From the Pastoral to the Grotesque in Late Russian Realism, 1872-1899

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2011
This dissertation argues that, during the last three decades of the nineteenth-century, at a time when, influenced by Mikhail Bakunin’s philosophies of destruction, Russian revolutionaries called for the annihilation of tsarist Russia, realist novelists turned to the grotesque mode. Whereas works written by Ivan Turgenev, Sergei Aksakov, Ivan Goncharov, and Tolstoy in the 1850s and 1860s had portrayed Russia in positive terms through the lens of an idyllic countryside, three late realist novels, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Demons [Бесы] (1872), Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin’s The Golovlevs [Господа Головлевы] (1875-1881), and Lev Tolstoy’s Resurrection [Воскресение] (1899), used the grotesque to cast a negative look at that same world. I base my definition of the grotesque on studies by Mikhail Bakhtin (Rabelais and His World) and Wolfgang Kayser (The Grotesque in Art and Literature), which describe the grotesque as an estrangement of the familiar. Kayser argues that the grotesque distorts the world as we know it; Bakhtin supplements this definition by suggesting that grotesque estrangement leads to a degradation of the abstract and spiritual to the level of physicality and the body. Working with these definitions I argue that Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Tolstoy used devices associated with earlier realism to develop their aesthetic of the grotesque and to depict Russian reality in a grotesque mode. They did not simply revive the earlier Gogolian grotesque, but created a new grotesque that estranged traditional idealizing
modes of depicting life on the Russian country estate. In these late realist novels Russian reality is populated by despiritualized, grotesque beings. I set the stage for this project through an analysis of the conceptualist Vladimir Sorokin’s Roman (1994), in which he simulates the pastoral idyll of the Russian countryside and then deforms and destroys it through grotesque violence. Like the nineteenth-century novelists, Sorokin reacts against the nostalgic impulse that has prevailed in Russian attitudes toward the past.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
1

**Chapter 1**  
The Path from Idyll to the Grotesque in  
Vladimir Sorokin’s *Roman*  
28

**Chapter 2**  
Grotesque Realism and the Inadequacies of  
‘Landowner Literature’ in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*  
68

**Chapter 3**  
Grotesque Realism and the Downfall of the Family  
Novel in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlevs*  
109

**Chapter 4**  
Grotesque Estrangement in Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*  
148

**Conclusion**  
188

**Sources Cited**  
197
Acknowledgements

The debts I have accrued in this process are numerous. First and foremost, I’d like to thank my advisor, Liza Knapp, for consistent support on this project and for helping make it much better than I thought it could have been. I also want to thank Irina Reyfman and Robert Belknap for numerous useful suggestions. The other members of my committee, Richard Wortman and Valentina Izmirlieva, provided much food for thought for the book expansion of this project. I thank Cathy Popkin for suggestions in the early stages of the project. I could not have finished without the Harriman Institute dissertation fellowship, which allowed me to spend a year writing.

Along the way I have received help and assistance from many others. I thank Mark Lipovetsky for suggestions on the Sorokin chapter and for welcoming me to Boulder. The participants of the “Tolstoy and World Literature” conference (Yasnaya Polyana 2010) gave me feedback on my Tolstoy chapter. William Mills Todd III and Justin Weir shared unpublished work with me. Jeff Love provided suggestions on the grotesque. Natalie Koch took long coffee breaks with me in Boulder and checked out countless sources relevant to my project. Katherine Bowers dutifully read my Saltykov-Shchedrin chapter and provided encouragement and support. And I extend a special thank you to Emma Lieber for showing me the way forward, for her friendship, and for her reassurance every step of the way.

I am grateful to my father, for support and assistance during this last year. My uncle Arben printed hundreds of pages of my dissertation and helped get it to the right people. Thanks to Meg and John L. for their interest about this project and for taking the
time to celebrate my “victories.” I could not have asked for a better mother and father-in-law.

My debt to my mother, Ariana Naco, and my grandmother, Lilika, exceeds words. I would not be where I am today had it not been for their support. Many are the number of hours they have spent hours speaking words of perseverance and faith. I only hope, in the years to come, to be able to give back to them some of what has been given me.

And finally, I extend my sincerest gratitude to John, my partner and my anchor on this long and occasionally tempestuous journey. “I love none better than you.”
Introduction

The grotesque is a style that aesthetically distorts normative realities. For this reason, it becomes “preeminent in periods of great […] upheaval and cultural instability” (Helbling 5). Social periods ripe for the grotesque have been abundant in Russian history. As Kevin Platt argues in his *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution*, literary works from “Russia’s periods of rapid transformation” (he singles out Peter the Great’s reforms, the Emancipation of the serfs, the Russian revolution, and the fall of the Soviet Union) constitute a “special form of the grotesque.” When Russian reality was upended at times of great political instability, literary works captured this inherent instability by “portray[ing] a disorienting mix of the old and new social spaces” (Platt 4). Platt terms this style a “revolutionary grotesque” and defines it as a vein of the grotesque that fuses “the opposite social worlds of past and future” (4). In Platt’s argument, “the revolutionary grotesque is […] not a genre itself, but a parasite on a genre that exists as long as the idea of revolutionary social change is itself alive and productive in Russian culture” (192).

In this dissertation I argue that the last three decades of the nineteenth-century, a time when Russia was shaken by revolutionary and terrorist activity, were another important time when the “idea of revolutionary social change” was “alive and productive” in the Russian psyche. Although Russia did not witness an actual revolution during this time, this period was plagued by tremendous social instability. Among the various displays of national discontent and instability of this time, I focus especially on the underground revolutionary activity of the period and argue that its natural complement was the appearance of grotesque realism on the Russian literary scene.
The instability that defined the last three decades of the nineteenth-century began with Alexander II’s liberation of millions of Russian serfs through a decisive imperial edict in 1861. Initially, the emperor’s act inspired the nation. The poet Fyodor Tiutchev praised the tsar for having “returned the little brother to his family,” thus turning a slave into a man, and the censor Alexander Nikitenko called the emancipation manifesto “probably the most important document in the thousand-year history of the Russian people” (Tiutchev 197, Nikitenko 179; qtd. in Wortman Scenarios of Power 58). Yet ridding the nation of serfdom did not improve the actual economic conditions of the Russian peasant. The peasants were given freedom, but they did not receive enough land to make a living. Moreover, the yields of Russian agriculture remained at a dismal low, which only provoked more discontent among the populace. Before the emancipation Russian liberals earnestly believed in the possibility of far-reaching reform from above. Yet once the emancipation proclamation was published, even initial enthusiasts were dismayed by the final document. When news came of post-emancipation peasant revolts, the general consensus among Russian liberals was that February 19, 1861 did not

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1 For a detailed account on how land was distributed during the emancipation see Alexander Kornilov, Modern Russian History, volume 2, 45-54.

