and popular success led him to discuss his open pursuit of both with a candor that either ignores or openly defies the implicit etiquette of the literary field. He reported that he jealously read critics’ responses to him and his work (“I’m the most attentive and loyal fan of anything written about me”) and even courted critical praise by interpreting negative reviews as implicit challenges. He describes the genesis of *The Gold of the Rebellion*, for instance, in the following terms:

In many ways I was provoked by critics. After *The Heart of the Parma* I was not entirely satisfied with the reviews, not so much about the work, but about me. […] In his review of *The Heart of the Parma*, the critic Danilkin said that I’m a crappy dramatist.
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[khrenovyi dramaturg]. And, idiot that I am, I didn’t know how to respond. So I sat down and wrote a novel. And I’m very happy that he changed his opinion.  

At the same time, he actively pursued commercial success by working with the publisher Azbuka to create a multifaceted promotional campaign around the release of his new novel. The campaign included new cover designs for all of Ivanov’s previous works, flagship promotion at the Moscow International Book Fair that year, and broad distribution to book stores, kiosks, and even supermarket chains. Ivanov himself often discussed the effectiveness of the ad campaign in interviews: “It was of course Azbuka that made a name for me when they bought up all the rights that I had thoughtlessly sold to Vagrius, Palmira, and AST [the publishing houses that had put out Ivanov’s earlier works], and released everything properly, systematically, professionally, and with good informational support.” Despite the thin euphemism, the last phrase (in Russian “s khoroshim informatsionnym soprovozdeniem”) unequivocally points to the marketing strategy that accompanied the release of his new novel.

While an author actively courting both critical acclaim and commercial sales might be unlikely to constitute a major revelation—after all, creative activity “has always hidden various

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60 “Даже неловко в этом признаваться, но во многом меня спровоцировали критики. Я после «Пармы» был не во всем доволен отзывами, и даже не про произведение, а про себя. Но размахивать кулаками и кричать: «Да я могу!» — нелепо, проще написать такое произведение, которое это дело бы опровергало. Исторический жанр идеально подходил для подобной реализации. Кстати, так же была написана фантастическая «Земля—Сортировочная» — в доказательство, что я могу. Критик Данилкин в отзыве на «Сердце Пармы», сказал, что я хреновый драматург. А я, лох, не знал, что Данилкину ответить. Сел и написал роман, и очень рад, что он изменил своё мнение. Пусть критики помнят, что результатом их высказываний может быть не только мордобой.” (Nesterov, “Vy s moskovskoi kolokol’ni…”)


strategies of success, […] vanity, cupidity, thirst for power, etc.”63—Ivanov’s enthusiastic admission of the fact seemed to violate certain tenets of literary etiquette. Profit motives and self-regard were meant to remain unspoken, if not completely repressed, aspects of literary activity. Ivanov’s explicit acknowledgement of their power over his fate was interpreted as an abandonment of literary priorities in favor of commercialization. One critic wrote that Ivanov had turned from a writer into a “successful publishing project.”64 Others wrote that it was his publisher’s promotional efforts and not the author’s prose that had made Ivanov successful.65 Reviews of the new novel often began by detailing Azbuka’s promotional campaign, as did one by Aleksei Balakin in Kriticheskaia massa. Balakin compared the novel to yogurt with artificial flavor enhancers: “If The Gold of the Rebellion were a food product, its back cover would have to display: ‘Ingredients: Cardboard, paper, typographic ink, glue, artificial flavoring: ‘novel’.”66 Though the review stipulates that the novel contains interesting passages, it insists that Ivanov’s new work is not a “living novel, growing out of nowhere for no apparent reason, but is entirely planned out, thought through, artificial, grown in a test tube […] a hologram created through chemical formulas.”67

63 Mikhail Berg, Literaturakratiiia: Problema prisvoeniiia i pereraspredeleniiia vlasti v literature (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), 235. “под ‘ореолом творчества’ всегда скрывались и различные стратегии достижения успеха, вполне понятное тщеславие, корыстолюбие, жажда власти и т.д.”

64 Beliakov, “Bludo i moda.” “Дальнейшей раскруткой занялась респектабельная «Азбука-классика», превратив писателя Иванова в успешный издательский проект.”


67 Balakin, “Retsenzii nomera.” “он — не живой, выросший из нитокуда непонятно по какой причине, а весь придуманный, измышленный, искусственный, выращенный в пробирке […] все это морок, голограмма, порождение химических формул.”
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By openly discussing his pursuit of literary success through both the critical apparatus and the commercial book market simultaneously, Ivanov exposed the mechanisms of his creative process. He did not differentiate between critical and popular acclaim, and nakedly courted both. Though this kind of candor might be interpreted as authenticity or sincerity by some, many in the literary establishment saw it as the opposite.68 The Gold of the Rebellion sold well, but it did not win any of the major literary prizes, and did not grant its author any more acceptance in the Moscow literary world. Frustrated with the literary establishment, Ivanov pre-emptively withdrew his next novel from all prize competitions before it was released, as noted above.69

That novel, Bluda and MUDO, can be read, among other things, as a reconsideration of the very notion of success.70 Instead of building on his previous successful works, the new novel departed from the mysticism, epic scale, and Ural exoticism of his earlier works, in favor of a small-scale, modern-day novel in a genre the author calls “contemporary picaresque” (sovremennyi plutovskoi).71 Much like Ivanov himself, the middle-aged protagonist of Bluda and MUDO, Boris Morzhov, has already found artistic success before the novel opens. An amateur painter his whole life, Morzhov finally sold his first artworks (for significant sums, we are led to believe) at a recent festival in Moscow. But Morzhov seems flummoxed by his newfound

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68 Ellen Rutten has argued that both flouting etiquette and professed ignorance of such norms can be seen as signs of authenticity, sincerity, and a stance against conformism. In fact, as I touch on in my conclusion, concerted rejection of the rules and norms of cultural capitalism has become a marker of authenticity in certain parts of Russian culture in the 2010s. See Ellen Rutten, Sincerity After Communism: A Cultural History (New Haven: Yale UP, 2017), 74. Ivanov himself frames his rejection of the literary establishment in this light, even as he expresses evident frustration with his inability to access the literary establishment.


70 The Russian title Bluda i MUDO (St Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2007) is all but untranslatable. “Bluda” is derived from the word “blud” which means licentiousness or immorality, and “bluda” itself is Ivanov’s neologism meaning bad times. MUDO is an absurd and vulgar acronym used as the name of an afterschool activities center where the novel is set (Munitsipal’noe upravlenie dopolnitel’nogo obrazovaniia). Instead of attempting to capture these nuances in English, I have left Ivanov’s wordplay in the original.

success. Uncomfortable in the Moscow art world, he decides instead to return to his provincial hometown, where he continues working at an afterschool program, living in a dormitory, drinking too much, and chasing local women. For Morzhov, the standard definition of success, which he frames as “the realization of ambitions,” is unsatisfying. He is suspicious of those ambitions themselves. “Ambitiousness,” he says, “is active conformism. Ambition is a claim to a higher place for yourself. But that place is within the same system. And that makes ambition a legitimation of the system.” Not only success, but also the ambition towards success, works to legitimize the prevailing value system (a point made elsewhere by the cultural theorist Boris Dubin). Under those terms, Morzhov rejects “success.” He abandons any ambitions in the Moscow art world, moves back to his hometown of Koviazin, and lives his life as if he had never sold a single painting.

There, his creative energy finds other outlets. Instead of pursuing the type of success usually associated with popularity in the art world, Morzhov builds an immersive fantasy for himself and his friends that mobilizes his energies towards creating community and preserving his outmoded way of life. In order to avoid the closure of the afterschool center where he works, he constructs an elaborate simulacrum designed to convince municipal authorities of the center’s

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73 As discussed in the introduction to the current study, Dubin writes that the very “motivation to achieve a higher level of activity or ability must be recognized by society as not only lawful, but also condoned.” Furthermore, “The recognition of one or another action […] as successful certifies it as generally valid, confirms and endorses its social character in the highest degree. Any success bolsters the normative order of a given society, it is an expression of that order; just as the normative order, in its turn, ensures any success, it is almost a guarantee of the given [instance of] success.” (“мотивация к тому, чтобы такого, более высокого уровня действий и умений достигать, и сама должна быть при этом признана обществом в качестве не только законной, но и поощряемой”; “признание того или иного действия […] успешным утверждает его как общезначимое, подтверждает и одобряет его в высшей степени социальный характер. Любой успех укрепляет нормативный порядок данного общества, он — выражение этого порядка; как нормативный порядок, со своей стороны, обеспечивает любой успех, он — как бы гарантия данного успеха.” Boris Dubin, “Siuzhet porazheniia,” in his Slovo – pis’mo – literatura (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), 262.
pedagogical effectiveness. He forges documents, recruits his colleagues to play along, and
manipulates the inspectors’ perception in order to make the center’s few children appear to be
both happier and more numerous. Though Morzhov’s machinations do not ultimately avoid the
center’s closure, they do something perhaps equally important. As Morzhov’s artistic talents
expand beyond the flat surfaces of his paintings and into the three-dimensional world, he creates
an immersive imaginative experience that allows him and his colleagues to envision and act out
an alternative reality that builds real social connections around imaginative activity. This
alternative reality affords Morzhov the opportunity to avoid conformism and redefine success as
the creation of something he himself chooses: an experience between himself and his colleagues
that does not require the consecration of the Moscow art world or other outside entities.

Ivanov’s own changing notions of success trace a similar trajectory. By the time he wrote
*Bluda and MUDO*, Ivanov’s frustration with the Moscow literary establishment had already
become apparent. In interviews, he bristles at Moscow literary culture, calling the prestigious
prizes mere “conformism,” and suggesting that they are controlled by “literary cliques [*tusovki*],”
which he is reluctant to join. Instead of continuing to pursue literary laurels, Ivanov around this
time began to stake out a position as a conscientious outsider, a provincial from Russia’s
heartland for whom deep and authentic connection to his native geography is more important
than the usual trappings of literary success. “One of the major conflicts of our time, of the Putin
era,” he told me in our interview, is “the conflict between authenticity and success.”76

Authenticity, as he understands it, is directly opposed to “success,” because “success,” as it is
usually understood, depends on one’s ability to fit into larger social formations. Like Morzhov,

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74 Bradley Gorski, “‘A Corporation…’” 175, 176.


76 Gorski, “‘A Corporation…’,” 176.
Ivanov sees that ability to fit in as a mode of conformism. He refers to that type of conformism as “corporativity” or “corporativnost’.”

Because we don’t have democracy and our government does not protect the rights of its citizens, we have neither true competition nor any of the institutions that would require. Under these circumstances, how can a person survive and achieve success? There’s only one way: become part of some powerful corporation that takes care of all your problems and gives you the opportunity to advance. I don’t mean only commercial corporations. It could be something commercial like, for instance, Gazprom. Go work at Gazprom and you’ll have a good salary with benefits, you’ll have a career ladder, respect, and so on. But there are other types of corporations, like Russian government service. Go work for the government, you can embezzle as much as you want, you’ll be protected, no one will ever put you in jail. You’ll be a successful and prosperous person. There’s another corporation called the city of Moscow. Move to Moscow! You’ll have good living conditions, you’ll get paid, you’ll be at the center of cultural life, you’ll have access to everything.

Russia exists on these corporations. If a person wants to be successful, especially in a conformist way, he becomes a member of a corporation. And rises within that corporation, moves to Moscow, gets a job in government service or at Gazprom. That’s the essence of Russian life. If I want to be a successful writer, I should become a member of some writers’ corporation, become part of some writers’ clique. Then I would have a good chance of winning a prize, going to festivals, etc. But that doesn’t interest me. I’m a non-conformist. I want to be successful within a corporation called Aleksei Ivanov.77

77 Ibid.
Like Morzhov, Ivanov rejects the idea that success should derive from the recognition of an outside social formation to whose rules and norms he would have to conform. But he does not reject the very notion of success, nor does he turn un-success into a virtue as Olga Slavnikova did in relation to the Booker Prize (and as Bourdieu and others have suggested is characteristic of the field of cultural production). Ivanov welcomes success, but on his own terms. Conformism and success should be disentangled, allowing an author like Ivanov to avoid the former while nevertheless preserving his access to the latter. In order to effect this disentanglement, he proposes creating his success “within a corporation called Aleksei Ivanov,” allowing him access to achievement without necessitating the adoption of a predetermined set of ambitions.

Instead of envisioning the writer as a lone creator dependent on the literary establishment for recognition, the idea of “a corporation called Aleksei Ivanov” places the writer at the center of a multifaceted imaginative experience. Success in this paradigm requires active audience involvement, including readership, participation in various extra-literary events, and what Ivanov calls “interpretations,” or adaptations, of his work in different settings. Film adaptations, festivals, stagings, and video games are all seen as more significant markers of success than those of the literary mainstream such as prizes. In part, such “interpretations” are important because they allow readers to continue interacting with the “corporation called Aleksei Ivanov,” that is, with the fictional worlds he has created. Such interactivity is essential to the alternative

78 Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, calls culture a “game where ‘loser wins,’” where a lack of success is valued due to a “systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies” (“The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” The Field of Cultural Production, ed. Randall Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 34). See also, Boris Dubin, et al. “Sotsiologiiia literaturnogo uspekha,” Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 25 (1997), 120–30. Olga Slavnikova, as shown in chapter 2, explicitly made “unsuccess” (“neuspekh”) into the very virtue that the Booker Prize jury should reward.

79 “It seems to me that in today’s multimedia atmosphere, a work of art needs to have one very important characteristic: it needs to be interpretable. It needs to have the potential to exist in completely different spheres of culture. […] Since cinema is the most important art form, the most important interpretation is always the film adaptation.” Bradley Gorski, “‘A Corporation Called Aleksei Ivanov’,” 178.
version of literary success that Ivanov imagines. This alternative vision, the “corporative” model of literary success, grew out of Ivanov’s frustration with the Moscow literary establishment, but, as shown in the next section, it also built on the many extra-literary activities Ivanov had been pursuing in the Urals since the beginning of his literary career.

EXTRA-LITERARY CONVERSION

Aside from giving interviews to Moscow journalists and participating in literary prize competitions, book fairs, and talk shows, Ivanov used his early literary prominence to pursue cultural activities at home in the Urals. He began to develop projects that brought his fiction away from the literary world and into contact with the real world. He published several non-fiction works on the region, produced a four-part documentary, started a cultural festival, and even proposed an extensive project to develop the tourism industry in one of the locations mentioned in his fiction. These activities show Ivanov projecting the enchanting effects of his novels beyond the realm of literature, into other spheres of cultural activity, and onto the physical geographies of the Urals. Furthermore, as these activities move away from literature proper towards other modes of imaginative activity, they also move away from the capital, appealing directly to Ivanov’s native region, the Urals. In this section, I explore these activities and I show how Ivanov uses them to develop a new vision of success that exists on the edges of literature and outside of the capital literary establishment. If his activities in Moscow literary society attempted to convert the “resource” generated by his first novels into a version of cultural

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80 In our interview, he traced his interest in interactivity to his past work in an afterschool program: “I came to understand the importance of interactivity a long time ago. I used to work in a local history afterschool program and I found that kids only remember what they experience. I could tell them all about the Perm region, but it would not be part of their experience. If I wanted them to remember something, I had to take them to see it, then that knowledge would grow into their life experience and they would remember it. That knowledge had to be interactive. Since then, I’ve always tried to work in interactive formats.” (Ibid., 177).
legitimacy, the extra-literary activities Ivanov undertook in the Urals converted that resource into
something outside the Moscow establishment, into what he would later characterize as a
“corporation called Aleksei Ivanov.”

Through several volumes of non-fiction, a documentary film, a festival, and proposed
tourist development Ivanov has worked to expand the enchanted geographies of his novels
beyond the limits of a strictly literary experience. His first work in this vein, a two-volume
hiking and rafting guide to the Chusovaia River, was conceived as part of the release of The Gold
of the Rebellion.81 Two years later, Message: Chusovaia (2007) would make the connection to
Ivanov’s fiction more explicit by promising to “introduce readers to those locations where all the
novels take place.”82 Organized according to geographic location, with toponyms used as chapter
titles, this book presents a history of the region in the form of a guidebook. But beyond that, the
version of history presented in this volume conceives of the land itself as an active and agentive
force. In a chapter on the town of Staroutkinsk, for instance, Ivanov considers why the two major
industrial families of the region had such different characters: the Stroganovs were models of
Christian virtue and progressive labor practices, while the Demidovs were cruel, profit-driven
masters. Behavior, argues Ivanov, echoing Lev Gumilev’s influential ethnos theory, is “formed
by the shape of the land on which people live.”83 The gentle slope of the Western Urals
encourages a “paternalistic” model of labor with a “charismatic leader” at the center. The

81 Aleksei Ivanov, Vniz po reke tesnin (Perm: Permskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 2004). As Ivanov mentioned in an
interview (cited above) The Gold of the Rebellion was conceived as a “five-part interactive project” (Gorski, “‘A
Corporation’”). This hiking guide was one of the five original components.

82 Aleksei Ivanov, Message: Chusovaia, book jacket. “Книга Алексея Иванова, лауреата множества
литературных премий, автора знаменитых романов «Золото бунта», «Сердце Пармы», «Географ глобус
пропил», знакомит читателей с теми местами, где происходит действие всех этих романов.”