2 Nikolai Chernyshhevsky, who had always been skeptical about the reforms, relates the following conversation with Nekrasov: “On [Nekrasov’s] face was an expression of grief, his eyes were downcast…‘That’s liberty, that’s what it is’ and he went on speaking for two or three minutes in the same tone of voice. ‘And what were you expecting? For a long time it’s been obvious that this is what we would get,’ I [Chernyshhevsky] said to him. ‘No, this is not what I was expecting,’ he answered, and he added that naturally he was not expecting anything extraordinary, but that this went far beyond his expectations” (qtd. in Venturi 169).
put to rest the problem of social relations in Russia, but was only the initial step in the resolution of a problem that required a great deal more work (Venturi 169).

Instead of bettering the conditions of the peasants, the emancipation of 1861 merely led to a decline in the economic welfare of the landed gentry. In Crisis of the Old Order: Gentry and Government, Roberta Manning argues that the emancipation “was an enormous economic blow” to the gentry (8). As she argues, the final years of the Russian empire could be viewed as a “prolonged period of crisis for the old political order” largely caused by the “decline and disintegration” of the landowning gentry who did not adjust well to life without the peasant workforce (3). There were certainly exceptions to this picture of “decline and disintegration,” but on the whole, the emancipation of 1861 “overturned the entire basis of the rural economy as previously practiced on the estates of the Russian gentry” (Manning 4) and created its share of problems for the whole gentry class. Landowners who had previously been used to extracting revenue from their estates while the serfs performed the agricultural labor were now forced to take more responsibility for managing their estates. Their poor training and lack of practical judgment about agricultural matters led to an erosion in the life of the estate.³

In combination, all the negative effects of the emancipation provoked much national discontent. As Richard Wortman suggests, the abolition of serfdom gave rise to a “psychology of change” never before seen in Russian society (Crisis of Russian Populism 2). The mentality of the thinking public as a whole, but especially of the new generation of the 1860s, was marked by a “spirit of criticism” directed at the core of society (Wortman, Crisis 2). Everything taken for granted in the old order was now

³ For a discussion of the causes of disintegration in the countryside estate, see Manning 3-12.
questioned and deemed inadequate by the generation of the 60s. The educated Russian youth of the 60s saw both the past and the present as “tainted with injustice” (Wortman Crisis 2).

During the late nineteenth century, the general discontent of the population with the tsarist regime became evident from the moment the serfs were emancipated. Shortly after the emancipation, liberalism spread throughout Russia. During the early to mid-sixties, Russian liberals spoke out against the government’s half-measures and called for more substantive and more just reforms. For instance, in 1862, in response to conservative claims about compensation of the nobility after the emancipation, a progressive group of noblemen from Tver wrote a resolution that called not only for fiscal and judicial reform, but also for the abolition of class privilege in favor of a representative government based on equal participation of all people (Kornilov 72-73). These requests for a constitutional system were echoed in several other forums during this period. Alexander Herzen supported the ideas of the Tver nobility in his Kolokol, while Nikolai Ogarev wrote an address that advocated those ideas. To an extent, despite its inadequacies, the government was also attempting further reforms (fiscal, judicial and others) during this time. In fact, as Kornilov points out, a liberal, democratic spirit resonated throughout Russia for quite a few years and only came to a halt after Karakozov’s 1866 attempt to assassinate the tsar. That violent act shook both the tsar and the general public and it gave strength to reactionary factions (Kornilov 106). “That event,” writes Kornilov, “made an indelible impression on Alexander [II] and on the public, and the reactions and enemies of democratic reform made skillful use of that impression” (106). The reactionary sentiment led to much persecution during this period,
of both liberals and radicals alike, and, among other things, it pushed the movement to reform Russia to the underground where it acquired much more radical features.

Fittingly, then, after the era of the Great Reforms a “revolutionary conspiratorial tradition” acquired a “permanent foothold in Russian life, especially among the educated class” (Ulam 18). Although an actual revolution did not come about during the nineteenth century, these revolutionaries came to believe that the status quo in tsarist Russia could not be mended from above. Unlike the liberals who called for reform and constitution, the revolutionaries had much more extreme goals. Despite the wide variety of disconnected groups that made up the Russian revolutionary movement, and despite disagreements among these groups on how to bring about the revolution, on the revolution’s timing, and on the political system that would come to power after the revolution, all branches of the Russian revolutionary movement were incontrovertibly united by a single percept: old Russia must breathe its last.

Though begotten by the constitutional liberalism of the 1860s, the revolutionary movement that came into being during the 1870s had violence and destruction, rather than hopes of reform, at the core of its political platform. For the revolutionary, the most immediate political goal, a goal more pressing than the establishment of communal socialism, was the destruction of the status quo. As Isaiah Berlin puts it, “the motley

4 Some radicals attempted to preach socialist ideology to the peasants in the hopes of inciting revolt, while others believed their mission was not to teach the peasants, but rather to learn from them and emulate their organically socialist lifestyle. Still others, like Mikhail Bakunin, believed that the examples of bandits like Pugachev and Stenka Razin who had terrorized rural Russia, proved that the peasant was ready and especially equipped for revolutionary activity. This respect for the peasant was not shared by all radicals. There were some Russian radicals like the nihilist Pisarev who did not rest their hopes on the peasant and the masses, but believed that the key to revolution rested with a few well-educated, intelligent men like himself and his comrades.
variety of revolutionary types” in Russia shared one single utopian myth: “that once the monster (tsarism) was slain, the sleeping princess – the Russian peasantry – would awaken and without further ado live happily ever after” (235). Though himself not a participant in revolutionary action, the radical critic Nikolai Chernyshevsky called for the violent destruction of the status quo as early as 1859 (in a document titled “Letter from the Provinces” published abroad in Alexander Herzen’s Kolokol). After describing the current conditions in Russia as “horrible” and “unbearable,” he concluded that Russia must be “summon[ed] […] to arms,” for “only the peasants’ axes [could] save [the country]” (qtd. in Venturi 159). Years later, another critic, Dmitry Pisarev, similarly called for the “successful overthrow of the reigning Romanov dynasty and the transformation of the political and social structure.” “What is dead and rotten,” wrote Pisarev referring to the status quo, “must of itself fall into the grave. It remains for us to give it a last push and throw the dirt over their stinking corpses” (125, 126).

What for Pisarev was simply an abstract goal, turned into a concrete task for the Russian revolutionaries. Among the tasks they envisioned ahead of them, the revolutionaries believed that destruction should precede any efforts at reconstruction. To some extent, they may have borrowed this order from Mikhail Bakunin who in 1842 famously asserted that “the passion for destruction is a creative passion, too” (57). Bakunin did not mean to glorify destruction as such in this often-used and often-misunderstood phrase. Rather, he believed that destruction could give life to something new and it was this something new that he glorified. Elsewhere, he refined this concept and stated that “in moments of crisis, the masses will not hesitate to burn down their

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5 It was toward the end of 1857 and the beginning of 1858 that the preliminary steps for the emancipation of the serfs were first made public (Venturi 104).
homes and neighborhoods…they develop a passion for destruction.” As he elaborates, without this passion for destruction “revolution would be impossible,” for “[r]evolution requires extensive and widespread destruction, since in this way, and only in this way, are new worlds born” (334). In these statements Bakunin stresses the importance of destruction and negation in any creative effort: without first excising the authority of old institutions, there could be no new life in Russia. Though a number of these statements were made long before the emancipation of the serfs, they encapsulated Bakunin’s philosophy of destruction. When during the late sixties (1868) Bakunin began to publish extensively abroad, he began to exert direct influence on Russian youth of the period.

Among those influenced by Bakunin was Nechaev, who asserted his willingness to use any means for the achievement of revolutionary goals in his notorious “Catechism of a Revolutionary” (1869), which is thought to have been influenced by Bakunin. As Nechaev wrote: “The revolutionary enters the world of the State, of the privileged classes, of the so-called civilization, and he lives in this world only for the purpose of bringing about its speedy and total destruction. He who has any sympathy for this world is not a revolutionary” (73). Nechaev was a particular kind of unscrupulous revolutionary willing to say or do anything to advance the cause. He had no trouble lying or committing violence and often used scare tactics to subdue those beneath him.

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6 It should be noted that the revolutionaries’ desire to wipe traditional Russia off the map is rooted in a spirit of revolutionary negation that is usually traced back to Hegel, who was highly influential in nineteenth-century Russia. As James Billington puts it, in nineteenth-century Russia there was a “Hegelian infatuation” (Russia in Search for Itself 10). As Frederick Copleston illustrates in his study Philosophy in Russia: From Herzen to Lenin and Berdyaev, Hegel influenced all camps of Russian intellectual thought. Intellectuals on the left like Herzen (generally understood as Westernizers) were influenced by Hegel’s dialectics and believed that they were the formula for bringing down the status quo. Others, like the Slavophiles, were influenced by the Hegelian idea of the Volksgeist – the spirit of the people – and its genuine manifestations.
The longing for destruction was passed on even to groups that were less nefarious and more principled like the notorious Organization of the People’s Will (Narodnaia volia or OPW). The OPW brought to life Pisarev’s violent rhetoric on March 13, 1881, long after Pisarev’s death, when they successfully assassinated Alexander II in front of a crowd of spectators. The “stinking corpse” that Pisarev had envisioned as a symbol of tsarist Russia took real shape in the public imagination through the body of the maimed and dying tsar.

In light of the clear instability that generally prevailed in late nineteenth-century Russia and which was augmented through the revolutionary activities that could be witnessed in the last three decades of the century, a key question raised by this dissertation is whether this revolutionary instability elicited a response in the literature of the period. I will suggest that the spirit of revolution that arose in Russia during the late nineteenth-century did indeed have its effects on the Russian novel. However, the literary response to revolutionary activity was not overtly politicized; it was indirect and only covertly political. Because literature is idiosyncratic by nature, a literary “response” can conceivably take a number of shapes and forms, some openly political, some overtly apolitical. There are different layers of meaning in any given text, and political statements can be found beneath the surface in a work of literature, within the “political unconscious” Fredric Jameson discusses in his book by that same name (The Political Unconscious).

Scholars have already addressed direct treatments of revolutionary figures in the Russian realist novel. For the most part, however, studies of the nineteenth-century novel investigate the rapport between literature and revolution either through an indoctrinated,
Marxist-Leninist lens, or in the context of tendentious genres such as the anti-nihilist novel. Charles Moser’s comprehensive study *The Russian Anti-Nihilist Novel* explores the interaction between literature and revolution by way of the anti-nihilist novel, but does not incorporate mainstream novels except insofar as they intersect with the anti-nihilist genre. In his study (*The Russian Revolutionary Novel*) of the tendentious “revolutionary novel,” Richard Freeborn considers Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* and Chernyshevsky’s *What is to Be Done?* as novels with the makings of “revolutionary novels,” but ultimately concludes that the genre had not yet come into being during this period. Freeborn sees these works only as precursors to the “first true revolutionary novel” in the Russian tradition, S.M. Stepniak-Kravchinsky’s *The Career of a Nihilist.*

There have also been studies on how themes from tendentious works permeate mainstream novels. In *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism* (1988) Irina Paperno illustrates how literary themes from Chernyshevsky’s *What is to Be Done?* migrated into and influenced works like *Anna Karenina* and *The Idiot.* More recently, in *Vicissitudes of Genre in the Russian Novel* (2001) Russell Valentino tackles the problem of literature and politics in Russian realism (and beyond, to modernism) through an exploration of tendentiousness in this tradition. Valentino considers both purely tendentious novels like Chernyshevsky’s *What is to Be Done?* and mainstream novels he believes incorporate features of tendentious genres like *Demons* and *Fathers and Sons.*

Critics have thus either seen the Russian novel as having an inadequate or not fully formed response to the concerns of radicals, or as addressing those concerns by

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7 This work was first published in Italian in 1882, then in English in 1883. Many other European translations would follow. The work was not published in Russian until after 1905 (Patyk 768, 771).
relying on tendentious genres. In this project, I will suggest that Russian realist authors, though many of them were not avid supporters of the revolutionary movement, frequently did express opinions on the movement in their fiction. My primary focus will not be direct representations of revolutionaries or overt statements about revolution. Rather, I am interested in exploring the ways in which, directly or indirectly, the revolutionary spirit may have permeated the inner fabric of the realist novel and affected its poetics in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Instead of looking at tendentious literature, I will focus on non-tendentious works with more ambivalent messages. I will argue that during the same time that revolutionaries wanted to wipe the tsarist establishment off the map, writers reconceptualized it as a grotesque world. As revolutionaries called for a violent destruction of the status quo in Russia and referred to the country in very physical terms as something “dead and rotten” and full of “stinking corpses,” Russian realists looked at Russian reality through a grotesque lens and saw it as a world populated by grotesque bodies deprived of spirituality. Revolutionaries wanted to destroy the tsarist establishment in its entirety, and though realist authors were outside the political bounds of that fight, by disparaging the status quo through their grotesque realism or by revealing it as susceptible to violent change, they visualized its downfall.