83 Ivanov’s reliance on Gumilev’s thought most likely comes from a generalized consciousness of the geographer’s
widely popular ideas, rather than direct reading of any single source. Ivanov has never mentioned Gumilev in
interviews, and none of his non-fiction books acknowledge any debt to the scholar. For a detailed discussion of Lev
Gumilev and his reception in post-Soviet Russia, see Mark Bassin, The Gumilev Mystique.
Stroganovs were able to “express the spirit of the Western Urals” through their leadership, and created a labor society based around their administrative skill and largess. The Demidovs, on the other hand, settled east of the continental divide, where the Urals “drop off over sharp cliffs onto the flat, swampy plains of the Western Siberian lowlands.” The stark landscape forms a completely different set of “ethical and moral values” including “readiness for quick changes in fate” and “a tendency towards extremism, towards extreme expressions of individualism.”

Here, Ivanov begins to transform the supernatural power of the land, an aesthetic effect of his fiction, into the explanatory basis for an apparently “non-fiction” interpretation of history. He further develops this line of thought in a collection of essays released the next year as *The Ural Matrix* (2008). The mathematical implication of the title—a system in which a set algorithm produces a predetermined result—underlines Ivanov’s developing geographic determinism. “Matrix” is also etymologically related to “uterus” or “womb,” a connection more apparent in the Russian word “matritsa,” which is gendered feminine and shares a synonym, “matka,” with the anatomical place of origin. This metaphor both embodies and feminizes the land, suggesting an immersive environment that provides for and genetically determines everything.

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85 Ibid., 314. “резко обрывается скалами в плоскую болотистую равнину Западно-Сибирской низменности.”

86 Ibid., 315. “И потому дух населения совсем иной: с готовностью к крутым поворотам судьбы, с умением совладать с резкими переменами жизни (или оседлать их), со склонностью к экстремальным, крайним проявлениям своей натуры.”


88 Edward Casey connects matter, material, *mater* and matrix to the primordial “pregiven” in many world creation myths. “The matrix is the geratrix of created things: their *mater* or material precondition” (24 and 32-35).
within it. But in the popular culture of the twenty-first century, a third association is perhaps more immediate for some readers. Just like its English equivalent, the Russian word “matritsa” immediately brings to mind the Wachowskis’ 1999 film *The Matrix*. Ivanov’s title therefore gains a further valence as a creator of virtual realities, of visions richer and more convincing than the pale offerings of “the desert of the real” (to recycle the film’s borrowing from Baudrillard).

The Ural matrix becomes a “zone of transformation,” where historical figures, social structures, and even Russia itself can take on new forms:

Until the time of Ivan the Terrible we say “Rus’.” This is the 1580s. But by 1612 the Poles were driven out of “Russia.” What could have happened in the history of our country […] that changed Rus’ into Russia? The killing of Tsarevich Dmitrii? The False Dmitriis? The shameful Rule of the Seven Boyars? These events could not have made Rus’ into Russia. Rus’ became Russia by joining with Siberia. The Urals are the hinge along that joint.89

This framing makes the Urals into the very birthplace of modern Russia, ascribing a supernatural procreative potency to its very landscape. The Urals become a powerful formula whose geographic specificity nurtures transfigurations and gives birth to new moral and social structures while itself remaining stable and unchanging.

The specific character of the Ural matrix, however, does not derive from its geography alone, but also—as in the fiction—from the repressed memory of the local peoples’ ancient belief systems. In an illuminating essay called “Demons of the Subconscious,” Ivanov argues that despite the Christianization of the Urals, nothing but paganism “can explain the ‘Ural

Bradley A. Gorski

matrix’ and how it continues to work.“As an example, Ivanov discusses the pre-Christian worldview depicted on carved bronze medallions unearthed in the Perm region. Ivanov’s analysis of these artifacts, which have become known as the “Perm Animal Style” (“Permskii zverinyi stil’”), leads unexpected onto an explanation of how Ivanov connects artistic representation, trauma, and history:

[The Perm animal style] is not simply “art”—it is an ancient, to us nearly incomprehensible “world system” with its division into separate levels, its elusive blending of forms, its fight with origins, and the dark frozen triumph of its ends.

Terrifying, like the tattoos of hardened criminals, these miniature artifacts draw a picture of the endless and manifold pagan universe.

Ivanov insists that these artifacts work not as primarily aesthetic pieces but as keys to a systematic understanding of the universe. Through aesthetic realization, they make a “nearly incomprehensible ‘world system’” graspable. Implicitly, Ivanov sees his own work in the same way, not as a strictly aesthetic object, but as a way of understanding and enriching the real world. Ivanov’s historical fantasies animate the local land and its history, and by aestheticizing that content, they make it newly accessible for a contemporary audience. In his non-fiction works, Ivanov then projects that aesthetic experience back onto the land, only now not as enchanting fiction, but as fact. As a dual mediator—through both fiction and ostensibly factual description—Ivanov bridges the literary and the real and leads his readers into a space where fictional and real

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90 Ibid., 255. “ничем, кроме язычества, невозможно было объяснить «уральскую матрицу», которая продолжала работать.”

91 Ibid., 260. “Это не просто «художества» — это древняя, почти непонятная нам «система мира» с его членением на разные уровни, с его неуловимым перетеканием обличья в обличье, с его борьбой начал и мрачным, застывшим торжеством финалов. Страшные, как татуировки рецидивистов, эти маленькие изделия рисуют картину бесконечной и многообразной языческой вселенной.”
Chapter 3: On the Edges of Literature

landscapes overlap. “Geography demands geopoetics,” writes Vladimir Abashev, but “once it arises, geopoetics begins to shape geography.”

The next year, Ivanov released a documentary entitled *The Backbone of Russia (Khrebet Rossii)*, which aired in nationwide primetime. In the four-part miniseries, Moscow journalist Leonid Parfenov follows Ivanov around the region’s major sites while the author relates his version of Ural history and culture. As Ivanov speaks, the land comes to life. In the very first minute of the series, Parfenov and Ivanov stand on an island in the Chusovoi Bay, where, as Parfenov tells the viewer, “there is nothing, except history.” Ivanov specifies: “Under Ivan the Terrible this was the land of the Stroganov merchants, and on this island stood a wooden fortress [kreml’].” The camera zooms out, and on the island arises a digitized fortress, cast in a semi-transparent ectoplasmic grey. In similar fashion, throughout the series, Ivanov’s words conjure ghostly structures on top of the physical landscapes, materializing the virtual past into the real present and its material geography.

![Figure 3.1](image-url): On an island in the Chusovaia river, a digitized wooden fortress appears after author Aleksei Ivanov describes it on camera (*The Backbone of Russia*, episode 1).

Significantly, though Ivanov worked as a local historian, a river-rafting guide, and a museum curator, the series’ opening sequence introduces his qualifications in aesthetic, rather than professional, terms: “Aleksei Ivanov has been called the most important Russian writer of

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94 Ibid., “При Иване Грозном здесь земля Строганова, и на этом остров стоит деревянный кремль.”
the twenty-first century. His novels *The Heart of the Parma* and *The Gold of the Rebellion* all but rediscovered the Urals."95 It is his historical fiction, in other words, and not his factual local knowledge, that qualify him to lead Parfenov and the viewer through the strange lands. The miniseries becomes a mediation point that helps connect Ivanov’s literary resource to the extra-literary realms of history and geography. Indeed, *The Backbone of Russia* relentlessly connects (and confuses) fiction and fantasy with history and geography, not only through Ivanov’s imaginative recasting of Ural reality, but also through its very visual language. The series punctuates live action shots with illustrations in a folk-naive style, which are shown as if lifted from the pages of an archival source. Upon closer inspection, however, the illustrations cannot be authentic: they include contemporary toponyms in new orthography, and even certain references to contemporary reality. At one point, Ivanov characterizes the place of fur in the colonial economy by saying, it “was the oil of the sixteenth century,” and the next shot shows an archaized illustration inscribed with the words “Fur — the oil of the 16th century.” While it might come as no surprise to most viewers that the illustrations were made for this film by a contemporary Moscow artist (and to drive the point home, the word for century, “vek” is spelled in new orthography), the presentation of these images as relics from an aestheticized past—nevertheless laden with traces of the present—creates an instability between history and fantasy, between the virtual and the real. This and other techniques throughout the film create a new version of the Urals in which fantasy and history come together in the real landscape.

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95 Ibid. “Алексей Иванов назван самым значительным писателем двадцать-первого века. Его романы «Сердце пармы» и «Золото бунта» буду пере-открыли Урал.”
Chapter 3: On the Edges of Literature

Figure 3.2: A faux-archival illustration that reads “Fur, the oil of the 16th century,” opened with a white-cotton-gloved hand in the lower right corner (The Backbone of Russia, episode 1).

At the same time, the documentary encourages viewers to directly interact with the Ural landscape as it is presented. In what is perhaps its most idiosyncratic choice, the series includes a third host, Iuliia Zaitseva. Zaitseva is introduced as a “universal sportswoman [sportsmenka-universal], who tests all the roads and rivers, rapids and dykes, cliffs and caves along our path.”

96 Ibid. “Юлия Зайцева — спортсменка-универсал, на себе проверяющая дороги и реки, пороги и плотины, скалы и пещеры нашего маршрута. Все они — этапы уральского экстремального многоборья.”

After Ivanov has explained the history of, for instance, a cave where Yermak Timofeyevich’s forces might have spent a winter, Zaitseva shows the viewer how to rock climb to reach the cave. As she demonstrates such “Ural extreme sports,” she speaks directly into the camera, telling viewers details about the land, about the equipment she uses, and about how she approaches each task, clearly inviting the viewer to interact directly with the land. But these demonstrations come only after that land has been filled with historical and fantastical meaning by Ivanov’s narrative.

Neither fully historical fiction, nor a straightforward historical documentary, nor a simple hiking and rafting guide, The Backbone of Russia mediates between all three modalities.
borrows from Ivanov’s literary legitimacy to create a project with historical and sporting aspects that asks audiences to engage both as viewers and as hikers, rock-climbers, kayakers, and so on. At the same time, the aesthetic enchantment of Ivanov’s novels is not to be forgotten. This documentary combines all these aspects and proposes a complex experience that is at once imaginative and interactive. It asks viewers first to project the novels’ fictional enchantment onto the history and current landscape of the Urals, and then invites them to interact directly with the land.

Another of Ivanov’s extra-fictional projects gives readers the opportunity to engage directly with the real-world Urals, unmediated by the televizual format. In 2006, Ivanov along with Zaitseva and his literary agent Il’ia Vilkevich, started the annual *Heart of the Parma* festival in the village of Cherdyn’, which nestles in the forest 400 kilometers north of Perm (an important location in the eponymous novel). According to its press release, the festival celebrates the “land, culture, [and] traditions,” of the northern Perm region by re-creating aspects of the novel’s world.97 Attractions have included bow-and-arrow lessons, trebuchet construction, battle re-enactments, and even a fifteenth-century-style wedding ceremony featuring local brides and grooms. The festival, said Vilkevich, was designed to create “a space in which the traditions and realities of the past transform into the present, and perhaps even into the future.” As these “realities of the past” are derived from Ivanov’s fiction and not from the historical record, the festival asks participants to transform the aesthetic experience of Ivanov’s novels into an interactive experience in the real world. Since its second year, the festival has been partially

funded by the Perm Region Ministry of Culture and has attracted between 10,000 and 25,000 participants annually.\textsuperscript{98}

The festival not only provides tourists an occasion to visit the land, but as a self-conscious (and announced) reconstruction of an imagined past, it actively mediates between fiction and reality. The announced artificiality of the festival admits not so much the impossibility of the recreated past, as its distance from the real surroundings. The festival can create only a pale imitation of the “real” \textit{parma} of its title, providing hints as to how the visitor might imagine that distant and necessarily richer world. To repurpose a phrase from Umberto Eco, the festival “not only produces an illusion, but—in confessing it—stimulates the desire for it.”\textsuperscript{99} Put another way, the festival provides not so much a truly immersive experience of the fifteenth-century Urals, as the opportunity to participate in a collective and imaginative reconstruction of that world, to join in the festival’s imaginative project, not simply as consumers, but as co-creators. All festivalgoers, whether costumed battle re-enactors or passive spectators, are referred to as “participants” (“uchastniki”), emphasizing the collective nature of the imaginative experience. The festival’s effect, in other words, is predicated not on a detached spectator’s belief in the reconstructed world, but on a collective desire to actively imagine the world depicted in the novel. In this way, the festival converts the literary experience of the novel into an interactive, extra-textual, collective project that transforms readers into active audience members.

Such interactive and immersive projects are essential to what Ivanov would later articulate as “success within a corporation called Aleksei Ivanov.” The imaginative collectivity is


based around the author’s literary works, but it is formed by stronger bonds than simple readership. It requires active engagement—what Ivanov calls, variously, “interactivity” and “interpretation”—from audiences whose loyalty and enthusiasm make them eager to occupy various roles. Readers become documentary viewers, who may later turn into hikers; and festival-goers, in their turn, might discover the novels after participating in this or other extra-literary events.

Ivanov’s “corporative” model of success, as shown above, was formulated in response to the relative failure of his attempts to enter the Moscow literary establishment, as well as the relative success of his extra-literary activities in the Urals. Part of the attraction of “a corporation called Aleksei Ivanov” is that it provides an alternative collectivity, opposed to the “literary cliques” of Moscow. In this way, Ivanov’s corporative model of success builds on the author’s provincial provenance, rather than attempting to overcome his peripheral status in the Moscow literary establishment. It also moves away from the center of literature as such and proposes a mode of literary creativity that derives energy other media. In Ivanov’s “corporative” model of literary success, the writer is no longer a strictly literary creator, whose work is limited to the process of writing novels, but a dynamic mediator between the imagined world and the various interactive experiences it might provide. Audiences are likewise recast not as collections of passive and atomized readers, but as something closer to a collective, but fluid, group of likeminded interpreters, all taking part in some aspect of a shared imaginative experience.

CONCLUSION

Aleksei Ivanov’s career trajectory and his pursuit of success have been characterized by his peripheral position in the literary field and in literary geography of post-Soviet Russia. His first
published novels were not only set in the Urals, but they also dealt explicitly with themes of colonialism and loss of local identity. They drew on linguistic, mythological, and historical sources specific to their Ural setting, and they appealed to publishers and critics in the literary mainstream in large part because of their exotic content and form. Consequently, Ivanov was often perceived as a Ural writer. Even as his position within mainstream literature was formulated in monetary terms, it retained the provincializing stamp of his origin. Metaphors like “permskii samorodok” compared him to mineral riches or to a natural resource, which developed untouched by mainstream society. As he pursued literary success in the capital, Ivanov often bristled at the Moscow establishment and emphasized his non-belonging and outsider status. He did this by (perhaps deliberately) flouting the norms of the literary field in his open pursuit of both commercial and critical success. Rebuffed by the most prestigious literary institutions, he rejected the mainstream establishment as conformism and redirected his energies towards a different kind of success.

The new version of literary success that Ivanov subsequently developed was also deeply informed by his position on the peripheries of literature. Not only was it developed in the Urals, far from the literary establishment, it also moved away from literary production itself to explore adjacent forms of media. Ivanov’s extra-literary projects innovate away from literature proper, putting into question a literature-centric model of cultural creativity. But more than that, Ivanov’s innovative vision of literary success recasts the writer as both a progenitor of fictional creations and as a mediator among various forms of imaginative activity. Readers, meanwhile, are transformed into active and engaged audience members, motivated to move among various

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100 The literature-centricity of Russian culture has inspired breathless debates among Slavists and philologists for years. With the introduction of new media landscapes, (briefly) uncensored television, and then the internet, post-Soviet Russia has seen the literature-centric quality of its culture destabilized. For a recent, and relatively balanced, discussion of the legacy and development of this model, see N.V. Kovtun (ed.), Krizis literaturootsentrizma. Utrata identichnosti vs. novye vozmoznosti (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo “Nauka”, 2014).
imaginative experiences, participating, co-creating, and re-envisioning the writer’s original fictional worlds.

By characterizing this vision of literary activity as a “corporative” model of success, Ivanov suggests that the writer stands at the center of a collectivity that keeps audiences engaged beyond initial reading, and invites them to return for film adaptations, festivals, and other activities. This allows Ivanov to expand his vision of success along the edges of literature, such that commercial success in the book market can transfer to other realms of activity, even if it does not necessarily translate to legitimacy within the literary establishment. By working to convert his literary resources into fields around the edges of literature, Ivanov integrates the role of the writer into a broader system of cultural capitalism. He positions his move towards the edges of literature as specifically opposed to the literary mainstream, represented by literary prizes and Moscow “cliques.” Always on the edge of literature, Ivanov develops a mode of literary success that does not require him to abandon his peripheral position, but rather innovates from that position to envision new hybrid forms of literary activity and of audience engagement.
CHAPTER 4
Online Publics as Literary Fact:
Vera Polozkova and Digitized Authorial Self-Creation

One cannot write without a public and without a myth — without a certain public which historical circumstances have made, without a certain myth of literature which depends to a very great extent upon the demand of this public.


INTRODUCTION

In February 2009, the Moscow literary critic Evgeniia Vezhlian posed a surprisingly contentious question on her LiveJournal page: “Next Wednesday,” Vezhlian wrote, referring to the next meeting of the weekly discussion club she hosted, “we will consider the sacramental question ‘Is [Vera] Polozkova a poet?’ The answer seems obvious to me. But there are several points of view.”¹ Indeed, a diversity of opinions surfaced quickly. “Of course she’s a poet,” wrote one user. “No she’s not,” another shot back. If she’s a poet, a third responded, then “Dima Bilan is the height of Russian culture.”² A St. Petersburg bookseller attempted some anecdotal evidence: Polozkova’s first book of poems, he said, was actually among the bestsellers in his shop.³

Another offered an apparently reasonable syllogism, “a person writes poetry, publishes books of her poems, people buy them. What is she?”⁴ Polozkova herself had done little to raise doubts

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² User: igor_bobirev, 26 Feb 2009, ibid. “Дима Билан вообще вершина русской культуры тогда.” Perhaps Russia’s most famous pop star, Dima Bilan has become a synecdoche for the entire industry of commercialized popular culture.

³ User: maccolit, 27 Feb 2009, ibid. “первая книга Полозковой Непоэзание, изданная Геликоном Плюс в Санкт-Петербурге, уже потребовала 3 допечаток по 500 экз. Таким образом совокупный тираж этой книги 1500 экз. И она у нас в бестселлерах.”

about her status as a poet. She had recently published two books of poetry, had just won the “Neformat” prize for poetry, and had been giving interviews in which she called herself a poet.\(^5\)

In fact, Polozkova had been writing verse since she was seventeen and, since around age twenty, had been read by a broader and more loyal audience than much more established Russian poets. If collections by Dmitrii Golynko and Mariia Stepanova, for instance, appeared in print-runs of no more than 2,000–3,000 copies, Polozkova’s every word was read and commented on by more than 10,000 eager fans. The problem, however, was the medium: Polozkova was primarily an internet poet. Her 10,000+ fans were LiveJournal followers.

Despite the fact that Polozkova had successfully transitioned from internet to print format the year before, her social media provenance remained suspect. “It’s a subculture,” read one answer to Vezhlian’s question, the implication clearly being: online poetry is not poetry writ large.\(^6\) Just because someone writes in verse, read another comment, even if she publishes, doesn’t make her a poet.\(^7\) Such comments make clear the anxieties energizing the ever more heated debate around Polozkova: what is the definition of a poet, and how does it intersect with the digital world? Is an online poet still a poet? Does an online audience have the authority to recognize and consecrate poets in the way that the more analog literary world has traditionally claimed for itself? As the discussion turned to broader questions about definitions and authority in a technologically changing world, Vezhlian’s page found itself in Yandex’s list of the 30 hottest topics in the Russian blogosphere (a point that, inevitably, also made its way into the

\(^5\) In fact many interviewers start by asking this very question, to which Polozkova unfailingly responds in the affirmative. See Avdotia Smirnova and Tatiana Tolstaya, “Vera Polozkova,” Shkola zlosloviia, No. 214, 27 Sep 2010, accessed 15 Apr 2017: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVSbL6lhG2s


\(^7\) User: zavtornik 25 Feb 2009, ibid. “по таким критериям Маринина писатель и Рубальская поэт! А еще сейчас издают книжки текстов всяких музыкальных групп...”
The debate soon spilled over onto the broader internet and even inspired a spat of articles in respectable print outlets like *Literaturnaia gazeta*, *Znamia*, and *Voprosy literatury.* As Polozkova’s legitimacy was questioned, so was the integration of new media technologies into the literary sphere. An internet poet is not a true poet, the logic goes, because the internet is outside of literature, not a real part of the literary process. In Vezhlian’s words, “A legitimate poet is one who goes through the poetic world to find readers” ("*idet cherez poeticheskuiu sredu k chitateliam*") and not one who finds her way into the “poetic world” by finding readers online. Writing in OpenSpace.ru the following week, Il’ia Kukulin suggested that the debate around Polozkova heralded a “coming repartition [*griadushchii peredel*] of the literary field” that would “bring the idea of publicity into poetry.”

While I would argue that publicity has never been far removed from poetry or literature more generally, Kukulin is correct in his assessment that the phenomenal popularity of Vera Polozkova and her poetry marked a fundamental realignment of the poet, her texts, and her audience. This realignment developed out of audience-building strategies native to the new environments of social media, where a new kind of reading public was formed, one that existed specifically online. These online publics were then made an integral part of the process of poetic creation. In this way, the debate around Polozkova marks a moment when the writers and critics who make up what Vezhlian called the “poetic world” were confronted with elements of social media and online publics as apparently

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8 User: marinnobot, 28 Feb 2009, ibid. “Ваш блог попал в ТОР-30 на Яндексе самых популярных тем в блогосфере.”


new, but already integral parts of the literary process. It was this confrontation that energized the debate, but as I argue here, it was a confrontation already several years in the making, traceable to the earliest intersections between literature and the web.

In this chapter, I trace the growing interrelationship between the internet and literary creation in post-Soviet Russia. In the first section, I argue that over the 1990s and 2000s the internet transitioned from an ancillary space of marketing and publicity, to a paratextual apparatus, and finally to an integral aspect of the creation of literary texts themselves. In this trajectory, I suggest that the internet’s transforming place in literature can be productively understood through a set of insights from Russian Formalist thinkers. The role of the internet in contemporary Russian literature begins as a clear case of what Boris Eikhenbaum called “the literary everyday” or “literaturnyi byt,” that is, an apparatus adjacent to literature that aids in its production and dissemination, but which remains outside of literature proper, in the liminal spaces that Boris Dubin has labeled either “not yet literature” or “already not literature.” By the early 2000s, however, the internet becomes a part of literature itself, or what Iurii Tynianov called a “literary fact.” This transition—from extra-literary apparatus to integral part of literature—is among the drivers of literary evolution. Tracing the dynamic relationship between literature and the web in this particular context reveals at least one possible mechanism for how technology can help shape new literary forms. As authors incorporated the new technology into their literary process, they also exploited the internet’s unique affordance for audience

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12 This last term, “literary evolution,” is also a Formalist phrase, most prominently explored in Tynianov’s eponymous essay. I explore this concept more fully in the introduction to this dissertation. For Tynianov’s original usage, see Iurii Tynianov, “Literaturnaia evoliutsiia,” in Ushakin, ed., Formal’nyi metod, Tom I: Sistemy.
interaction. In other words, through the use of new technology, contemporary writers have
developed new ways of interacting with audiences, and of integrating their audiences into their
creative process. Building off the work of Michael Warner, I call internet audiences “online
publics.”¹³ The creation and integration of these online publics into the literary process goes
hand-in-hand with the introduction of the internet technologies that make them possible. In the
second section of the chapter, I return to Vera Polozkova to show how she has mobilized social
media to cultivate an active and engaged online public that is integral to her success as one of the
most read poets of the young generation. I then show how she integrates communication
strategies from her social media experience into her poetic texts. I argue that the unique poetic
voice and subject position that distinguishes Polozkova’s verse is deeply indebted to her use of
internet technologies and her engagement with her online public. In this way, I demonstrate how
the internet affects the very fabric of literary production. Polozkova’s forms of writing, steeped
as they are in internet culture, reverberate with formal innovations that incorporate the basic
tenets of social media: dialogue and co-creation. In this way, I argue that the internet of the
1990s—a clear instance of literaturnyi byt, aiding in the production and dissemination of
literature—by the mid-2000s had become a literary fact at the heart of literary production and
evolution.

FROM BYT TO FAKT: THE INTERNET IN POST-SOVIET LITERATURE

Literature appeared on the Russian internet almost as soon as the infrastructure provided the
possibility. But online verbal production remained largely outside the mainstream literary
establishment, often referred to half-derisively as “setevaia literatura” or “seteratura,” both

translatable as “web literature.” In a 1998 article on the phenomenon, Sergei Kornev writes that the distinction between online and offline literary production is starkest specifically in highbrow or literary fiction and poetry. In more marginal genres such as “science fiction, fantasy and cyberpunk […] the border between print and web literature is practically unnoticeable: one and the same collection of authorities and significant events, the same critical criteria; the maestros of this genre actively assimilate the online space and feel like fish in water.” But the situation is different, Kornev continues, with “literature that one could call serious or high-artistic (avant-garde, advanced mainstream, etc.).” In this realm, “web literature is sealed within itself and closed off both to ‘high literature’ and to ‘the cutting edge of literature.’ It is a kind of parallel world, whose habitués (especially young authors) are often accused, not without basis, of dilettantism, unoriginality, imitation, of the absence of any sort of original cultural program.”

Kornev observes that both published print authors and mainstream literary critics explicitly distance themselves from the literary production appearing on the new online platforms.

This tendency on the part of established authors and critics to reject web literature is informed by skepticism as well as by an instinct for territorial defense. For example, the published poet and print critic Dmitrii Kuz’min, writing for Literaturnaia gazeta in the same year, made a stark distinction between the “professionals” who publish in print outlets (including

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15 Ibid. “Иначе обстоит дело с литературой, которую можно назвать серьёзной и высокохудожественной (авангард, продвинутый эмнайстрим, и т.д.). […] здесь сетевая литература во многом замкнута на себя и отторжена как от ‘большой литературы’, так и от ‘переднего края литературы’. Это своего рода параллельный мир, обитателей которого (особенно молодых авторов) не без основания упрекают в дилетантизме, вторичности, подражательности, в отсутствии сколь-нибудь оригинальной культурной программы.”
himself) and the “marginals” who write online.\(^\text{16}\) His analysis of the situation repeats the specifically territorial metaphor of a “parallel world” from Kornev’s analysis:

The pioneers of literature on the Internet – likely from the best of intentions – have succeeded in two or three years of received allowance to build a kind of parallel world, the denizens of which mostly do not suspect (or pretend that they do not suspect) the existence of literature beyond its limits.\(^\text{17}\)

For Kuz’min, the internet is home to “mass literature and dilettante composition” as opposed to the professionalism of print periodicals and book publishing. Though he mitigates the inherent condescension of this appraisal by conceding that online writing, mass literature, and dilettantism have “their own, extraordinarily important functions in culture and society,” he nevertheless maintains that those functions amount to playing a supporting role to what he (along with Kornev) calls “serious” literature.\(^\text{18}\)

Kuz’min’s distinction between professionals and marginals became paradigmatic, with online writers like Misha Verbitskii and Iulia Fridman proudly reclaiming the banner of “marginals” as they advocate for internet creativity.\(^\text{19}\) Both professional and amateur writers, both skeptics and advocates of web literature for the most part all maintained the strict separation between online and print literature. They saw online literary production at best as a para-literary


\(^{18}\) Ibid. “Потому речь не о том, чтобы отказать массовой литературе или дилетантским сочинениям в праве на существование – у них есть свои чрезвычайно важные функции в культуре и в обществе, функции, которые серьезное искусство сегодня нести не в состоянии.”

phenomenon with, perhaps one day, the potential to become an integral part of the literary process. In Kuz’mín’s analysis, *seteratura* could not yet be considered literature because it was still “led by people far removed from literature.” But, he continues, “this situation is changing quickly” with the advent of author websites, Kuz’mín writes, professional writers are beginning to experiment with the online format, bringing the internet closer to the literary process itself.

In these and many other articles from the late 1990s, literary critics define online verbal production as something outside of (if adjacent or parallel to) literature as such. *Seteratura* might well be classified as “*slovesnost’*” or “verbal production,” to use two of Tynianov’s favored terms, but not yet literature, at least for those already within the literary establishment. By labeling online verbal production as “not-yet-literture,” authors and critics were not merely denigrating *seteratura*, but were in fact delimiting the boundaries and contours of literature itself, at least as they saw it. In this way, these debates about the place of *seteratura*, about its marginal nature and its non-integration into the body of mainstream or highbrow poetry and prose, anticipate the arguments around Vera Polozkova’s status as a poet.

To borrow from cultural theorist Boris Dubin, the literary establishment consistently defines itself against what it sees as its own two boundaries: “not-yet-literature” and “already-not-literature.” What is within these boundaries “counts” as literature, while what lies beyond

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20 Kuz’mín, “Komp’iuter v ozhidanii pisatelei.” “до сих пор русской литературой в Интернете ведают люди достаточно далекие от литературы.”

21 Ibid. “Но эта ситуация быстро меняется: за последние несколько месяцев появилась первая в России персональная Интернет-страничка писателя (поэта Александра Левина), пристально следят за Интернетом и, кажется, готовят собственные проекты Виктор Кривулин и Аркадий Драгомощенко…”


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them is left outside of literature, defined instead as part of the surrounding culture. With these terms, Dubin re-conceptualizes the frontiers between two concepts developed by Formalist theory in the late 1920s: _literaturnyi byt_ and _literaturnyi fakt_. Coined by Boris Eikhenbaum, _literaturnyi byt_ refers to a relatively untranslatable category that comprises the institutions, interpersonal relations, and verbal production surrounding literature, but still outside of it; it can be roughly translated as the “literary everyday.” By contrast, a _literaturnyi fakt_ or “literary fact,” as defined by Iurii Tynianov (the term was also used by Eikhenbaum), is anything that integrally comprises the historically contingent understanding of “literature” as a category. If literature is made up of various literary facts, then it is surrounded and influenced by _literaturnyi byt_. For the Formalists, some aspects of _literaturnyi byt_ are always in the process of becoming part of literature, while parts of literature are always in the process of moving away from literature proper and fading into the surrounding culture. This constant movement between the two categories defines the dynamic and integral system of literature and is understood as one of the major drivers of literary evolution.

At any given time, explains Tynianov in his essay on “Literary Fact,” any critic might believe he knows what is and is not a literary fact. “He’ll say that such-and-such has no relation to literature, is a fact of _byt_ or of the private life of the poet, while such-and-such is precisely a literary fact.” But those who have lived through more than one literary revolution look at things

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24 Eikhenbaum and Tynianov developed these issues in a series of essays published in the late 1920s, including Eikhenbaum’s “Literaturnyi byt” (1927), “Literatura i pisatel’” (1927), “Gogol’ i delo literatury” (1928) and “Literaturnaia domashnost’” (1929) all collected in his _Moi vremennik: Slovesnost’. Nauka. Kritika. Smes’_. (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1929); and Tynianov’s “Literaturnyi fakt” (1924) and “O literaturnoi evoliutsii” (1927), both reprinted in Ushakin, ed., _Formal’nyi metod, Tom I_.

differently. They notice that “a certain phenomenon was not a literary fact, and has now become
one, and vice versa.”²⁶ Journals and almanacs, for instance, have long prehistories, but only in
Tynianov’s time had they become recognized as literary works in themselves. Certain wordplay,
Tynianov continues, in Karamzin’s time was considered literary, but was now no longer counted
as such. Such movements in and out of the category of literature change the very aspect of
literature as it is understood at various historical moments.²⁷ Importantly, Tynianov emphasizes
that these changes do not merely affect “the frontiers of literature, its ‘periphery,’ its
borderlands,” but also its very center:

It is not that in the center of literature there moves and evolves one original, successive
stream, and only along the edges do new phenomena flow in, — no, these same new
phenomena occupy the very center, and the center moves out to the periphery.²⁸

Throughout the post-Soviet period, Russian literaturnyi byt transformed at an
extraordinary pace, including many of the specific shifts analyzed in previous chapters—the
introduction of the capitalist book market and statistics on bestsellers (analyzed in chapter one),
changes in prize culture (chapter two), and the evolving relationships between literary and extra-
literary spheres (chapter three). The introduction of internet technologies represents another
decisive shift in the literaturnyi byt of post-Soviet Russia. These new technologies, as we have
seen, were often carefully separated from literature itself by mainstream critics; however, one

²⁶ Ibid. “такое-то явление не было литературным фактом, а теперь стало, и наоборот.”
²⁷ See also Boris Eikhenbaum, “Literaturnaia domashnost’” [1929], in Ushakin, ed., Formal’nyi metod, Tom II:
Materialy, 641.
²⁸ “Тynianov, “Literaturnyi fakt,” 666. И текущими здесь оказываются не только границы литературы, ее
‘периферия’, ее пограничные области - нет, дело идет о самом ‘центре’: не то что в центре литературы
движется и эволюционирует одна исконная, преемственная струя, а только по бокам наполняются новые
явления, - нет, эти самые новые явления занимают именно самый центр, а центр съезжает в периферию.”
might argue that the apparent necessity of such rhetorical separation already betrays the influence of the internet within the literary process itself. At the very least, the new technologies could be said to have provoked anxieties over the possibility of such influence. Over the next several years, online literary production became more integrated into the literary world at large, coming to occupy a central position in literature proper by the time the debates around Vera Polozkova’s status as a poet unfolded. The transformation of this particular aspect of literaturnyi byt into a literary fact was facilitated not only by writers, but also—and perhaps even more so—by readers, whose presence both on and offline was able to mediate between the worlds of online and print literature.