There were two surges in revolutionary activity in the last three decades of the nineteenth century: one began at the start of the 1870s and escalated up until the assassination of the Tsar Alexander II in 1881, while the other started in the 1890s and
continued all the way up to the revolution in 1905. In my dissertation I consider three nineteenth century novels from these two periods: I look at two novels from the 1870s, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Demons (1872) and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin’s The Golovlevs (1875-1880), as well as one novel from the 1890s, Lev Tolstoy’s Resurrection (1899). These three novels differ from one another in their treatment of the political realities of the late nineteenth-century – two of them (Demons and Resurrection) incorporate revolution into their plotlines, while the third (The Golovlevs) does not. Irrespective of their opposing approaches and diverging political views, despite the presence or absence of revolutionaries, or the nature of their portrayal, these three works come together as novels defined by the grotesque.

It is not possible to establish a straightforward cause and effect relationship between the revolutionary movement and these three Russian novels that historically coincided with it. Rather, in a complicated historical and literary landscape, I would like to suggest a parallelism between Russian history and literature. The parallelism may be due to a number of reasons, including the disintegration of gentry life which was figured prominently in the Russian novel, or the larger social discontent that provoked the increase in revolutionary activity in the first place. Yet the appearance of a negative, grotesque view of Russian reality was concurrent with the violent rhetoric and actions of the revolutionaries. What I suggest is that during the late nineteenth century, at a time

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8 In Roots of Revolution, Franco Venturi mentions that the revolutionary activity in Russia “reached its climax with the assassination of Alexander II in 1881,” yet despite this escalation of revolutionary violence “[t]he hoped-for revolution did not break out.” Instead, Alexander III came to power, decided upon “a policy of extreme repression,” and eventually crushed the revolutionary organizations (XXVII). In the 1890s these underground revolutionary groups – most of them Marxist by this point – regained political significance, to a large part due to the dissatisfaction with autocracy that existed among the general populace (Acton 8, 106).
when Russian society was seething with underground revolutionary activity due to
tremendous discontent with the state of affairs, not only was there recurrent and
frequently criminal activity, but some of the same destructive sentiments that moved the
revolutionaries also penetrated Russian literature, leading to a sweepingly negative
outlook on Russian reality that was communicated through the grotesque.

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To understand the relationship between Russian realism and the Russian
revolutionary movement, we have to acknowledge that it is an inherently antagonistic
one. While the revolutionaries preached against reality and sought to see it in pieces so
that they might build their bright utopian futures out of the shambles of what had been,
realist authors recreated this same reality in fiction as ontologically stable and impervious
to drastic change. For my purposes here, my overarching definition of realism is based
on two works by D. A. Miller and Fredric Jameson, which suggest that in its treatment of
political realities, realism generally serves as a stabilizing force. In his study The Novel
and the Police, Miller takes a Foucauldian approach and considers the ways in which,
despite presenting itself as a “lawless” libertarian genre, the realist novel reinvents the
policing power of the law “in the very practice of novelistic representation” (20). The
realist novel is deeply committed to order and enforces social discipline on its characters.
In so doing, it ensures that they will never disrupt basic social decency or unleash
anarchic drives. Jameson similarly argues in his The Political Unconscious that the
“great realist novelists […] are forced, by their own narrative and aesthetic vested
interests, into a repudiation of revolutionary change and an ultimate stake in the status
quo. Their evocation of the solidity of their object of representation […] is necessarily
threatened by any suggestion that that world is not natural, but historical, and subject to radical change” (193). According to Jameson, due to their commitment to empirical reality as a subject of representation, realist authors cannot condone views of that reality as vulnerable to change; for if the world is changeable, then it cannot function as a solid object of representation.

In the Russian tradition, despite its penchant for disregarding formal literary conventions, a similar preservation of the status quo was at play in the practice of realism. As Robert Louis Jackson argues, whereas in 1835 Vissarion Belinsky called for a realism defined by “merciless frankness” that presented life “exposed in all its nakedness” and “frightful disintegration” (безобразие) (qtd. in Jackson, Dialogues with Dostoevsky 192), by the 1850s and 1860s, the status quo was represented in a more positive light. According to Jackson, around this time, Russian authors transcended Belinsky’s emphasis on reality’s “disintegration,” managed to discover authentic aesthetic beauty in their reality, and refrained from bitter social criticism. For instance, Turgenev’s A Huntsman’s Sketches showed that beauty could be discovered even in a world plagued by serfdom (Jackson, Dialogues 200).

9 Tolstoy famously asserted that in Russia “there [was] not a single work of literary prose that [rose] above mediocrity which could fit into the form of a novel, an epic, or a tale” (PSS 16:7; qtd. in Todd The Novel 401). His argument has been echoed and further modified by scholars over the years. They have addressed the freedoms that the Russian novel takes with both genre and narrative technique. One significant argument is that the Russian novel employed its formlessness, even needed it, to carry out a representation of the world that was somehow more honest. Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, who criticized the free forms of Russian realism, found that while Russian realism could be “devoid of taste and method,” it made up for its formlessness through increased “sincerity” (326-27).

10 Though “безобразие” could be translated in a number of ways, in this project I borrow Robert Louis Jackson’s translation of it as "disintegration."
The literary rendering of the beauty of reality and the transcendence of its political problems marks the beginning of the conservative position of Russian writers during this period. As Charles Moser demonstrates in his study of the literary polemics of the 1860s (Esthetics as Nightmare), unlike avid political radicals like Pisarev or Chernyshevsky, creative writers, whether intentionally or not, were conservatives or moderates who opposed the revolutionary movement. Rufus Mathewson addresses this notion in his seminal study The Positive Hero in Russian Literature. Mathewson mentions that during the debate of the 1860s on the function and nature of literature, political radicals advanced an aesthetic that would compel writers to create inspiring political heroes, while novelists viewed their art “as an autonomous kind of exploration, concerned with politics but finally independent of any political claims made upon it” (3).

For instance, as Eikhenbaum notes, around this period Tolstoy, prompted by frustrations with radical thinkers of his time, devised the philosophy of history in War and Peace (Eikhenbaum, Tolstoy in the Sixties 137-171). Among other things, Tolstoy’s philosophy of history also served as an anti-revolutionary statement. In fact, even before taking an explicitly anti-revolutionary stance Tolstoy had implicitly opposed the aims of the revolutionary movement through his original intention to avoid political problems altogether and write War and Peace as a family novel about ordinary life.