When Kuz’min pointed to the upcoming websites of authors and poets as harbingers of a new truly literary internet, he counted on sites built by writers themselves to integrate the new technology into “serious” literature. But while such projects did indeed experiment with the possibilities of online authorial presence, a parallel development, initiated largely by readers and fans, did at least as much to integrate the online space into the broader system of contemporary Russian literature. In fact, the most visited author websites of the early Russian internet were created not by the authors themselves, nor by critics, publishers or publicists, but by amateur readers who built social communities around popular texts. As authors noticed these websites, and as internet access and literacy grew, these fan sites began to connect the marginal environment of online literary communities with the “serious” literary mainstream. By the mid-2000s, when Vera Polozkova gained prominence, such fan communities had helped the literary internet build a bridge between creators and readers of print literature. As Polozkova built her own community, she benefited from structures and expectations developed through such online publics. Among the strategies that propelled Polozkova’s rise to prominence were methods of
audience engagement that had been developed in an ad hoc manner through such online communities, in dialogues between writers and readers, often hosted on fan-built sites. In fits and starts, this process integrated the new online literaturnyi byt into the literary mainstream.

To be sure, the various ways in which the internet has become central to literary production since the late 1990s cannot be exhaustively explored through the development of such reader communities concentrated on single authors. Literary portals such as Vavilon, proza.ru, and stikhi.ru provide authors (both aspiring and established) outlets for publication; review sites such as FantLab, IMHOnet, Livelib, and Read.ru offer readers platforms to exchange opinions and practice amateur criticism; and social networking giants like Vkontakte and Facebook have more recently provided avenues for creating social groupings around and among writers, publications, and audiences. In tracing the development of the literary internet through online publics devoted to single authors, I intend to focus first on the role of the reader and communities of readers, and second on that of the writer. Early online publics related to print literature were often started by devoted readers. Soon, however, authors began to integrate these online environments into their self-presentation, imagining them as extensions of their fictional worlds. By the time Polozkova began to create her own literary persona, she did so first and foremost through her online public. In order to illustrate the transforming role of such online environments, I will briefly examine sites devoted to Viktor Pelevin and Boris Akunin, before returning to Vera Polozkova and her LiveJournal community. The sites devoted to Pelevin and Akunin exemplify important stages along the gradual integration of internet technologies into mainstream literary production, or in other words, along the trajectory from literary byt to fakt. Over the course of this transition, the role of the online environment—through the combined efforts of readers (or web hosts), the authors themselves, and increasingly cohesive online
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publics—became less peripheral and more integrated into the fabric of the literary process itself.

By the time Kuz’m’in and other critics began discussing the possibility of author websites in the late 1990s, Viktor Pelevin was already among Russia’s most famous writers. As the author of such works as “Prince of Gosplan” (1991) and Generation ‘P’ (1999), which explicitly explored the influence of digital technologies on both real life and narrative forms, Pelevin was an ideal candidate for an online authorial presence. With this in mind, the web designer Artemii Lebedev bought the pelevin.ru URL and publicly invited the author to collaborate on his website: “Vitya [diminutive of Viktor]! When you find some time, give me a call so we can finish the site. People are waiting and nothing’s happening. My number: 229-88-33. – Tema [diminutive of Artemii].”

Lebedev’s message is a mystification—he had never begun working on a site with Pelevin—but Pelevin’s readers were indeed waiting for his online presence to materialize. In 2000, one such reader, Aleksei Andreev, a web pioneer and an active participant in the seteratura debates outlined above, could wait no longer. After reading Pelevin’s work, Andreev set about creating a site dedicated to the author and his fiction. In his detailed log of the site, Andreev chronicles its development from a simple repository of texts, to a much more interactive site, capable of generating social connections around Pelevin’s works.

The first several entries in the log mark the inspiration for Andreev’s project (“reading The Life of Insects and ‘Prince of Gosplan’” (23 June 2000)) as well as the technical aspects of collecting and encoding Pelevin’s basic texts (“began the global formatting of texts into HTML” (27 June 2000); “Found many more of Pelevin’s texts on the Internet as well as much


30 The site’s news archive can be found at “Arkhiv novostei,” Sait tvorchestva Viktora Pelevina, accessed 15 Apr 2017: http://pelevin.nov.ru/news/. Subsequent citations of this archive are given in-line with the date in parentheses.
information about him” (28 June 2000)). In its earliest incarnation, the site was a simple library of Pelevin’s works, accompanied by minimal paratextual resources: links to publicly available interviews, short author bio, etc. But very early on, even before adding links enabling readers to buy hard copies of Pelevin’s books, Andreev built his first interactive feature—a guest book. “Now there is a space to share opinions about what you’ve read,” he wrote on 2 July 2000. Early the next year, Andreev added more interactive features, “Chat” and “Forum” (7 January 2001), and in another year he announced the first real-world “Meeting for visitors of the site of Viktor Pelevin’s works” (9 February 2002).

Despite being an active readers’ community, and even an authorized repository of online versions of Pelevin’s texts, the site has never officially been endorsed by Pelevin, or benefited from his direct involvement in its creation, design, or maintenance. The “Chat,” “Forum,” and “Guest Book” features help the site create an amateur-critical community of readers, but that community intersects only minimally with the author, and it does not appear to influence Pelevin’s process of creation. In the following years, the site developed two sections specifically devoted to creative writing: “Viktor Olegovich™,” which comprises the creative production of “Viktor Olegovich [Pelevin]’s fans devoted to the author or his works,” and the “Sushi-Bar,” which hosts original short stories and poetry written by Pelevin’s fans on any topic. Even as these ancillary creative projects developed, they did not include the creative production (or critical commentary) of Pelevin himself, distinctly separating this online fan production from the writer’s own literary process.

The site’s lack of interaction with Pelevin could be read as yet another example of the author’s retiring public persona. At the center of the site, which contains all his creative works, his fans’ readings, responses, and even creative engagement, Pelevin himself is conspicuously
absent, recreating, perhaps intentionally, the absent signifier at the center of many of his novels. Pelevin has never accepted Lebedev’s invitation to create his own author site, nor has he evinced interest in doing so independently. Rather, he seems content to allow Andreev and his other readers to dominate the online presence of his work. Though he has stopped short of endorsing Andreev’s site, Pelevin and his publisher have cooperated in allowing Andreev to host the author’s texts for online readers free of charge. Nevertheless, this cooperation remains outside the process of literary creation, distinctly separated from the production or internal logic of Pelevin’s literary work. It would take a more actively playful creative sensibility to bring the forms of the reader site and the author site into more direct contact with the literary process itself.

In 1998, the unexpected appearance of a new kind of Russian bestseller and its mysterious author B. Akunin provided the literary internet with an new source of fascination. Once again, designer Artemii Lebedev jumped at the opportunity to create an online presence for an already successful print author. This time the author took the bait. Grigorii Chkhartishvili, who stood behind the pseudonym B. Akunin, teamed up with Lebedev to create an innovative literary website. Both an author site and a digital extension of B. Akunin’s fictional world, akunin.ru makes no mention of the real life Chkhartishvili or the real post-Soviet world outside of Akunin’s literary works. Instead, it maintains the fiction of Akunin’s nineteenth-century authorship by portraying Akunin as real (albeit with constant irony). The site claims copyright “1856–2001 Boris Akunin (text) and Artemii Lebedev (design)” and provides a portrait of the

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31 On the absent presence as the center and subject of Pelevin’s fictional worlds, see Meghan Vicks, “Viktor Pelevin and the Void,” in Brigit Beumers, ed., Russia’s new fin-de-siècle: Contemporary culture between past and present (Chicago: Intellect, 2013), pp. 47–63.
author in the washed-out style of nineteenth-century daguerreotype. On closer inspection, the “daguerreotype” turns out to be a watercolor portrait, which reveals its own fictionality in much the same way as the patent absurdity of the copyright creates an instability between the listed dates, on the one hand, and the twenty-first century intellectual property (a website) it purports to protect, on the other. The site does not provide any resolution to this conflict, but instead provides links to online versions of several of Akunin’s novels, where the play between a fictionalized past and that fiction’s own self-awareness in the present is played out over hundreds of pages.

Just as Chkhartishvili and Lebedev launched their Akunin website, several fan sites appeared devoted to the pseudonymous author and his fictional creation. Chkhartishvili quickly began to take an active part in these online communities as well. The most prominent of such sites, fandorin.ru, borrows its name from Akunin’s fictional protagonist, Erast Fandorin, and partakes of the same parchment-and-calligraphy aesthetic that characterizes akunin.ru. Launched in the same year as the author’s own site (2000), fandorin.ru picks up on Chkhartishvili’s playful tension between fiction and reality, offering, alongside a “Dossier on Mr. Akunin,” a “Dossier on Mr. Fandorin.” The site also links to akunin.ru with a playful note written by Chkhartishvili himself, in the guise of Akunin.

Unlike Pelevin, Chkhartishvili takes an active part in many of the discussions and decisions that have shaped the fandorin.ru site. In a 2009 interview, Chkhartishvili said that he visits the site almost daily, answering readers’ questions and inserting himself into discussions—

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usually in character, as Akunin.\textsuperscript{33} In so doing, Chkhartishvili extends the world of his pseudonymous author further into the world of his readers, pervading the online environment with his fiction, its characters, and its atmosphere. Readers on the forum at fandorin.ru describe the site and the interactions it affords as an “alternative universe” with the same “spirit of tolerance” and “general civilized tone” that characterizes the fictional world of Fandorin.\textsuperscript{34} Many readers are drawn into the online community by a desire to be part of that world. One contributor to an Akunin forum explains that he joined the forum after his “life changed radically when I read the first book about EFP [Erast Petrovich Fandorin].” For this user, participating in the forum gives him a chance to “be a simple inhabitant of that world,” which he finds emotionally fulfilling.\textsuperscript{35} This user’s emotional attachment to this online community suggests that it is precisely the extension of the literary world that invites interactivity. In other words, by extending the values, atmospheres, and affects of Akunin’s novels into the online community, the site invites users to participate in an extension of the literary world, and by doing so to fill out or even create the online extension of that literary world.

With such active audience engagement, Chkhartishvili incorporates readers more fully into his literary project, while at the same time extending that project into the online space of his own official website and several other fan sites. Such an active online audience begins to form a community, a public, that for Chkhartishvili becomes a literary project itself. For Chkhartishvili, the internet remains outside of the creation of his novels themselves, and instead forms a parallel


\textsuperscript{34} Chkhartishvili, “Akunin otvechaet.”

literary project, which shares much in tone and also content with the world of his novels. The pseudonymous Akunin occupies both worlds, as does the fictional Fandorin. At the same time, the fan community, begun without the author’s initiative, becomes incorporated into Chkhartishvili’s broader literary project. Though this online public has not directly influenced Chkhartishvili’s literary production (it has not, for instance, made explicit appearances in subsequent Akunin novels), Chkhartishvili’s active role in the community—often as the pseudonymous Akunin—already suggest a much more intimate connection between the online community and a mainstream (print) author’s literary project.

Whether or not Chkhartishvili’s online interactions as Akunin constitute a “literary fact” in Tynianov’s sense, they certainly seem to indicate a further integration of internet technologies into the literary mainstream in a way that moves away from distinctly separated literaturnyi byt and towards something closer to a necessary aspect of the process of literary creation itself. However, as Tynianov emphasized, a strict demarcation between the categories of byt and fakt, is hardly the point. Rather, it is tracing the dynamic between the two that can facilitate analysis of literary evolution, as literature itself transforms in constant interaction with extra-literary factors. Chkhartishvili’s active engagement with his audience brings his online presence into closer contact with the worlds created in his published literature. Through the online space, Chkhartishvili not only finds a way to interact directly with readers, but he also interacts as a literary creation, as Akunin. By projecting a literary world beyond the bounds of his novels, Chkhartishvili fosters an online public around the idea of participating in and filling out that literary world.

With the growth of social media, this kind of online public of devoted and active audience members became an essential aspect of a new kind of literary success, one that
combined audience interaction and online media in the creation of compelling authorial personae. When Vera Polozkova initiated her online presence in 2003, she built on audience engagement strategies developed through the author websites and online publics analyzed above. But in contrast to the text-based sites of Pelevin’s and Akunin’s readers, Polozkova’s online presence would, from the very beginning, exist on social media. Her online persona, her audience, as well as her creative texts would be created alongside one another in mutual interaction from the very beginning.

POLOZKOVA’S PUBLIC

When Vera Polozkova entered university, she already wanted to become a famous poet. Or, more precisely, as she would later put it in an interview, she had long been writing poetry, and now she “really wanted to be famous” (“ochen’ khotelos’ byt’ znamenitoi”). In other words, Polozkova’s understanding of success, from the very beginning, incorporated an aspect of fame perhaps more characteristic of celebrity culture; for Polozkova, success was based largely on finding and building an audience. That audience would soon become the loyal readers through whom she would come to the attention of the broader literary establishment, win the “Neformat” prize for poetry, and find her way into the poetic world. Instead of submitting her poetry to thick journals, reading her work publicly, or building literary connections, the young Polozkova turned to a new medium: LiveJournal, one of the first social media platforms to become popular in Russia, where she opened an account under the name “vero4ka.” Her first post in this medium


37 Because of typographical resemblance, the numeral “4” is often used to replace “ч” (the letter “ch”) in Russian internet orthography. Polozkova’s LiveJournal username has since changed to “mantrabox,” and she has largely
mixes tonalities and tropes characteristic of young poets with those typical of young internet users: she asserts her presence to a higher power and her right to a voice (both common poetic tropes), while also confessing her confusion with LiveJournal’s settings, all in a youthful, naïve tone, which she finishes off with emoticons:

Lord, Lord, well here I am. I don’t understand anything about the settings, I’ll figure it out gradually. But now I at least have the right to a voice in this remarkable place. The rest comes with the package. :))

After this initial post Polozkova became a very active LiveJournal user, writing on her own blog and commenting on others’, following other users and inviting them to follow her. She also made her grand poetic aspirations clear. Several of her earliest posts are in verse, and one from her first year ends with the lines:

And, if my intuition doesn’t lie
Despite the hurricanes and landslides
My verses, like precious wines,
Will find their time. (15 May 2003)

transitioned to other platforms, first Vkontakte, and now Facebook. Nevertheless, all of her LiveJournal posts both as “vero4ka” and as “mantrabox” can still be found at mantrabox.livejournal.com. Subsequent references to this blog are given in the following format: Polozkova, LiveJournal, [date of entry].

38 Polozkova, LiveJournal, 3 Jan 2003. “Боже, Боже, ну вот я и здесь. Ничего не понятно с настройками, буду разбираться постепенно. Но у меня теперь есть хотя бы право голоса в этом замечательном месте. Остальное - прилагается в комплекте. :))”
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The last two lines are borrowed from Marina Tsvetaeva’s 1913 poem, “To my verses, written so early” (“Моим стихам, написанным так рано”), as Polozkova herself explains in a footnote. More than a simple allusion, this intertext points to Polozkova’s own poetic ambition. In Tsvetaeva’s poem, the lyrical hero worries that her poems sit “Amidst the dust of bookshops / And never purchased there by anyone.” At the same time—and specifically in the lines Polozkova chooses to cite—she expresses a deep confidence in her own calling as a poet, in the strength of her verses, and in the world’s eventual recognition of these facts. By borrowing these lines, Polozkova not only aligns herself with a recognized poet in the Russian canon, but also expresses a similar confidence in her own future recognition. However, instead of waiting for eventual external acknowledgment (as Tsvetaeva did), Polozkova took more active steps to propel herself to prominence. She set about actively building her audience, an online public that would both read and contribute to her texts as she developed her poetic voice.

Though she began building her audience with the goal of gaining a wide readership and thereby becoming famous, from the beginning she did so through creative means. Alongside updates on her real life, she posted ideas for film scripts, imagined dialogues, and created characters, inviting her readers to take part in her imaginary games. It is worth remembering that Polozkova began her blog in 2003, long before the creation of Facebook or Twitter, when the conventions and capabilities of social media were embryonic at best even for the most competent users. LiveJournal was among the first platforms—and certainly the most popular in Russia—that allowed users to interact directly with each other while also maintaining their own blog.


40 Here, I rely on Vladimir Nabokov’s translation in Simon Karlinsky and Alfred Appel (eds.), The Bitter air of exile: Russian writers in the West, 1922–1972 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 72. In the original, these lines read: “Разбросанным в пыли по магазинам (Где их никто не брал и не берет!)”
space under a single user’s control. Polozkova quickly intuited that tagging other users would encourage them to comment, not only adding to her audience, but also contributing to the text of her blog itself. As she activated her fledgling audience, she also involved them explicitly in her creative play. In the first post that attracted significant commentary, the 17-year-old Polozkova imagines what would happen if she were a boy (“Esli by ia byla mal’chikom”), and what kind of boy she would be. After describing how the imagined character would dress, act, how much money he would make, where he would travel, she begins to describe how he would interact with her followers. For example, she writes:

I would pat Topor [one of Polozkova’s early followers] on the shoulder paternally and would think of him as my little brother.41

With her female friends, Polozkova imagines various and literature-inspired love affairs:

With Trepa, we’d be Bonnie and Clyde; with Dasha Chernova, Tristan and Isolde; with Olya Savina, Romeo and Juliet; with Kristina, Master and Margarita, with Inna, Tomas and Sabina from “The Unbearable Lightness.”42

Though many commenters beg Polozkova to stay female (“I’m up to my ears in love with you as a girl, and here you’re a boy…”; “if you were a boy, then there would be no Verochka-girl”), many others participate in the fantasy instead.43 A commenter by the name of “galiya” writes that she would shyly look away and feign disinterest if she passed the male-Polozkova in the halls of

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42 Ibid. “С Трепой мы были бы Bonnie и Клайдом, с Дашей Черновой - Тристаном и Изольдой, с Олей Савиной - Ромео и Джульеттой, с Кристиной - Мастером и Маргаритой, с Инной - Томашем и Сабиной из “Невыносимой легкости” Кундеры.”

the university.\textsuperscript{44} Another, Khait, responds in verse, imagining a basketball game between himself and Polozkova’s character, which turns into a show of dominance over the imagined rival:

and I would shake your hand
only I would be looking away
I would beat you in basketball
and if you resisted, tried
to call fouls and act like
the ball went out off me
I would make an example out of you
in the process of which I’d throw you down
To the inexpressible surprise of the onlookers
and then would come up to make peace
and would say falsely – like, I’m sorry,
you know, in the heat of the fight, blah-blah-blah
but I would never drink with you
even though we’d have an apparently normal relationship\textsuperscript{45}

Instead of bristling at Khait’s somewhat disturbing aggression, Polozkova actively encouraged this and similar responses, engaging users in imaginative dialogues that both build connections with her audience and contribute details to her own created character. Indeed, many of her posts

\textsuperscript{44} User: galiya, ibid. “если бы ты была мальчиком, я бы встречала тебя на факультете и отводила глаза, делая независимый вид. правда, ни к чему бы это не привело.”

\textsuperscript{45} In the original, khait’s response reads: “а я бы с тобой здоровался за руку, / тока при этом отворачивая лицо / обыгрывал бы тебя в баскетбол / а если ты сопротивлялась пытались / втирать про штрафные и типа что / мяч ушел в аут от меня -- / устраивал бы с тобой показательные драки / в процессе которых валял бы тебя / к невыразимому сюрпризу окружающих. / потом подходил бы мириться / и говорил притворно - что мол извини / знаю в пылу борьбы и бла-бла-бла / но никогда бы не пил с тобой / хотя у нас вроде бы были нормальные отношения” (User: khait, ibid.).
inspire creative responses, often in verse, to which she unfailingly responds with praise. She herself often asks her readers for their opinions, encouraging a playful creative-critical community around the production of sometimes poetic, sometimes prosaic collective texts.

The texts themselves, as well as Polozkova’s mode of interaction in her early posts, seem at least as much intended to build community as to create verbal art. But it would be a mistake to completely separate the two. Polozkova’s texts are creative artifacts, meant to conjure into being not so much their referential subject matter as the community to which they are addressed. As all texts do, Polozkova’s create and shape their own addressees, their own audience. Like any public utterance or literary work—novel, poem, or other verbal creation—the early texts on Polozkova’s blog invite certain readers in, distance others, and define the terms of engagement. Though nearly all texts work to define their audience, the specific social media setting of Polozkova’s verbal creation allows her audience to materialize, to respond, and to fill out her texts in real time.

In this sense Polozkova’s LiveJournal, especially in its earliest incarnation, can be seen as a project in the formation of what Michael Warner has called a public. “A public,” writes Warner, “is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than the discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed.” For Warner, myriad publics overlap and intersect within the fragmented space often referred to as the “public sphere.” Public speech is then defined as speech directed towards both its immediate

46 Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 67.

47 Perhaps the most thorough and influential theorization of the public sphere in relation to literature, and one against which Warner argues, comes from Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society [1962], trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
addressee and a broader public. Within this framework, all public speech addresses and reshapes an already existing public or works to form a new public of its own. Polozkova’s LiveJournal provides a concrete realization of the latter possibility. Instead of turning to existing publics, such as those around thick journals or other institutions of the poetic world, Polozkova used social media to create her own public, to conjure into existence an audience through the very texts she addressed to that audience. In order for her texts to exist, in other words, she first needed to create an audience who might read them, to whom she could then address them.

Beyond this, Warner argues, developing a public is also an exercise in poesis, or world-building:

> There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation: not just through its discursive claims—of the kind that can be said to be oriented to understanding—but through the pragmatics of its speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address, temporality, mise-en-scène, citational field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on. Its circulatory fate is the realization of that world. Public discourse says not only “Let a public exist” but “Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way.”

Polozkova’s particular approach to building her public actively engaged her audience in collaborative creativity. She invited her followers not only to read, but also to contribute in their own creative voice. In this way, Polozkova realized an important potentiality of social media: each audience member has a voice, and activating that voice is an essential aspect of cultivating a loyal and engaged audience. Today, Polozkova’s page on Vkontakte (the Russian competitor of

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48 Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 114.
Facebook), which is followed by over 145,000 users, includes a section specifically devoted to the “Poems of the Participants of the Group” (“Stikhi uchastnikov gruppy”), who have together contributed over 22,000 entries. As Nick Stevenson argues about social media fame, “audience members are now increasingly likely to perceive themselves as potential stars and celebrities, rather than being content to admire others from afar.”¹⁴⁹ Polozkova translates Stevenson’s insight into the poetic realm, acknowledging that the most engaged poetic audiences might want to create texts, rather than just passively consume them.

Although Polozkova actively engages with the voices of her audience, she nevertheless maintains a central position in the creative community she has built. The format of LiveJournal allows her to post first, while others respond. Even as her followers contribute in creative, often poetic ways, Polozkova’s own texts remain always at the top of the page, setting the tone and the subject matter of the ensuing exchange. In other words, Polozkova’s ability to activate her audience should not be confused with an effort to cede control, but rather to reorient the position of the text in the creative process. For Polozkova, the creative text is produced through her interaction with her audience.

This puts her at odds with several more common conceptions of the creative process, where the text is presented either as a creation of the poet alone or as the product of semi-divine inspiration, which is then presented to an audience in its completed form.⁵⁰ For Polozkova, who


⁵⁰ A postmodernist view of the literary text gives more agency to the reader. There the text is created from previous texts and activated by the writer in the process of writing and by the reader in the process of reading. Nevertheless, Polozkova’s positioning of textual creation is different. For her the audience works in concert with the poet on the creation of a single, collective text. For classic explications of the postmodern conception of the literary text see Umberto Eco, The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1979), especially Introduction and chapter 1, and Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in Image, Music, Text. Essays, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Macmillan, 1988): 142–48; and The Pleasure of the Text (New York: Macmillan, 1975).
is writing in the social-media age, the text is created in the process of interaction between the poet and her actual public. That public does not act as mere readers, but as co-writers and editors in its own right. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that even in this conception of poetic activity, the poet maintains a central and seminal position. Without the poet, the creative process cannot begin. The poet first must create a public with whom to interact, and it is from that interaction that the creative process begins to unfold.

One of Polozkova’s first projects outside of her own blog provides a concrete realization of this schema of creative activity taken beyond the realm of social media. By 2007, Polozkova’s LiveJournal had attracted more than 10,000 followers and had drawn the attention of literary luminaries and celebrities like Dmitry Bykov, Lev Danilkin, and Ksenia Sobchak. Around the same time, she began performing her poetry publicly, usually accompanied by music, to growing crowds in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Noting her popularity, the director Georg Zheno invited Polozkova to create a show at the Moscow performance space Teatr.doc. The resulting piece was called “Society of Anonymous Artists” ("Общество анонимных художников"), and it featured Polozkova and journalist Mikhail Kaluzhsky on stage asking questions of the audience and of each other and drawing out conversations designed to turn into mini performances. The show not only encouraged audience participation, it was built on it, and by extension, on the assumption that everyone in the audience could be—and just as important, wanted to be—an artist. Publicity materials for the show unfailingly include the line, “the protagonist is the public” ("глavnьи героi — publika") and the original announcement on the Teatr.doc homepage read, “Along with the hosts — Vero4ka Polozkova and Mikhail Kaluzhsky — you’ll be able to scrutinize your own self and attempt to discover the talents you have.”

The show proved to be one of Teatr.doc’s most popular productions, running for more than three years and touring throughout Western Russia. In a 2009 recording of the show, as the hosts explained the concept to the audience, Polozkova highlighted the importance of audience participation. Emphasizing that the show depended on the audience and their stories, she said, “without you, it’s impossible” (“bez vas nikak”). This simple phrase, “bez vas nikak,” characterizes not only the format of the “Society of Anonymous Artists,” but also Polozkova’s philosophy of creativity more broadly. Polozkova’s popular success, as well as her creative texts themselves could not have come into being without her audience. Her vision of success, and the technique of audience-creation she used to attain it relied on her audience’s participatory responses to her creative output. As suggested above, this active audience participation is characteristic of social media culture, but modified to fit the needs of the poetic realm.

As Polozkova began creating texts, she did so through interactive, playful means that solicited and incorporated the creative input of her LiveJournal followers, making her popular success not an end in itself, but a means to creative production. As we will see in the next section, this orientation towards audience-involvement deeply informed the grammatical, structural, and thematic characteristics of her poetry. In some of her most innovative poems, she displaces the lyrical voice, usually expressed as the first-person “I” onto other grammatical forms, such as the second-person universal “you,” the plural “we,” or the third-person “they,” creating a socially-embedded subject position characteristic of the internet age. She uses this innovative lyrical voice to claim a place within and against the poetic tradition. Paradoxically, it
is largely the same audience-oriented subject position that has led many in the poetic community to question her very status as a poet.

THE LYRICAL NOT: “I”

In the last section of this chapter, I analyze several of Polozkova’s poems in order to demonstrate how her experience building an online public and performing collaborative creativity inform the development of an innovative lyrical voice. In the poems analyzed below, Polozkova creates a voice and expresses a subjectivity that calls into question the centrality of the lyrical “I” and pushes back against poetic traditions, insisting instead on a more inclusive subjectivity that, I argue, is at least partially conditioned by the media environment of her generation. I have chosen mostly poems from around the time of the 2009 controversy with which I began this chapter, since that was the moment when Polozkova came to general public attention, two volumes of her poetry were published, and she won a national prize. Not coincidentally, it is at the same time that her poetry begins to coalesce around the themes highlighted below. She begins to move away from the lyrical “I” in favor of the second-person singular and first-person plural forms, she experiments with blurring the boundaries of her lyrical subjectivity, allowing one voice to blend into another, while also highlighting the importance of audience and collaborative creativity in her work. With each of these formal innovations, Polozkova borrows from the language and syntax of social media, pulling in the very verbiage of the digital literaturnyi byt into her original, and still controversial, literary sensibility.

The first poem analyzed here, “Happiness” ("Schast’e"), was written just after Polozkova began reciting her poetry publicly at sold-out concert halls with crowds numbering in the
thousands. It is informed by her experience on stage, and it is also one of the poems she most often performs, a context that becomes important in the poem’s conclusion. The lyrical hero, however, begins the poem not on stage, but in a museum where she apparently works. She finds herself among the paintings of late-Soviet conceptualist artists Boris Turetskii, Eduard Gorokhovskii and Il’ia Kabakov. She needs to speak and write clearly, to learn to distinguish between technical aspects of visual art, and to react properly to the pieces. Then, in the last two lines of this stanza she thinks, with apparent dread, “Вероятно, когда я вдруг коротну и сдохну, / Меня втиснут в зеленый зал моего музея” (“Probably when I suddenly stop short and die, / They’ll squeeze me into the green hall of my museum”). Though one might expect an aspiring poet to hope for the posthumous canonization implied in these lines—after all, she ends up in a museum alongside recognized artists—Polozkova’s hero resists the restrictions of the institutional setting. For her, the museum setting appears to stifle creative activity and to sanitize even the most misfit artists (those of the late Soviet period invoked here).

In these first stanzas, her poetic “I” is central, guiding the poem. She construes herself as a kind of interpreter of the art displayed around her and even rhymes the first three lines of the poem with her own last name. Nevertheless, something in the lyrical hero seems to resist the role of interpreter. For her, poetry (equated throughout the poem with happiness) feels less like a process of transmission, and more like intoxication. It’s an addiction, as we learn in the fourth stanza:


53 The lines are: “На страдание мне не осталось времени никакого. / Надо говорить толково, писать толково / Про Турецкого, Гороховского, Кабакова,” all rhyming with, and possibly written on the page directly after the title and author’s name “Schast’e, Vera Polozkova.” I am grateful to Daria Kavitskaya for this insight.
That this is an addiction is unlikely to be big news.
Neither the absence of the Internet, nor labor, nor conscience
Will cure the thirst — for any kind of rhyme, that is,
You’re greedy like a rabid wolf.
He who got smashed once comes back for another dose.

In describing her thirst, the lyrical hero reaches for the second-person pronoun “ty” (“ty zhadna, kak beshenaia volchitsa”), which nevertheless appears to refer to the first-person subject. This ambiguity allows the lyrical hero to universalize a personal experience, and to invite the audience into her subjective emotional state. This grammatical form begins to destabilize the boundaries of the lyrical “I”. At the same time, the poem begins to describe poetic happiness not as a solitary act of creation, but as a kind of freeing performance.
Because you won’t earn happiness, hard as you try
Because happiness is a Jamaican’s tamtam,
Happiness, don’t break in me,
Rise up
Don’t settle down
Will I really survive in this diabolical silence;

In the diabolical silence of the museum, the lyrical hero doubts she can survive, but more than that, by finishing the line with the grammatically superfluous “ia,” she seems to put into question not only whether she can survive, but whether the very concept of the lyrical “I” can survive the museum setting. The next stanza continues:

Потому что счастье не интервал – квarta, квинта, секста,
Не зависит от места бегства, состава теста,
Счастье – это когда запнулся в начале текста,
А тебе подсказывают из зала.

Because happiness is not an interval — a forth, fifth, or sixth
It doesn’t depend on the place of escape, the composition of the dough,
Happiness is when you stumble at the beginning of a text,
And you’re prompted by the audience.

For her, the type of poetry that equates to happiness comes in the moment of performance and collaborative creativity, when the audience fills out your text. By this moment, the lyrical hero has fully abandoned the first-person “ia” in favor of the second person form, “ty,” and now even
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uses the masculine verb form “zapnulsia,” though she has apparently been feminine throughout. The first use of the second-person form “ты” was associated with feminine grammatical forms and a feminine simile (“ты злодева, как бешеная волчица”). The subsequent shift here to the masculine “ты” marks another universalizing gesture as the lyrical consciousness dissolves even further into the audience. This movement from feminized (both grammatically and associatively) and often specific lyrical hero to universal and masculine is characteristic of several of Polozkova’s poems including those analyzed here.

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her eight-line stanzas and their rhyme schemes to the Nobel laureate and specifically to his 1967 poem “Speech Over Spilt Milk” (“Rech’ o prolitom moloke”). Like Polozkova’s, Brodsky’s lyrical hero begins his poem in a confined space, at home alone, but unlike Polozkova’s performing poet, Brodsky’s hero isolates himself further as the poem progresses, locking the door to his apartment, crawling back into bed, and finally finding comfort in his solitary imaginings. Not only is the audience never explicitly invoked in Brodsky’s poem, his hero’s very isolation seems integral to the act of poetic creation. Though Brodsky explored a range of subject positions and lyrical voices throughout his long career, he often chose to emphasize the personal and solitary aspects of poetic creation. A passage from his Nobel lecture, for instance, reads:

If art teaches anything (to the artist, in the first place), it is the privateness of the human condition. Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, it fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness – thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous “I”.

By coopting a formal structure from Brodsky but insisting on a lyrical position that replaces the individual “I” of poetic creation with the collective “you,” Polozkova’s “Happiness” reclaims a lyrical tradition from the solitude of late-Soviet subjectivity, and infuses it with a social sensibility born of the internet age. This sensibility grows organically out of her vision and pursuit of a kind of literary success embedded in both celebrity culture and social media technology.

Another poem, “Again not we” (“Snova ne my”), written a year after “Happiness,” portrays the creation of a poetic text as a collaborative performance between poet and addressee.


The poem begins with what appears to be an interruption: “ладно, ладно, давай не о смысле жизни” (“fine, fine, let’s not get on about the meaning of life”). The lyrical voice then redirects the interrupted conversation, asking the addressee instead to talk about very specific subjects, which she provides herself down to precise sensory details: “лучше вот о том, как в подвалном баре со стробоскопом под потолком пахнет липкой самбукой и табаком” (“better [tell me] about how in a basement bar with a strobe light on the ceiling it smells of sticky sambuca and tobacco”). As the lyrical voice continually implores the addressee to speak, she does so with such insistent specificity that she herself creates the images that she intends to call forth from her interlocutor. In this way, the poem performs collaborative creativity without ceding much (if any) control (to her addressee).

At the same time, as Polozkova’s hero asks her addressee to speak, she insists that he speak about the apophatic subject of the poem’s title, “не мы” or “not we”: “и красивые, пьяные и не мы выбегают курить, он в ботинках, она на цыпочках, босиком / у нее в руке босоножка со сломанным каблуком” (“and beautiful, drunk, and not we run out to smoke, he’s in shoes, she’s on tip-toe, barefoot / in her hands is a sandal with a broken heel”). This absent “we” becomes the true lyrical hero of the poem, as the first person singular voice pleads with her singular addressee to conjure the absent (or unattainable) first-person plural. Within the descriptions, that first-person plural (“not we”) becomes the third person “they” and often splits into “he” and “she.” This play with pronouns blurs intersubjective lines, rendering immaterial the distinctions among speaker, addressee, subject, and even the fiction or perhaps aspiration implicit in the depicted images.