Tolstoy was not alone in wanting to write a novel that, despite its treatment of history, depicted family and private life as more significant than political realities. During the 1850s and 1860s many Russian writers retreated from political life and grounded their fiction in the landscapes of the countryside, thus giving rise to a rural realism that muffled political complexities by highlighting the personal and natural
aspects of reality. Despite being far from simplistic and riddled with underlying tensions, such a realism had a great deal in common with pastoral realism. This withdrawal from the political was at least partially a pastoral gesture. In his *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams defines the pastoral as a retreat into the past that is motivated by a "deep desire for stability" coupled with desperation to "evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time" (45). During the 1850s and 1860s, Sergei Aksakov, Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Goncharov, and Tolstoy – authors disparagingly referred to by Dostoevsky as “landowner writers” – sidestepped the commotion of the political arena and focused their works on a layer of life driven by natural and biological rhythms. Their depictions of a natural rather than political layer of existence, a world ruled by family rather than revolutionary brotherhood, led them to construct an image of the countryside and the country estate as an idyllic space – a space in which, as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, "the rhythm of human life [was] in harmony with the rhythm of nature" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 229). Bakhtin argues that the idyllic life is traditionally "limited to only a few of life's basic realities," which include "love, birth, death, marriage, labor, food and drink, stages of growth" (*Dialogic Imagination* 225). In many works by “landowner” writers, it was these occasions that governed day-to-day reality.

The writers’ refusal to treat questions of revolution led the radical critic Pisarev to viciously condemn Russian writers in an 1865 essay “Stroll Through the Gardens of Russian Literature” (Прогулка по садам российской словесности). In Pisarev’s view, realist authors wanted to “distract people from serious meditation” and to “divert the [public’s] gaze from the idiocies of life both large and small.” They accomplished this goal, as he put it, by drawing “readers away into a tiny little world of purely personal joys
and purely personal grievances” (Pisarev 271; qtd. in Moser, *Esthetics* 80); precisely the sort of reality to which Tolstoy had intended to give life in *War and Peace* and that he had already created in *Family Happiness*.

According to Pisarev, by pulling narratives away from the evils of contemporary Russia and into a detached countryside microcosm where beauty reigned, Russian writers were reinforcing the status quo. “Esthetics,” writes Charles Moser, “was a nightmare for Pisarev because it sustained what he saw from his vantage point in the dungeons of the Sts. Peter and Paul Fortress as a nightmarish reality” (*Esthetics* 81). Undoubtedly, for writers like Tolstoy or Turgenev, the revolutionary talk of Pisarev was no less nightmarish. Irrespective of what was happening in the political arena, at least within the confines of their fictional creations, the Pisarevs and Napoleons of the world are always declared the losers. Fictional characters who rise up against the status quo, like Bazarov and Rudin, are reduced to “superfluous men” who invariably fail in their attempts to reinvent their surrounding realities. If the radicals hoped to take on decisive action that would smash the very foundations of traditional Russia, “landowner” writers showed that the hope for such action was merely a subjective delusion. In their novels, rebellious characters who could not be reconciled to objective reality either perish or bitterly languish as social outcasts while the status quo – often the status quo on a rural estate – perpetually regenerates itself.

And yet, as I will show in this dissertation, during the late nineteenth century we witness a significant evolution in Russian realism, an evolution that directly or indirectly had an impact on the rapport between realism and revolution. If earlier, the status quo had been validated and perhaps even somewhat idealized, by 1872, the year of
publication of Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, writers cast a darker look at the status quo. Whether they were liberal or conservative, for or against revolution, Russian realists began to look at their surrounding reality through a grotesque lens.

The grotesque had existed as a literary phenomenon in nineteenth-century Russian literature long before the last three decades of the nineteenth-century. Its roots can be traced all the way back to Belinsky’s notion of “disintegration” [безобразие]. Within the sphere of Russian belles-lettres, before Turgenev and other Russian writers managed to transcend the “disfiguration” of their reality, Gogol had given life to the grotesque in his tales. The grotesque has been studied extensively in Gogol’s works and scholars have shown it to be a defining presence in his poetics. Donald Fanger, who argues (in *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*) that Gogol’s work is the “apotheosis of the grotesque,” defines the grotesque as essentially a “monstrous deviation from accepted norms.” He notes that Gogol’s grotesque, which began in the Ukrainian stories, survived well into the Petersburg tales (Fanger 124). Indeed, according to Boris Eikhenbaum in his well-known essay “How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ Was Made,” not only does the grotesque appear in Gogol’s Petersburg tales, but Gogol’s best-known story, the “Overcoat,” which ends with Akakii Akakievich’s madness, is “an effective apotheosis of the grotesque” (“How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ Is Made” 291). Because the grotesque in Gogol’s oeuvre has been very effectively and extensively explored and because Gogol belongs to a different era in Russian literature, it will not be directly addressed in this project. It is worth noting, however, that vestiges of the earlier Gogolian grotesque can still be traced in late nineteenth-century works of grotesque realism. The former bureaucrat Judas Golovlev from Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlevs*, though much less sympathetic than the clerk
Akakii Akakievich, is a grotesque being who could have easily been created by Gogol; the Chief Procurator of the Most Holy Synod Toporov from *Resurrection* is similarly driven by a bureaucratic mentality not so different from that of Akakii Akakievich. The spiritless automatism that guides Akakii Akakievich’s actions is also what powers these characters, but in their case the comic Gogolian grotesque has taken a darker turn as automatism gives rise to unfathomable cruelty. Indeed, one might say that this darker, overwhelmingly negative view on reality is what sets apart the late realist grotesque I address. Works of grotesque realism made an appearance in the nineteenth-century after Gogol and before the period I will be focusing on, but pieces like Dostoevsky’s *Selo Stepanchikovo* were too humorous to compare with the abysmal and purely negative view on reality that we witness in the late nineteenth-century grotesque.

Moreover, *Demons*, *The Golovlevs*, and *Resurrection* were works of grotesque realism aimed against the earlier novelistic tradition in Russian literature. The transition from Akakii Akakievich to Judas and generally the transitions in Russian literature from Gogol to works by Saltykov-Shchedrin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy in the late nineteenth-century was paved by the semi-pastoral style of “landowner” literature. The grotesque realism of the late nineteenth-century was begotten not just through Gogol and his grotesque, but also through the rural landscapes of Turgenev or Aksakov. When responding to the turmoil of revolution, the late realists also interacted with their literary predecessors, thus giving life to a *sui generis* grotesque that was not merely a revival of the Gogolian grotesque.

The late realist grotesque I consider gave rise to what may be seen as anti-novels that distort the forms and ideals of earlier novels. For instance, whereas earlier
treatments of Russian reality such as Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *A History of a Town* (1869-70) displayed profound grotesque realism, the grotesque in *The Golovlevs* is aimed specifically at the family novel in particular rather than all aspects of Russian reality. If we were to consider nineteenth-century Russian literature diachronically, then it can be said that these later works reenacted literary impulses from Belinsky’s and Gogol’s time, while also incorporating touches from the style of the 1850s and 1860s deep within the structures of their works. While earlier this rural landscape served as a literary oasis that allowed writers to abstain from political debates, in the late realist works it was precisely this space that became a target for the grotesquery.