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Throughout the poem, the “not we” is described in very specific situations, always in the present tense. After the bar scene quoted above, the next stanza asks the addressee to

tell me about how the beautiful not we travel to the south, rent a house
how the old ladies give him a bowl of fruit for her
and how taxi drivers are shameless thieves
and how a lady takes her unbending linens from the line in their yard
wooden from starch
how they don’t need much, my happiness
how little

This stanza seems to conjure a shared memory, suggesting that “not we” might be a past—and perhaps retrospectively idealized—version of the speaker and the addressee. Further images seem to conform to this interpretation until the “not we” clashes with “we” at the end of the fifth stanza: “not we” are “слишком чудесные и простые, / чтоб оказаться нами” (“too miraculous and simple / to turn out to be us”). Perhaps the conjured “not we” represents the speaker and addressee’s past selves, but it is the space between “not we” and “we” that energizes this poem.
This separation makes “not we” unattainable, divorced from reality, and allows it—as an absence—to take on new, perhaps aspirational, meanings throughout the poem. The shifting content of “not we” allows the speaker to constantly redirect the subject matter of the collaboratively creative text implied in this poem as she ostensibly pushes her addressee to create it. All the while, however, as Polozkova’s lyrical hero asks her addressee to conjure an image, she—in her very request—conjures that image herself.

In “Again not we,” Polozkova simultaneously depicts and performs her vision of collaborative creativity, conjuring a shared text between her lyrical hero and addressee. Perhaps because it captures so well the mechanisms of her audience interaction, this text is among Polozkova’s most popular. A video of Polozkova reading “Again not we” is among the most watched videos of contemporary Russian poetry with over 1.5 million views. But beyond the poem’s broad popular appeal, I would argue, it marks an important point in the development of Polozkova’s lyrical position because of the way it destabilizes the boundaries between lyrical voice, addressee, and subject matter. As it destabilizes these boundaries, it dramatizes the act of incorporating the audience in the very process of creating the text. This expansive lyrical consciousness—a consciousness that seems to bleed over into and even coopt the addressee, audience, and even subject matter—thematizes the complex position that Polozkova herself inhabits vis-à-vis her active audience.

In later poems, Polozkova continues to expand the consciousness of her lyrical voice, pushing it beyond the scope of her direct addressees and audience and dissolving it into the

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59 For comparison, the most watched videos of other internet poets usually rank in the low thousands. Dmitry Vodennikov’s most watched poem has attracted over 10,000 views (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB3NzmPzp84); Roman Os’minkin’s over 4,000 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dr_IChm23xk); Linor Goralik’s, just over 11,000 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X6Ypfl7Wq6c). The only other contemporary poetry online with over a million views comes from Dmitrii Bykov’s television program, Citizen Poet (Grazhdanin poet).
surrounding environment. For instance, in the untitled poem “or not even god, but some deputy of his …” (“ili dazhe ne bog, a kakoi-nibud’ ego zam…”), the lyrical hero “you” begins the poem by being swept up into the afterlife. Here, as in “Happiness,” the use of the second person seems to suggest that the described experience is not singular, but rather universal. It is at once the specific experience of the lyrical voice (expressed in the second person) and at the same time an experience that the audience (implicitly addressed by the second person) might also share. In this way, the lyrical voice plays with the indexicality of the pronoun “you,” pointing both to herself and to the addressee. “You” remains the lyrical hero, but a hero divorced from the specificity of individual subjectivity, and instead inserted into a grammatical structure that by its very nature universalizes, reaching out to the possible experience of the addressee.

As if to underline this break from traditional lyrical forms, Polozkova’s first stanza invokes an intertext from the poetic canon, only to question it from within. The third line, “obnazhennym kamushkom, mertvym shershnem” (“as a naked stone, a dead hornet”), recalls two images, stones and a dead hornet, familiar from Osip Mandel’shtam’s poetry. For Mandel’shtam, the stone most often represent the word as an essential element, a building block of verbal art, while the dead hornet, taken specifically from his 1923 “Graphite Ode” (“Grifel’naia oda”), represents the daytime of the real world (as opposed to the nighttime of poetic creation). Mediated through the allusion to Mandel’shtam, both images in this line take on an intimate relation to poetic creation. But Polozkova mobilizes these images in a very different way from

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61 The phrase “dead hornet” (“mertvyi shershen’”) opens the third stanza of “Graphite Ode”: “Как мертвый шершень возле сот, / День пестрый выметен с позором” (“Like a dead wasp near honeycomb, / The colorful day is swept away with shame”). Mandel’shtam’s uses of the word “stone” (“kamen’”) are too numerous to list, beginning with the title of his first collection Kamen’. For an overview of the significance of this term in Mandel’shtam’s oeuvre, see R.D.B.Thomson, “Mandel’stam’s Kamen’: The Evolution of an Image,” Russian Literature, Vol. 30, Is. 4 (15 Nov 1991): 501–30.
Mandel’shtam. For Mandel’shtam, neither the stone nor the dead hornet represent the poet; rather, they are things of the world to be apprehended, manipulated, or even “tossed out” (in the case of the dead hornet) by the poetic consciousness. In Polozkova’s poem, on the other hand, the lyrical hero, the universalized “you,” experiences itself as a pebble, a dead hornet (in the hands of God’s deputy). Her consciousness does not apprehend or manipulate these images, but identifies with them on a material, compositional level. Here, Polozkova is not so much pushing against Mandel’shtam’s subject position, but rather against the separation between poet and poetic material, between subject and materials of this world. By the last stanza, the “kamushek” has further dissolved into its surroundings, becoming a basic element, a “human mineral” (“chelovecheskii mineral”), and the poem ends with the insistence that this most singular, individual and individualizing experience, the experience of dying, is actually nothing special at all. God’s deputy, lifting the poet “you” up to his nearsighted eyes, addresses her:

что-то ты глядишь изумленно слишком
будто бы ни разу
не умирал

it seems you’re looking a little too bewildered
as if you’ve never, not once
died

The masculine form of the universal you (expressed in the last line’s verb, “не умирал”) (“as if you’ve never, not once died”) contrasts with the otherwise feminine images ascribed to the lyrical “ty.” For instance, all of the following images that describe “ty” earlier suggest a feminine presence:
кудри слабого чая
лоб сладкого молока
беззащитные выступающие ключицы

curls of weak tea
forehead of sweet milk
defenseless protruding clavicles

In the final line, however, this gendered imagery dissolves into the universal (and grammatically masculine) “you”—as happened in “Happiness” above—reinforcing the lyrical hero’s dissolution into her surroundings, becoming, apparently, a mineral (which rhymes with the poem’s final “умирал”). In these poems, Polozkova’s lyrical hero narrates from a liminal position between poet and audience. The second person universal, a grammatical form borrowed from online communication, makes this liminal position possible, and allows Polozkova to evoke a feeling of deep connectedness rather than separation, an almost intrinsic interdependence among the self, audience (often as co-creator), and the surrounding world.

Polozkova’s 2008 poetry collection, *Photosynthesis (Fotosintez)*, in which “or not even god” appeared, brings together her vision of connectedness and collaborative creativity with a further dissolution of the lyrical “I”.62 The book’s cover features Polozkova’s name alongside that of her collaborator (and LiveJournal follower), the photographer Olga Pavolga and the volume contains Pavolga’s photographs interspersed among Polozkova’s poetry. The opening poem, “In place of an introduction” (“*Vmesto vstupleniia*”), reads as a sort of statement of

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62 Polozkova and Pavolga, *Fotosintez*. 
purpose for the collection. Here, Polozkova writes in the first person, but she nevertheless refuses a strong, individualized “I”. Instead she first appears, almost invisibly, as “we” (“my”) with her co-author:

огромный город — не хватает глаз —
прокуренный от шахт до антресолей,
и где-то в глубине сидим мы с олей
и поглощаем углекислый газ.

enormous city — not enough eyes
smoked through from the mines to the attics
and somewhere in the depths sit olya and I
and devour carbon dioxide gas.

As this first suffocating scene gives out onto a less confined space, a street with an old dog, rays of sunlight, and a bitter wind, the lyrical hero apparently never moves. Her photographer friend goes out to record the world, while she stays and searches for the right word.

и оля с камерой идет по огородам,
а я ищу словцо погорячей.
то, что получится, и будет кислородом.
мы фабрики счастливых мелочей.

and olya with her camera goes along the gardens,
and I search for the most fiery word.

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63 Ibid., 5.
that which results will be oxygen.

we are a factory of happy trifles.

As the two collaborators record the world around them and combine their efforts, it is neither one’s individual work, but the combination itself that produces oxygen. The effect of photosynthesis, the “чёрно-белый фотоинтез,” brings to life the short vignettes in the following lines:

идет состав одышливый вдали,
мальчишка паучка кладет за плинтус,
и бабушки за хлебушек – «подвиньтесь!» —
отсчитывают звонкие рубли,

there’s a panting train in the distance,
a boy puts a spider behind the moulding,
and grandmas for bread — “get moving!” —
count out ringing roubles,

The lyrical consciousness itself, however, does not come to life, but rather seems to become more embedded in its surroundings. In the poem’s last lines, “а мы такие легкие / земли” (“and we’re such lungs / of the earth”), Polozkova not only rejects the lyrical “I” in favor of the collective “we,” but she also implants that “we” within greater ecological structures, claiming at once to play the role of plant life (photosynthesis) and to be essentially connected to the whole earth as an integral living organism. This radical connectedness stands in sharp contrast to the image of the poet as a sort of ur-individual who exists separate from both audience and surrounding world. But even as her lyrical consciousness dissolves into its surroundings, it
remains central both to the creative process, and to the larger organism it joins. Not only are the lungs of the earth presumably essential to the imagined world’s survival, their work within the logic of the poem, the “chērno-belyi fotosintéz,” creates that world. In this way, Polozkova’s lyrical consciousness is both expansive and dissolute, both dominant and recessive, apparently ceding its individuality to audience, co-creator(s), and surroundings, but all the while maintaining a central position and creative control within the greater collectivities it joins.\textsuperscript{64}

Sympathetic critics like Aleksandr Gavrilov and Lev Danilkin, who read Polozkova’s poetry as uniquely suited to her generation, often point to the expansive connectedness of her lyrical voice, suggesting that it is Polozkova’s most vital contribution to the poetic tradition. Danilkin, for instance, writes: “Vera Polozkova is a poet with the type of ‘I’ that has long been absent from Russian poetry. It is an ‘I’ capable of filling the whole world with itself.”\textsuperscript{65} Dmitry Bykov also notes Polozkova’s expansive lyrical voice and calls Polozkova “par excellence — a real poet” who continues “the living tradition of Russian literature.”\textsuperscript{66} But many critics take precisely the opposite perspective, that Polozkova’s expansive, non-individual lyrical voice in fact disqualifies her as a poet. Writing in \textit{Literaturnaia gazeta}, Igor’ Panin stipulates that Polozkova might be talented, but “her talent is unlikely to develop into anything worthwhile as long as she continues to poetically pander to the demands of the acidic public instead of trying to

\textsuperscript{64} Mikhail Bakhtin might argue that the central position of the creative consciousness is necessary for aesthetic activity as such; an authorial position can never be fully overcome, not even in a polyphonic work. At best, an author can attempt to acknowledge the other voices already present within a creative text. See Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in \textit{Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays}, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990), 4–256.

\textsuperscript{65} “Вера Полозкова — поэт с таким «я», какого давно не было в русской поэзии. Это «я» в состоянии заполнить собой целый мир так.” (Danilkin, “Stikhotvorenie nedeli”)

find something not even particularly bright, but her own.” On the literary talk show Shkola zlosloviia, hosts Tatiana Tolstaya and Avdotia Smirnova advise Polozkova not to continue with poetry because her very consciousness makes her unsuited for it.

Avdotia Smirnova: It’s striking, you’re always aligning yourself with something. I’ll tell you directly: your path leads to film or the theater and not where you’re trying to go, because you have an absolutely non-individual consciousness. You’re always saying “I’m the internet generation,” “I’m the images generation”—

Vera Polozkova: It’s just that we chose that intonation—

Smirnova: No one chose any intonation. It’s you who says this. This is your text, Vera. You’re always putting yourself into some context. You’re always aligning yourself with some group. That’s collective consciousness. It’s not good; it’s not bad. For a writer, it’s impossible. Believe me.

For Smirnova, Polozkova’s interaction with her audience, as represented in her texts and in her answers to interview questions on the show, aligns better with the personae most familiar in film and theater—that is, with figures most often associated with celebrity culture. It does not align with the individualized subjectivity associated—at least for many of Smirnova and Tolstaya’s generation—with a poetic consciousness. Certainly, Smirnova and Tolstaya represent gatekeepers to the literary community, a role they emphasize in their performance on this talk show, but what Polozkova’s case shows is that the very nature of the gates—and of the literary community—have changed.

67 Igor’ Panin, “Kukla.”
Chapter 4: Online Publics as Literary Fact

CONCLUSION

Polozkova’s vision of success has created new possibilities for literary prominence. By employing strategies from both social media and the literary heritage, and by mobilizing internet technologies to create an active and engaged audience, Polozkova brings online publics into her poetic process in an integral way. For her, LiveJournal (along with the other social media sites she has since begun using) is more than a platform; it is her studio of creative activity. Likewise, her online public is more than a passive audience, more than an active but ancillary fan community, like those of Pelevin or Akunin; Polozkova’s online public is both a creation of and co-creator in the poetic process. Polozkova constantly “aligns herself” with this group (in Smirnova’s words) not in order to avoid the “individual consciousness” associated with lyric poetry, but in order to create conditions under which her lyric poetry can find and maintain an audience in the social-media age. As she has done so, she has tested the boundaries (and the nerves) of the poetic community, as demonstrated in Smirnova’s exasperation and in the question with which this chapter began: “Is Vera Polozkova a Poet?”

The debate on this question developed around two axes. The first was one of legitimacy: Is Vera Polozkova a poet simply because she writes in verse, publishes, and sells? Does her rise through social media impugn her status as poet, or can online publics be mobilized to generate poetic legitimacy? The second axis is one of lyrical consciousness. Does Polozkova’s avoidance of the lyrical “I”, her reliance on her audience, her blurring of boundaries between lyrical voice and addressee and even the surrounding environment itself express an innovative sense of post-Soviet internet-age subjectivity? Or do these strategies simply make her something other than a poet—perhaps a performer or a celebrity blogger-in-verse? The central methodological intervention of this chapter, and indeed of this dissertation, is that these two axes are not separate
and distinct; they are in fact integrally related. The ways that Polozkova has envisioned and pursued literary success have deeply influenced the creation of her poetic voice, the development of her lyrical sensibility, and the narrative structures of her verse. Her experience creating and continually engaging her online public has infused her poetry not only with the language, but also with the grammatical structures and communicative strategies characteristic of social media, complicating and enriching poetic language. Her place at the center of a collaborative-creative community has impacted the position her lyrical hero takes vis-à-vis the lyrical addressee. In this way, Polozkova’s poetic project is inseparable from its setting on social media. Even if she could have risen to prominence without social media, she would likely have never created the lyrical not-“I”, or used the second person universal so creatively, or explored the radical dissolution of the lyrical voice into its surroundings.

I do not mean to suggest a simple causal relationship between the conditions of Polozkova’s success and the resulting poetry. Such a facile schema would trace causal vectors in only one direction and ignore the specifics of the situation. Instead, I want to suggest that to fully understand Polozkova’s poetry and its extraordinary popularity, it is necessary to take into consideration how this particular poet mobilized these specific technologies in pursuit of this vision of success, and in the process created this lyrical voice and poetic consciousness. In other words, Polozkova’s vision of success and the technologies she used to pursue it are necessary components of a meaningful understanding of her poetry and of how and why it resonates with her audience.

Despite the special status of her collaborative creativity through social media, Polozkova’s case provides insights into broader trends within the Russian literary world. Her activation and integration of online publics into the creation of her public persona and her poetry
are representative of a mode of author-audience interaction that other writers have employed in different configurations. Evgeny Grishkovetz, Linor Goralik, and Dmitrii Vodennikov, to name just a few examples, have used LiveJournal and online videos to actively engage audiences in their broader poetic and prosaic projects. Vodennikov, like Polozkova, often interacts with his audience—both in poetry and in blog posts—through the inviting use of the second person universal, while Grishkovetz builds a confessional-aspirational style that balances, like Polozkova’s, between the intimate and the universal in the creation of his public persona. Like Polozkova, these writers and many others create and activate online publics, making the internet and the audiences it affords into integral parts of the literary process.