Taking these idiosyncratic properties into account, it is possible to formulate a definition of the late realist grotesque, with the awareness that just as the Russian pastoral was by no means a homogeneous phenomenon, so the grotesque manifests itself in different contours and shades. Even though the grotesque realism of the three novels I treat generally falls within a larger landscape of the grotesque, Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Tolstoy do not uniformly emphasize the same specific elements of the style.

Before moving to the specifics of the late-nineteenth-century Russian grotesque, I want to consider some of the larger theories of this style, which have shaped and guided my understanding of it. The uncertain history of the grotesque is the first challenge in any attempt to define this style. Some scholars believe the style dates to the Renaissance, while others trace the beginnings of the grotesque to antiquity. These contradicting viewpoints can be respectively attributed to the two foremost theoreticians of the
grotesque: Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin. The seminal works by these two theorists formulate the definition of the grotesque I present in this dissertation.¹¹

Kayser’s exploration of the grotesque in his *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* is guided by what he calls an “etymological history of the word” (10). He outlines various understandings of the grotesque, beginning with the first recorded use of the term by Italian painters in 1502, to the Romantic period, to the nineteenth-century realistic grotesque, and concludes with avant-garde movements like Surrealism. After this diachronic survey, Kayser settles on a comprehensive definition of the grotesque as defined by unnaturalness. “THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD” (184, emphasis Kayser’s), he asserts, and explains that the grotesque renders our worlds unreliable and strange. Comparing the grotesque to the fairytale, Kayser argues that when “viewed from the outside, the world of the fairy tale could also be regarded as strange and alien,” yet unlike the grotesque, this “world is not estranged […] the elements in it which are familiar and natural to us do not suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous” (184). In the grotesque our familiar world is transformed. The nature of these transformations varies depending on the text.

Bakhtin, who provides an alternate definition of the grotesque as a style that inherited and is filled with the “spirit of carnival,” suggests that though the grotesque could be construed as an estrangement from day-to-day reality, it usually renders this reality friendlier and more comic, rather than dark and ominous (Rabelais 47). For

¹¹ At points I have consulted works on the grotesque by less foundational scholars, but use these other sources in order to clarify the larger percepts of the grotesque devised by Kayser and Bakhtin. These include: Boris Eikhenbaum (“How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ Was Made”), Geoffrey Harpham (*On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*), and Robert Helbling (*The Power of Negative Thinking: The Grotesque in the Modern World*).
Bakhtin, grotesque estrangement relates to the carnival and the “peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (Rabelais 11). Bakhtin’s carnivalesque grotesque deposes authority and inverts all hierarchies, profanating the sacrosanct through laughter.

Despite competing definitions of the grotesque estrangement, this dissertation will argue that what defines the grotesque and what differentiates it from a similar style like the fantastic is precisely its deformation of the familiar. As Robert Helbling argues, if “the fantastic creates a world governed by its own esoteric law,” the grotesque shows “a disquieting estrangement of our world from itself” (6). As I will show, among various transformations, one could still expect to find traces of the familiar in the grotesque. Geoffrey Harpham posits that in the grotesque, “[i]n the midst of an overwhelming impression of monstrousness there is much we can recognize, much corrupted or shuffled familiarity” (5). The grotesque represents two worlds in one: a world familiar to the eye and mind and a monstrous world where familiarity gives way to aberration. Since the divisions between the two are not clearly delineated, it is difficult to determine where the familiar ends and the alien begins. Often, it is the very collision between the familiar and unfamiliar and the deep contrast and shock it evokes in the reader that marks the grotesque.

Distorted familiarity or familiarity pervaded by the unfamiliar is a significant characteristic in the makeup of the late nineteenth-century Russian realist grotesque. *Demons, The Golovlevs,* and *Resurrection* all engage the familiar narratives of the past, the very narratives of the 1850s and 1860s that contributed to their diachronic makeup,
and corrupt or estrange them in a variety of ways and in varying degrees. In Demons, Dostoevsky recreates the Turgenevan narrative of stability and then proceeds to unravel it, transforming it into a narrative of full-blown chaos; in The Golovlevs Saltykov-Shchedrin turns the very essence of pastoral stability from the earlier family narrative into an “impression of monstrousness” (Harpam); in Resurrection, Tolstoy provides a few fleeting snapshots of the countryside like the ones prominent in his earlier works, but surrounds this natural world with overwhelming unnaturalness.

The unifying thread behind the chaos, monstrousness, and unnaturalness, the particular syndrome that drives the process of estrangement and corruption of past narratives in Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and late Tolstoy, consists of creating a warped microcosm in which characters give preference to materialism and physicality over spirituality. Of the two competing definitions of the grotesque I have discussed, Bakhtin’s definition most directly engages the body as a fundamental component of the grotesque. Bakhtin recognizes the body and its manifold physical processes as what makes the estranged world of the grotesque peculiar. In Rabelais and His World Bakhtin discusses the appearance of the body in the grotesque and the process by which this style “turns [its] subject into flesh” (20). As he asserts, “the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation – the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body […]” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 19). Bakhtin uses several examples from the Middle Ages where learned discourse is “often debased to the bodily level of food, drink, digestion, and sexual life” (Rabelais 20). In Bakhtin’s words, grotesque bodies are: “ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point

\[12\] In fact, Bakhtin’s opposition to Kayser’s definition is largely motivated by the fact that it doesn’t leave enough room for the body (Rabelais 48).
of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics […]” (Rabelais 25). Classic aesthetics described the individual as finished and complete, separated from birth or development, whereas in the grotesque, the individual is a body in communion with the world, transgressing its inner boundaries, venturing outside through apertures such as "the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (Bakhtin, Rabelais 26). The grotesque body projects outwards and cannot be smoothed over or made to fit predetermined classical paradigms.

In the three late nineteenth-century works I discuss, it is the grotesque as a style that estranges the familiar through degradation and debasement that is most prominent. This preference can be attributed to the very nature of realism. With its emphasis on recreating the physical world, realism is inherently preferential to the grotesque constructed through disturbing but ultimately natural distortions of the human body, rather than a style that depends on supernatural, ethereal phenomena. Indeed, Kayser associates the grotesque predominantly with romanticism and modernism and argues that when realism flourished, the grotesque lost some of its prominence. “It stands to reason,” he writes, “that no genuine grotesques will be found in the art of the [nineteenth-century], and that the best we can hope for is a weak or impure manifestation of the genre” (Kayser 104). Yet upon stepping outside the German tradition, Kayser concedes that realism does not preclude the possibility of the grotesque. “The grotesque,” he writes, “has also its place in realism, even though its scope is considerably narrowed by the increasingly strong rejection of the supernatural and the greater emphasis which is placed on the humorous side” (Kayser 123). In the works I am considering, since the authentic supernatural is altogether absent, it is the human body, with all its spillages, orifices,
appendages, its perishability, and its need to engage in basic processes of subsistence (like eating), that serves as an object of grotesque exaggeration.