Igor’ Panov writes, in the *Literaturnaia gazeta* article quoted above, that LiveJournal is now filled with “a hundred little Polozkovas” waiting to become the next internet poetic sensation. For a younger generation, Polozkova perhaps more than anyone else has modeled a method of combining poetic celebrity, internet technologies, and literary play with narrative structure into an innovative strategy in the pursuit of success. This type of literary success has further solidified cultural capitalism in contemporary Russia, demonstrating that even lyric poetry can attract a popular (and profitable) audience, and updating cultural capitalism for the social media age.
CONCLUSION: Anti-Capitalism and the Art of Not Being an Artist

“Пора перестать думать, как следует правильно и эффективно торговаться собой — нужно просто научиться дарить.”
— Chto Delat’? Collective (2004)

Oppositional voices can often indicate the relative entrenchment of the hegemonic systems they position themselves against. By this logic, a rising chorus in the mid-2000s pointed insistently to the dominance of cultural capitalism. “This is how I see the contemporary cultural situation,” wrote Kirill Medvedev, one of the earliest voices in this chorus, in 2003:

A strengthened book business, a bunch of publishers [...] using the most unscrupulous tactics and provocative strategies to commercial advantage, playing with the most monstrous and to me disgusting ideologies. An inhuman fight for prizes. An endless staging of pseudo-events in literature. Several literary lobbies, carrying on a cruel and primitive struggle for cultural influence. Loathsome speculations by critics and journalists openly serving their masters; by critics either imposing their juvenile and half-conscious cultural world on the reader or proselytizing a cultural or other kind of xenophobia and pseudo-religious obscurantism.¹

Medvedev rejects this overwhelming system—the system whose provenance and development I have traced in this dissertation. He refuses to participate in any “literary projects organized and

Conclusion: Not Being an Artist

 financed either by the state or by cultural authorities [instantsii]” or even to give any public readings. Medvedev’s position is more universal in its ambitions than other refusals we have seen—such as Aleksei Ivanov’s withdrawal from literary prize competitions, discussed in chapter three. Medvedev launches a more comprehensive attack against cultural capitalism broadly construed. No publisher should make money reprinting his work, and even more radically, neither should the poet himself. A year later, Medvedev renounced his claim to copyright altogether and even refused for five years, to write poetry at all.

In the same years, the newly-formed leftist art collective Chto delat’? (What is to be done?) began publishing a broadsheet periodical. An unsigned mission statement opens the first issue. The collective describes Russia’s cultural landscape as dominated by “consumers’ conception of pleasure” and the “cynicism of commodity-monetary relations, [which] pervade society from top to bottom.” In this environment, the authors insist, poets, writers, and artists have lost the right to pessimism and passivity. They must act. What is to be done, it follows, will be the subject of subsequent discussion, but a first step, they suggest, might be to “stop thinking of how one should properly and effectively sell oneself,” and instead “to learn how to give away.” Their avowedly anti-capitalist aim is similar to Medvedev’s: to stand against a dominant commercial “system that so devalues and debases the Word,” to find a position for the artist who

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2 Ibid. “Я отказываюсь от участия в литературных проектах, организуемых и финансируемых как государством, так и культурными инстанциями. […] Я отказываюсь от каких-либо публичных чтений.” After five years of abstaining from poetic life, Medvedev returned to the literary scene in 2011, and has since actively published and performed his own poetry, though within the confines of his own publishing ventures and limited public readings organized by friends.


5 Ibid., 1–2. “перестать думать, как следует правильно и эффективно торговать собой — нужно просто научиться дарить.”
will “fight for art.” This defiant stance begins with the “fight for a position” from which one could fight for art.7

Tellingly, both Medvedev and the Chto Delat’? collective begin their manifestos with a diagnosis of the commercialization of contemporary culture. Their critiques describe the lay of the land and open up a front from which this fight might begin. In this way, what they see as the cynicism, commodification, and capitalization of culture—and what I am calling cultural capitalism—is a prerequisite for their own cultural-ideological stances. Without this diagnosis of the dominant system, they would not be able to position themselves against it. “The possibility of simply imagining the question ‘What is to be done?’,” write the authors of Chto Delat’?, “appeared not long ago.”8

It was not only the possibility of asking, “What is to be done?” that appeared at the time. The very possibility of conceptualizing contemporary Russian culture as a system dominated by capitalist exchange came into focus only around this time as well. Though a similarly capitalist system might have dominated pre-revolutionary Russian culture, the transition from the Soviet system had once again reactivated anxieties about capitalism’s role in culture. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, it would have been nearly impossible to stake out a position against the capitalistic system of cultural exchange in post-Soviet Russia—and indeed few, if any, cultural producers did so. Cultural capitalism simply had not formed yet; it was not yet perceptible as a dominant system. Instead, as I have shown, it was a patchwork of individual

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6 Medvedev, “Kommiunike.” “К системе, настолько девальвирующей и опошляющей Слово, настолько профанирующей его, я не хочу иметь даже косвенного отношения.”

7 Ibid. “Меня интересует только позиция художника, ведущего ‘борьбу за искусство’, однако, в наше время, прежде всего - борьбу за саму позицию.”

8 “Chto delat’?”, I. “Возможность просто вообразить вопрос ‘Что делать?’ появилась недавно.” The collective’s very name, however, alludes to Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Vladimir Lenin’s works by the same name, suggesting that this is not the first historical moment when the possibility of asking such a question has arisen.
solutions to discrete problems, undertaken by authors most often in search of their own success. As the authors in this dissertation (and others) pursued individual strategies towards their own specific aims, they strengthened, reshaped, and even created the institutions and mechanisms that would go on to form the system of cultural capitalism. The literature these writers produced at the time also grew alongside and in interdependence with their institutional navigations of the literary field. In other words, these authors, in search of readers, legitimacy, aesthetic innovation, and so on, created institutional and economic pathways alongside literary forms and practices to meet specific demands. It was those pathways, forms, and practices that overlapped, intertwined, and eventually wove themselves into the system of post-Soviet Russian literature that became recognizable as cultural capitalism in the mid-2000s. Without specifically intending to, the writers discussed in this dissertation built the foundation as well as the very forms—the base and the superstructure—of the system that became the object of critique for Medvedev, *Chto delat’?*, and others.

Each chapter of this dissertation shows how incremental changes introduced by specific authors collectively led to a profound shift in the system of literary production and exchange. Similar and interrelated changes in literary forms and practices also led to no less profound transformations in the nature of literature as an art form. Recalling Boris Eikhenbaum, one could say that in the immediate post-Soviet period the question of “how to write” became eclipsed by the question of “how to be a writer.” As post-Soviet authors engaged with the constantly shifting institutional and economic frameworks that constituted the possibilities of being a writer, the possibilities of writing itself also shifted. Each of the authors discussed in this dissertation tested the limits and pushed the boundaries defining the field of possible solutions to each of these questions, and as they did so, they opened up new ways both of writing and of being writers.
Taken together, the possible answers to Eikhenbaum’s questions (of how to write and how to be a writer) might be understood as coterminous with the literary field itself. In other words, as these authors proposed, tested, and found innovative answers to these two questions for themselves, they also changed the very shape of the literary field as a whole.

As Grigorii Chkhartishvili took on the pseudonym B. Akunin and created a new form of intellectual detective novels, he did much more than simply forge a new kind of success. He combined the genre conventions of mass literature with the prose style and allusiveness usually associated with elite literature. By so doing, he helped legitimize genre conventions among the literary elite. At the same time, as demonstrated in chapter one, he created a series of literary worlds pervaded by a specific philosophy of meritocracy and success. Within this philosophy, the unerring success of the protagonist-sleuth, Erast Fandorin, works to reflect and amplify the success of the pseudonymous author B. Akunin, connecting the conventions of the fictional world to the sales success of the books themselves. In this way, Chkhartishvili’s many-layered fictional project instantiates the always-present but rarely-visible interdependence of the aesthetic, social, and economic aspects of literary creation.

Chkhartishvili borrowed a set of genre conventions from a form of literature—the popular detective novel—which is often associated with high sales numbers on the literary marketplace. He then imported those conventions into a project targeting an audience that had, in Russia and elsewhere, been resistant to the very notion of popular success. At its core, the move is an aesthetic one. It involves the creation of a novel (and a subsequent series of novels) and therefore might be thought of as primarily literary rather than extra-literary. But its consequences immediately resonate beyond the covers of Akunin’s published work. Genre conventions find new acceptance in elite fiction and popular success becomes a possible route for legitimacy even
Conclusion: Not Being an Artist

within the elite pole of the literary field. These changes represent major shifts within the literary field, which came to define not only how the literature of the 1990s and 2000s incorporated the popular genres dominating the book market at the time, but also how the literary elite understood and came to terms with market success as a new and powerful indicator of cultural legitimacy.

Olga Slavnikova, whose fraught relationship to the growing “prize culture” is traced in chapter two, likewise navigated the literary field by pursuing a series of incremental tactical solutions, which together represent a seismic shift in the conception of cultural legitimacy and the place of literary prose in contemporary Russian society. In Slavnikova’s vision, contemporary culture lacked institutions capable of granting legitimacy to writers as professionals and as artists. Where the Soviet Union had, through the Writers’ Union and other institutions, conveyed the importance of the writer to a broader public, post-Soviet Russia, in her opinion, had failed. She chose to address this problem by turning to the growing institution of post-Soviet literary prizes, especially the imported Russian Booker. Though undertaken as a discrete solution to a specific problem, Slavnikova’s engagement with literary prizes resonated far beyond her own desire for legitimacy. Her specific choice of literary prizes helped bolster the Russian Booker as it gained momentum and influence throughout the first post-Soviet decade.

The most prestigious and influential prize of the 1990s, the Russian Booker distinguished itself from other literary awards through its open embrace of capitalist markets of culture. Rather than insulating elite literary writers from the caprices of capitalism—as prizes like the Triumph endeavored to do—the Booker promised to make them beneficiaries of that same system. This implicit promise at the heart of the Russian Booker brought elite literary legitimacy and market success even closer together, even as Slavnikova herself saw the institution of prizes as a potential bulwark against the advance of capitalist markets into the cultural realm.
Moreover, Slavnikova’s commitment to prize culture echoed on the pages of her fiction. The trajectory from her earliest work to her Booker Prize-winning novel 2017, includes several small adjustments to her prose style and plot structures that—whether intentionally or not—brought her into closer alignment with the demands of prize juries. At the same time, her prose shows her wrestling with the new capitalistic economic order and the stylistic and cultural baggage it brings along with it. Ultimately, she finds a compromise with the post-Soviet economic order while still maintaining something of a critical stance vis-à-vis capitalism itself. This compromise successfully attracted the attention of the Booker Prize, allowing Slavnikova to claim the marker of literary legitimacy that she held above all others. At the same time, however, it contributed to the formation of a prose style and an authorial position that negotiated a sympathetic accommodation for capitalism within cultural production. In this way, Slavnikova’s trajectory shows how the search for a solution to a discrete problem—the inadequacy of outward markers of literary legitimacy—led to the embrace of an increasingly influential capitalist institution in the Russian Booker Prize, and to the incorporation of a capitalist worldview into the prose style of an elite, and specifically non-market-oriented, novelist. The institutional and aesthetic aspects of Slavnikova’s trajectory are ultimately inseparable. Nor is it possible to define a direction of causality, to conclude that first and foremost prizes influence prose or prose prizes. Institutional changes in Slavnikova’s vision of literary legitimacy acted in concert with aesthetic changes in her literary form and content, with neither aspect completely independent of, nor fully defining the other.

In my third chapter, I show how Aleksei Ivanov’s early prose provides perhaps the most compelling example of how artistic works can function as non-human “actants” in the literary field. The deeply local character of Ivanov’s first novels—expressed in their subject matter, their
depiction of local environments, and their use of indigenous toponyms and obscure vocabulary—
not only associates the novels themselves with their particular environments, but also defines
their author as a literary provincial, tied to his native land. The almost magical effects of the
novels inspire intense loyalty among Ivanov’s readers, but at the same time constrict Ivanov’s
own movements within the literary establishment of Moscow. Consistently portrayed as an
outsider, Ivanov soon became frustrated with the few pathways available to him in the capitals
and shifted his attention back to his native Urals. There he played to his strengths, amplifying the
enchanting effects his novels already exerted on the readership through a series of multi-media,
interactive projects that brought imaginative experience into the real world. These projects not
only moved away from establishment modes of literary legitimacy, they also transformed the
solitary act of reading into collective and interactive endeavors.

The trajectory of Ivanov’s career discloses the surprisingly active power of literary texts
over the extra-literary maneuverings of their author, flipping a causal arrow that usually imagines
an author as master of his texts. Here, we see Ivanov’s texts in many ways hemming him in,
closing off certain pathways to literary legitimacy while opening up others, and funneling his
efforts in specific directions. Both Ivanov’s failures in the Moscow literary establishment
(notably, his disqualification by the Russian Booker committee) and his successes in his
collective multi-media endeavors would be difficult to imagine if he were the author not of
historical epics but of, for instance, domestic melodramas or postmodern literary games. At the
same time, his novels cannot be said to fully define his position in the literary field, or to
completely circumscribe the scope of his activities. Indeed, while his extra-literary projects—
including hiking guides, festivals, documentaries, and film adaptations—might derive their
energy from the enchanting effects of his literary work, they are directed by Ivanov’s
idiosyncratic conception of literary success. By conceiving of literary success as “success within a corporation called Aleksei Ivanov,” he accomplishes two tasks: his own discrete task of defining his own path to success, as well as the further entrenchment of cultural capitalism. Most immediately, Ivanov’s formulation declares his independence from the Moscow literary establishment, defiantly insisting that he can find his own success without relying on legitimating structures like the Russian Booker Prize or critical consecration. At the same time, however, by framing his independent criteria for success in market terms, Ivanov underscores the legitimating power of capitalist indicators of success and further expands the reach of cultural capitalism.

Vera Polozkova, whose career is the subject of chapter four, conceived her poetic persona from the very beginning in terms of success. Lacking access to the legitimizing mechanisms of the traditional poetic world, Polozkova set about building her own audience through the popular social media platform LiveJournal. Once again, this discrete solution to an insufficiency in her immediate environment resulted in larger repercussions both for her own career and for the literary field at large. Faced with the task of building her own audience from scratch, Polozkova developed a series of audience-engagement techniques that drew her readers into playful co-creativity. She encouraged her readers to comment on her blog, critique her work, and add dimensions and complexity to the imagined characters and scenarios she conceived in her own posts. As she gained popularity, her audience-engagement strategies not only resulted in the publication of her first two (bestselling) volumes of poetry, they also expanded beyond the written work into other creative activity, including concerts and an interactive show at Moscow’s Teatr.doc performance space. The combination of this literary and extra-literary success pushes against the borders of the literary field, raising questions of what it means to be a poet in the age of internet celebrity.
Furthermore, Polozkova’s poetry around this time shows how her strategies of audience-building pervade the language, syntax, and subject position of her lyrical voice. By referring to the poetic consciousness—traditionally the “lyrical I”—with the universalizing second person “you”, Polozkova borrows pronoun patterning from social media, underscoring a sense of common experience shared with her audience. At the same time, by constructing her poetic voice out of the linguistic building blocks of her pursuit of success, she develops a language and syntax of cultural capitalism fit for the internet age. Here again, we see how Polozkova’s immediate solution to the problem of audience-engagement redounds to larger questions about the shape of literary field, the definition of the word “poet”, and even the development of the literary language itself.

Each of these chapters shows how contemporary Russian writers have found new ways to be writers in the post-Soviet literary landscape, how they have transformed the very process of writing and the scope and limits of literary art itself. Though none of the writers discussed in this dissertation explicitly set out to bring the principles of capitalist exchange into the literary field, the network of discrete solutions they have introduced has come to define cultural capitalism in post-Soviet Russia. As these writers forged new pathways to readers, legitimacy, professionalism, and accolades, they did so within the economic and institutional structures of post-Soviet Russia, pushing the limits of, but always participating in the developing system of cultural capitalism. Put another way, as these writers searched for new ways to be writers, they found ways to be writers under cultural capitalism—that is to say, they found ways to produce, distribute, and exchange intellectual property for economic and symbolic gain. The economic logic of capitalist exchange pervades the visions of literary success pursued by each of the authors in this dissertation just as much as it pervades the institutional structures of the literary
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field, from prizes to publishers. This economic logic might not be immediately apparent in each of the individual strategies undertaken by writers of the post-Soviet decades, including those analyzed here; however, in aggregate these individual strategies weave themselves into a system with a clear capitalist logic. And it is against this system that oppositional figures like Kirill Medvedev and the members of Chto delat’? began to position themselves in the mid-2000s.

Instead of asking how they can become writers within the logic of cultural capitalism, these oppositional figures position themselves outside of the system, specifically opposing its aims. They believe that the question of “how to be a writer” has too often been equated to “thinking of how one should properly and effectively sell oneself.” If answers to these questions only work to further entrench a “monstrous and disgusting” system, then what is a writer to do? How can a writer, a poet, or an artist exist in the world without buying into the system of exchange that seems to undergird the entire cultural sphere? This is the question that energizes the contemporary leftist avant-garde. In her reading of Medvedev’s poetics and positionings, Marijeta Bozovic frames the question as the search “for a way to live in the world as an artist without being an artist – that is, without creating intellectual property.”