The prominence assigned to the body in the late realist grotesque and the use of the body to eviscerate past literary tropes that glorified the status quo, is an implicit response to the revolutionary activity throughout Russia during this time. While earlier works of Russian realism held up the personal and natural layers of reality as more significant than the historical, Demons, The Golovlevs, and Resurrection acknowledge the historical. In Demons and Resurrection revolutionaries permeate the novelistic plots, are given a substantial treatment, and are allowed freedom of action. These novels have divergent takes on the revolutionaries: Dostoevsky saw the revolutionaries as the root of the grotesquery that was taking over his reality, while Tolstoy viewed the very fabric of social reality as grotesque and the revolutionaries as the only ones at least partially (and temporarily) immune to it. Yet despite their contrasting perspectives, both authors present a grotesque and deeply imperfect reality susceptible to physical and historical actions. On the flip side, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s purely ahistorical novel, The Golovlevs, seems unusual for its time. Saltykov-Shchedrin exhumes the Aksakovian family chronicle in The Golovlevs and recreates a reality outside of history in which characters are unaware of basic historical facts. His intentional antihistoricism comes with a blatant rendering of the status quo and the characters in it as grotesque. Without once invoking revolutionaries in his narrative, Saltykov-Shchedrin symbolically enacts and validates their larger mission. Partially responding to or appropriating the materialist mentality of the revolutionaries, Russian writers created a grotesque reality in which

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13 Though a treatment of history, Tolstoy’s War and Peace attacks epoch-making history and deflates significant historical figures.
physicality was often appraised as more significant than spirituality. This project had its subconscious, indirect parallels to the revolution, and, at the very least, it revolutionized the novel genre by negating old forms.

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The purpose of this dissertation is to consider how Russian authors transform earlier literary motifs in response to a time of political instability in the late nineteenth-century. I will treat these earlier motifs – the distortion of which is often a measuring stick for the late realist grotesque – through a novel from a different era of instability: Vladimir Sorokin’s 1994 novel, Roman. A thoroughly postmodernist creation, Sorokin’s novel closely mimics the realist novel by bringing together countless pastoral motifs spread across multiple realist texts of the 1850s and 1860s. The first three quarters of Sorokin’s Roman function as a textual depository for Russian realism; this segment captures in more obvious terms the underlying vein of idealization in works by the early Tolstoy, Turgenev, Aksakov, and others. Eventually, however, after pages and pages of an almost cloying rendering of the Russian countryside as an idyll, the protagonist of Roman undergoes a rapid and unexplainable transformation and brutally murders everyone in his village, his bride, and finally himself. The disturbing murders and the bizarre ritualistic ceremonies that Roman performs with his victims give rise to a grotesque narrative as pure as the pastoral prevalent in the earlier part. Chapter one will thus investigate the clash of two essentialized versions of the pastoral and the grotesque in Roman. My analysis of how the grotesque derails the pastoral in the context of Sorokin’s synthetic nineteenth-century novel will illustrate the larger purpose of this dissertation and its scope of inquiry. Sorokin’s destruction of the traditional Russian
novel through the grotesque illustrates a variation of the grotesque as a style that deconstructs familiar narratives through their own devices.

The second chapter will address Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, with a focus on the duality that defines the aesthetic makeup of this novel. The first part of the novel begins by mimicking some of the narrative stability and the priority given to the personal (over the political) in Turgenev’s works, but Dostoevsky gradually dishevels this familiar narrative by giving life to a grotesque realism that upends hierarchies and places the physical on center stage. Chapter three focuses on Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlevs*, which revives the traditional countryside narrative found in Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle*. Yet while the stable microcosm of Golovlyovo may have all the makings of the estate in the classic Russian family novel, the Aksakovian narrative merely becomes the root for Saltykov-Shchedrin’s grotesque. The Golovlevs are fundamentally grotesque beings whose lives are driven by food cravings, and the former stability has given way to stagnant stasis. The fourth and final chapter will address Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, which similarly belongs to a time of social unrest. Through depictions of the body and of the body politic, Tolstoy presents both Russian gentry society and the penal system as worlds in which all values are inverted and soulless. Immoral individuals reign. In Nekhliudov’s reminiscences Tolstoy presents a few glimpses of the countryside that had been at the heart of his earlier works, but this pastoral idyll of the past is surrounded on all sides by a grotesque reality, and there can be no return to that age of innocence.

In these small glimpses of an earlier pastoral reality Tolstoy fleetingly indulges in a nostalgic longing for the lost past. By confronting the reader with the grotesque immediately after, he refuses to engage the nostalgic impulse. This refusal is echoed
throughout the works I consider. Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlevs* and even Sorokin’s *Roman* reject the impulse in Russian culture to feel nostalgia for the past while glorifying it as superior to the present. These works could be seen as epitomizing the antithesis of nostalgia. They react to past forms by partially recreating them and turning them into the root of their grotesque realism.
Chapter 1

The Path from Idyll to the Grotesque in Vladimir Sorokin’s Roman.

Written between 1985 and 1989, but published in 1994, Vladimir Sorokin’s Roman begins as a classic nineteenth-century novel in a style reminiscent of authors like Turgenev, Goncharov, Tolstoy, and even Dostoevsky, but ends on a postmodernist, grotesque note. The first three-quarters of Roman are written from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator, who in the manner of the realist novel often sums up the state of affairs, or interjects to provide psychological observations about both the novel’s protagonist Roman and other characters. As Sorokin himself explains, although he tried to “eliminate all temporal references,” the first parts of the story are set in the nineteenth century (Roll 81). Reading Roman, we immediately notice that the novel’s language, the literary space that houses the story, and the plot itself all mimic the nineteenth-century canon.