It is no accident that this phrasing depends on an implicit equivalency between “being an artist” and the production of “intellectual property”—an equivalency that, as much as any other, might be said to define cultural capitalism. Indeed, the public statements of Medvedev and the Chto delat’? group, informed as they are by Marxist philosophy, are shot through with economic logic and the vocabulary of capitalistic exchange, even as they position themselves against the very systems animating that vocabulary. Like the dissident literature of the Soviet era, which derived much of its ethical weight and cultural legitimacy from its opposition to the hegemonic

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forms of official Soviet discourse, the rhetorical power of the contemporary avant-garde depends on the economic logic of cultural capitalism to generate its oppositional energy.\textsuperscript{10} It relies on capitalist logic in order to oppose capitalism. For instance, Medvedev’s rejection of copyright and refusal to participate in the literary field was articulated in economic terms and it in turn won him a much more prominent place in the very literary field he had renounced.\textsuperscript{11} (In Bozovic’s estimation, it was these gestures of refusal that “in a sense defined him,” leading to his “canonization” as a central oppositional voice of contemporary Russia).\textsuperscript{12} As such leftist voices position themselves against cultural capitalism, they derive energy and what Katherine Verdery called “moral capital” from their opposition to it.\textsuperscript{13}

The art of not being an artist—of refusing participation in the cultural forms of exchange that define cultural capitalism—has now become perhaps the central issue of the contemporary leftist avant-garde. And it is perhaps here, in the oppositional energies that it has generated, that the power of cultural capitalism is most visible. Throughout this dissertation I have shown how the systems of exchange, the markets for cultural goods, and the priorities of success and


\textsuperscript{11} When Medvedev renounced copyright, the liberal publishing house Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie (New Literary Review) took advantage of the opportunity to publish a volume of his poetry without his permission. The volume, entitled Kirill Medvedev: Texts Published Without the Author’s Knowledge, led the poet to consider that his very refusal might have been subsumed into the system of cultural capitalism. While stipulating that the volume might be a genuine (if playful) engagement with Medvedev’s ideology, he admits another, more “sober” interpretation: “A large established publisher has rescinded the poet M.’s pretensions to an especially marginal-independent-outside position, unequivocally putting him in his place in the cultural context and once again demonstrating the ability of the capitalist system to subsume within itself many ideologically antagonistic intentions.” (Kirill Medvedev, “Na vykhod knigi ‘Kirill Medvedev: Teksty, izdannye bez vedoma avtora,” Sait poeta Kirilla Medvedeva Dec 2005–Jan 2006, accessed 15 Aug 2017: http://kirillmedvedev.narod.ru/nlo.html “крупное этаблированное издательство отменило претензию поэта М. на особую маргинально-независимо-отверженную позицию, недвусмысленно указав ему на его место в культурном контексте и лишний раз продемонстрировав способность капиталистической системы включать в себя многие идеологически враждебные интенции.”)

\textsuperscript{12} Bozovic, “Poetry on the Front Line,” 1.

\textsuperscript{13} Verdery, What Was Socialism, 107–08.
meritocracy, have defined the artistic and social practices of writers in the immediate post-Soviet era. As the next wave of cultural producers overtakes the immediate post-Soviet generation, it becomes apparent that the patchwork system constructed out of the strategies analyzed in these pages has come to define the cultural sphere in a much more lasting and systematic way than any of these authors individually could have ever intended.
WORKS CITED

Interviews


Literature


Works Cited


Works Cited


Works Cited


Bradley A. Gorski


Works Cited


Works Cited


СЧАСТЬЕ

На страдание мне не осталось времени никакого.  
Надо говорить толково, писать толково  
Про Турецкого, Гороховского, Кабакова  
И учиться, фотографируя и глазя.  
Различать пестроту и цветность, песок и охру.  
Где-то хохотну, где-то выдохну или охну,  
Вероятно, когда я вдруг коротну и сдохну,  
Меня втиснут в зеленый зал моего музея.

Пусть мне нечего сообщить этим стенам – им есть  
Что поведать через меня; и, пожалуй, минус  
Этой страстной любви к работе в том, что взаимность  
Съест меня целиком, поскольку тоталитарна.  
Да, сдавай ей и норму, и все избытки, и все излишки,  
А мне надо давать концерты и делать книжки,  
И на каждой улице по мальчишке,  
Пропадающему бездарно.

Что до стихов – дело пахнет чем-то алкоголическим. 
Я себя угроблю таким количеством,  
То-то праздник будет отдельным личностям,  
Возмущенным моим расшатываньем основ.  
— Что ж вам слышно там, на такой-то кошмарной громкости?  
Где ж в вас место для этой хрупкости, этой ломкости?  
И куда вы сдаете пустые емкости  
Из-под всех этих крепких слов?

То, что это зависимость – вряд ли большая новость.  
Ни отсутствие интернета, ни труд, ни совесть  
Не излечат от жажды – до всякой рифмы, то есть  
Ты жадна, как бешеная волчица.  
Тот, кто вмазался раз, приходит за новой дозой.  
Первый ряд глядит на меня с угрозой.  
Что до прозы – я не умею прозой,  
Правда, скоро думаю научиться.

Предостереженья «ты плохо кончишь» — сплошь клоунада.  
Я умею жить что в тORNадо, что без торнадо.  
Не насилиственной смерти бояться надо,  
А насилиственной жизни – оно страшнее.
Потому что счастья не заработаешь, как ни майся,
Потому что счастье — там там Ямайца,
Счастье, не ломайся во мне,
Вздымайся,
Не унимайся,
Разве выживу в этой дьявольской тишине я;

Потому что счастье не интервал — квarta, квинта, секста,
Не зависит от места бегства, состава теста,
Счастье — это когда запнулся в начале текста,
А тебе подсказывают из зала.

Это про дочь подруги сказать «одна из моих племянниц»,
Это «пойду домой», а все вдруг нахмурились и замялись,
Приобнимешь мальчика — а у него румянец,
 Скажешь «проводи до лифта» — а провожают аж до вокзала.
И не хочется спорить, поскольку все уже
Доказала.

15 декабря 2007 года
HAPPINESS

For suffering I have no time left.
I must speak clearly, write clearly
About Turetsky, Gorokhovsky, Kabakov
And learn, taking pictures and staring,
To distinguish colorfulness and coloration, sand and ochre
And at some points I’ll laugh, at some sigh or ah,
Probably when I suddenly stop short and die,
They’ll squeeze me into the green hall of my museum.

Though I have nothing to tell these walls — they have
Something to impart through me; and perhaps the downside
Of this passionate love for work is that reciprocity
Will eat me up whole, insofar as it’s totalitarian.
Yes, give it its due, and all the surplus, all the extras,
But I have to give concerts and make books
And on every street there’s a boy,
Falling away in vain.

As for poetry — it smells of something alcoholic.
I’ll kill myself with such a quantity.
That there will be a holiday for certain persons
Who were outrages at my shaking of the foundations.
— What can you hear there at such a nightmarish volume?
Where is there space in you for that fragility, that breakability?
And where do you turn
In these empty containers
From all those firm words?

That this is an addiction is unlikely to be big news.
Neither the absence of the Internet, nor labor, nor conscience
Will not cure the thirst — for any kind of rhyme, that is,
You’re greedy like a rabid wolf.
He who got smashed once comes back for another dose.
The first row looks at me threateningly.
As for prose — I can’t [do] prose
True, soon, I think I’ll learn.

The warning “you’ll end badly” — is pure clowning.
I’m able to live in a tornado and without tornadoes.
It’s not a violent death one should fear
But a violent life — that’s scarier.
Because you won’t earn happiness, hard as you try
Because happiness is a Jamaican’s tamtam,
Happiness, don’t break in me,
Rise up
Don’t settle down
Will I really survive in this diabolical silence;

Because happiness is not an interval — a forth, fifth, or sixth
It doesn’t depend on the place of escape, the composition of the dough,
Happiness is when you stumble at the beginning of a text,
And you’re prompted by the audience.

It’s saying about the daughter of a friend “one of my nieces,”
It’s “I’m going home,” and everyone frowns and hesitates,
You lightly hug a boy — and he blushes
You say, “walk me to the elevator,” — and they walk you to the train station,
And you don’t want to argue, since you’ve already
Proven everything.

*15 December 2007*
Или даже не бог, а какой-нибудь его зам
поднесет тебя к близоруким своим глазам
обнаженным камушком, мертвым шершнем
и прольет на тебя дыхание, как бальзам,
настоящий рижский густой бальзам,
и поздравит тебя с прошедшим
– с чем прошедшим?
– со всем прошедшим.
покатает в горсти, поскоблит тебя с уголка —
кудри слабого чаю
лоб сладкого молока
беззащитные выступающие ключицы
скосишь книзу зрачки – пьют себе облака,
далеко под тобой, покачиваясь слегка
больше ничего с тобой
не случится
– ну привет, вот бог, а я его генерал,
я тебя придирчиво выбирал
и прибрав со всем твоим
бараклишком
человеческий, весь в прожилочках, минерал,
что-то ты глядишь изумленно слишком
будто бы ни разу
не умирал

3 сентября 2008 года
Or not even god, but some one of his deputies
takes you up to his nearsighted eyes
as a naked pebble, a dead hornet
and pours on you breath like balsam,
real Rigan thick balsam,
and wishes you a happy past
— what past?
— *all* that has passed.

rolls you in his palm, scrapes you from the corner —
curls of weak tea
forehead of sweet milk
defenseless protruding clavicles
you cast your pupils down — clouds float by,
a long ways below you, rocking gently
nothing more
will happen to you

— well hi, here’s god, and I’m his general,
I meticulously picked you
and took you with all of your
stuff
a human, all veiny, mineral,
it seems you’re looking a little too bewildered
as if you’ve never, not once
died

3 September 2008
ВМЕСТО ВСТУПЛЕНИЯ

огромный город — не хватает глаз —
прокуренный от шахт до антресолей,
и где-то в глубине сидим мы с олей
и поглощаем углекислый газ.
есть что-то, что обязывает нас.
вот пёс, что дремлет, старый и ночной,
в соломке мелких солнечных лучей,
вот горький ветер, ниоткуда родом —
они обычно служат поворотом
каких-то тайных внутренних ключей.
и оля с камерой идет по огородам,
а я ищу словцо погорячей.
то, что получится, и будет кислородом.
мы фабрики счастливых мелочей.
идет состав одышливый вдали,
мальчишка паучка кладет за плинтус,
и бабушки за хлебушек — «подвиньтесь!» —
отсчитывают звонкие рубли, —
все это чёрно-белый фотосинтез.
а мы такие легкие
земли.
IN PLACE OF AN INTRODUCTION

enormous city — not enough eyes
smoked through from the mines to the attics
and somewhere in the depths sit olya and I
and devour carbon dioxide gas.
there’s something that binds us.
here is a dog, dozing, old and no one’s,
in straws of small rays of sunlight,
here’s a bitter wind borne out of nowhere —
they usually serve as a turn
of some secret inner keys.
and olya with her camera goes along the gardens,
and I search for the most fiery word.
and that which results will be oxygen.
we’re a factory of happy trifles.
there’s a short-winded group in the distance,
a boy puts a spider behind the moulding,
and grandmas for bread — “get moving!” —
count out ringing roubles, —
all of this is black-and-white photosynthesis.
and we’re such lungs
of the earth.
СНОВА НЕ МЫ

 рыжей

ладно, ладно, давай не о смысле жизни, больше вообще ни о чем таком
лучше вот о том, как в подвальном баре со стробоскопом под потолком пахнет липкой
самбукой и табаком
в пятницу народу всегда битком
и красивые, пьяные и не мы выбирают курить, он в ботинках, она на цыпочках, босиком
у нее в руке босоножка со сломанным каблуком
он хохочет так, что едва не давится кадыком
черт с ним, с мироустройством, все это бессилие и гнилье
расскажи мне о том, как красивые и не мы приезжают на юг, снимают себе жилье,
как старухи передают ему миски с фруктами для нее
и какое такиссты бессовестное жулье
и как тетка снимает у них во дворе с веревки свое ненужное белье,
деревянное от крахмала
как немного им нужно, счастье мое
как мало
расскажи мне о том, как постигший важное – одинок
как у загорелых улыбки белые, как чеснок,
и про то, как первая сигарета сбивает с ног,
если ее выкурить наоточак
говори со мной о простых вещах
как пропитывают влюбленных густым мерцающим веществом
и как старики хотят продышать себе пятачок в одиночестве,
как в заиндевевшем стекле автобуса,
протереть его рукавом,
говоря о мертвом как о живом
как красивые и не мы в первый раз целуют друг друга в мочки,
несмелы, робки
как они подпевают радио, стоя в пробке
как несут хоронить кота в обувной коробке
как холодную куклу, в тряпке
как на юге у них звонит, а они не снимают трубки,
чтобы не говорить, тяжело дыша, «мама, все в порядке»;
как они называют будущих сыновей всячески идиотскими именами
слишком чудесные и простые,
чтоб оказаться нами
расскажи мне, мой свет, как она забирается прямо в туфлях к нему в кровать
и читает «терезу батисту, уставшую воевать»
и закатывает глаза, чтоб не зареветь
и как люди любят себя по-всякому убивать,
чтобы не мерзть

расскажи мне о том, как он носит очки без диоптрий, чтобы казаться старше,
чтобы нравиться бильєтреше,
вахтёре,
папиной секретарше,
но когда садится обедать с друзьями и предается сплетням,
он снимает их, становясь почти семнадцатилетним

расскажи мне о том, как летние фейерверки над морем вспыхивают, потрескивая
почему та одна фотография, где вы вместе, всегда нерезкая
как одна смс делается эпиграфом
дологих лет унижения; как от злости челюсти сжимаются
так, словно ты алмазы в мелкую пыль дробишь ими
почему мы всегда будемнечно переигрывать,
когда нужно казаться всем остальным счастливыми,
разлюбившими

почему у всех, кто указывает нам место, пальцы вечно в слюне и сале
почему с нами говорят на любые темы,
кроме самых насущных тем
почему никакая боль все равно не оправдывается тем,
как мы точно о ней когда-нибудь написали

расскажи мне, как те, кому нечего сообщить, любят вечеринки, где
много прессы
все эти актрисы
метресс
праздные мудотрясы
жаловаться на стрессы,
решать вопросы,
наблюдать за тем, как твои кумиры обращаются в человеческую труху
расскажи мне как на духу
почему к красивым когда-то нам приросла презрительная гримаса
почему мы куски бессонного злого мяса
или лучше о тех, у мыса

вот они сидят у самого моря в обнимку,
ладони у них в песке,
и они решают, кому идти руки мыть и спускаться вниз
просить ножик у рыбаков, чтоб порезать дыню и ананас
даже пахнут они — гвоздика или анис —
совершенно не нами
значительно лучше нас

13 июня 2009 года
AGAIN NOT WE

to redhead

fine, fine, let’s not get on the meaning of life, no more at all about any of that
better about this, how in a basement bar with a strobe light under the ceiling it smells of linden
sambuca and tobacco
on friday there’s always a thick crowd
and beautiful, drunk, and not we run out to smoke, he’s in boots, she’s on tiptoe, barefoot
in her hands is a sandal with a broken heel
he laughs so that he’s almost crushed by his adam’s apple
to hell with it, with the world order, it’s all impotence and rot
tell me about how beautiful not we travel to the south, rent a house
how the old ladies give him a bowl with fruit for her
and how taxi drivers are shameless thieves
and how the lady takes from the line in their yard her unbending linens
wooden from starch
how they don’t need much, my happiness
how little
tell me about how the one who has achieved what’s important is lonely
how the suntanned have white smiles, like garlic,
and about how the fist cigarette knocks you off your feet,
if you smoke it hard
talk with me about simple things

how those in love are soaked through with a thick, sparkling substance
and how old men want to breathe themselves a nickel in solitude,
how on the frosted window of the bus
you run it with your sleeve,
speaking of the dead as of the living

how the beautiful and not we for the first time kiss each other’s ear lobes, unbravely, shyly
how they sing along to the radio, waiting in traffic
how they carry a cat to be buried in a shoe box
like a cold doll, in rags
how in the south their phone rings and they pick it up,
so as not to say, breathing heavily, “mom, everything’s alright”;
how they name their future sons all sorts of idiotic names
too miraculous and simple,
to turn out to be us.
tell me, my light, how still in her shoes she crawls into bed with him
and reads “tereza batista: home from the wars”
and rolls back her eyes, so as not to scream
and how people love to kill themselves in all sorts of ways
so as not to go dead

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tell me about how he wears glasses without a prescription in order to look older
to make the ticket-taker like him
the janitor
and his dad’s secretary
but when he sits down to lunch with his friends and gives himself over to gossip
he takes them off, becoming almost a seventeen year old

tell me about how summer fireworks above the sea burst, sparkling
why that one photograph where you’re together is always unclear
how one text message becomes an epigraph
for long years of debasement; how your jaw so clenched from anger
that it’s like you’re grinding diamonds into a fine dust
why we always monstrously overplay it
when we need to show everyone else that we’re happy
fallen out of love

why everyone who shows us our place always has their finger in spit and lard
why they speak with us on any topic
except the most essential topics
why no pain is ever compensated for by
how precisely we at some point write about it

tell me how those who have nothing to communicate love parties where there’s a lot of press
all these actresses
maîtresses
idle cockshakers
complain about stress
solve issues
observe how your idols turn into human decay
tell me in spirit
why we who were once beautiful have grown this resentful grimace
why we are pieces of sleepless evil meat
or better about those near the jetty

they’re sitting by the very sea in each other’s arms,
their palms are in the sand,
and they’re deciding who should go wash their hands and go down below
to ask the fishermen for a knife to cut the melon and pineapple
they even smell—carnations and anise—
completely not like us
markedly better than us

13 June 2009