The plot of Roman follows the familiar nineteenth-century formula of homecoming: disenchanted by urban life in St. Petersburg, Roman Vospevennikov returns to his childhood home in the Russian countryside, a picturesque, nearly idyllic Krutoi Iar (translated as “steep ravine”) full of warm and fun-loving people who welcome him back with open arms. Roman’s retreat to his countryside nest mirrors those of many protagonists of nineteenth-century novels, including Lavretsky’s return to his country estate in Turgenev’s A Nest of the Gentry, Arkadii Kirsanov’s similar return and final resettlement in the country in Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons, Konstantin Levin’s welcome return to the country after a brief visit to Moscow in Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, and

14 The title refers to both the Russian word for “novel” and the protagonist’s first name.
Oblomov’s mental return to his childhood home in Goncharov’s *Oblomov*. We learn that Roman has renounced his career as a city lawyer and has permanently relocated to his family’s countryside estate in order to take in the joys of country living and landscape painting. The landscape painting and the renunciation of law also have interesting parallels to Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, where the protagonist Nekhludov attempts landscape painting, maligns lawyers and the legal system for unjustly sentencing the innocent Maslova, and eventually abandons the urban setting and follows the prisoners (most depicted as victims of the legal system) to Siberia.

The narration tracks Roman as he rapturously wanders the countryside, enjoys bountiful meals at the home of his aunt and uncle, hunts, mows the land alongside village peasants in the fashion of Levin from *Anna Karenina*, visits a bathhouse, extinguishes a village fire, and engages in other countryside activities. Eventually, the favorite nineteenth-century trope of the country romance, which began with Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and was given new life in works by Turgeniev (*Rudin, First Love, A Nest of the Gentry, Fathers and Sons* and many others) and Tolstoy (*Family Happiness, War and Peace, Anna Karenina, and Resurrection*), makes an appearance. Roman meets Tatiana, a classic Russian beauty and a fitting double of Pushkin’s original, who is described as sensitive and innocent. After a few serendipitous meetings, Roman falls in love with her and the two marry.

Yet at the height of jubilation during the wedding feast, the novel takes a drastic turn in both style and content. From this point on, characterizations of Roman as a simulated nineteenth-century text and the reader’s expectations that this text will behave like a realist novel must be abandoned. In the middle of the wedding ceremony an
unexplained and inexplicable string of violent acts begins as the newlywed Roman starts killing everyone in the village with an axe. He begins by killing his own uncle, then all the guests at his wedding, and eventually ends slicing open his own bride. As Roman commits each murder in an automaton-like fashion, the text itself also grows increasingly automated and repetitive. As the range of violence extends beyond the wedding scene to the village huts, the language grows more and more simplistic with each new act of violence. The murders are described in repetitive, nearly identical terms and followed by a mention of Tatiana’s ritualistic ringing of a wooden bell until she too is silenced. After Roman manages to kill everyone in the village unhindered, he enters the village church where he performs a dark ritual with his victims’ intestines, severed heads, and genitalia. He makes a mixture of these parts, eventually consumes it, and finally dies with no apparent cause. By this point, the narrative seems entirely depleted of its descriptive energies, as sentences have disintegrated into the syntactical basics of subject and predicate. The last sentence of the novel, which signals Roman’s death (“Roman died” [Роман умер]) is preceded by pages and pages of monotonous, brief sentences with only a few reverberating verbs: “Roman quivered. Roman swayed. Roman quivered. Roman swayed. Roman wiggled. Roman quivered. Roman groaned. Roman wiggled. Roman shivered. Roman quivered. Roman wiggled. Roman quivered” [Роман дёрнулся. Роман качнул. Роман дёрнулся. Роман качнул. Роман пошевелил. Роман дёрнулся. Роман застонал. Роман пошевелил. Роман вздрогнул. Роман дёрнулся. Роман пошевелил. Роман дёрнулся] (Sorokin 638). Verbs like "качнул" and "поспевелил" are transitive verbs that should, grammatically, assume objects. The lack of

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15 All references pertain to: Vladimir Sorokin, Roman (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo “Ad Marginem,” 2004). All translations are my own.
objects suggests a grammatical dissipation in Roman in addition to the conceptual disintegration of the narrative. The text's gradual linguistic simplification reads like an exhaustion of sorts, as though the text too is slowly and inexplicably drawing its last breaths with Roman. It is as though the narrative is coming apart all together until the novel finally reaches total silence with the death of its namesake Roman.

This type of drastic turn from a richly descriptive, traditional narrative to grotesque bodily violence is one of Sorokin’s most common devices. As Boris Groys argues in an article on Roman, Sorokin’s readers often wait for the moment “when it will start, that is to say when the deceptive narrative idyll changes into the description of something horrible” (236). We patiently read through the derivative traditional sections, all the while awaiting the appearance of the first corpse or the first naked body, the first breaking of taboos – whether literary or social – that signals the end of conventional narration and the beginnings of an improbable and disturbing reality.

As scholars have suggested, these moments of dramatic narrative transition are due to Sorokin’s frequently deconstructive artistic aims. Mark Lipovetsky observes that Sorokin is always seeking to deconstruct discourses that wield any sort of influence over the individual. As Lipovetsky argues, Sorokin often aims to show that “authoritative discourse is potentially absurd” and uses his narratives to essentially transform “power of discourse into the power of the absurd” (207, emphasis in the original). For Sorokin, discursive authoritativenss can be found not only in texts like law-codes or ideological manifestoes, but also within the pages of literature. Fittingly, Sorokin has reconstructed and deconstructed nearly every representative genre of Russian literature, including Socialist Realism (The Norm [Норма] 1979-83, The Queue [Очередь] 1983), and
perhaps most profoundly the play *Confidence* [Доверие], 1989), dissident and underground prose (*Marina’s Thirtieth Love* [Тридцатая любовь Марины] 1995), and of course Russian realism in *Roman*.

The pastiche of borrowed styles that makes up Sorokin’s œuvre brings out his deep aesthetic ties to Russian Conceptualism. As Sorokin himself has said, the conceptualist artist “does not have his own language – he uses only the language of others, as Andy Warhol, for example, used the language of cliché, mass language” (Laird 149). So even though he is the author of *Roman*, Sorokin writes the first part of this novel as if on behalf of a “nineteenth-century Russian writer” (Epstein 77). From this perspective, the traditional part of *Roman* can be construed as a giant composite quotation virtually plagiarized from nineteenth-century realism. The violent part of the novel, which Boris Groys describes as “ultra-modernist,” belongs to an entirely different artistic universe (236). Groys calls this artificial fusion of texts a “poetics of bureaucracy,” a “meaningless-mechanical manipulation of texts” that is familiar to the Russian author (and also his reader) who grew up witnessing bureaucrats and censors having unrestricted power over language and text (236).

In the case of *Roman*, Sorokin’s deconstructive aesthetic prerogative seems to be responding to one authoritative discourse in particular: nationalist nostalgia for Russia’s tsarist past. Groys suggests that Sorokin wrote *Roman* as a reaction to a prevailing trend among the post-Soviet Russian intellectuals to construe pre-revolutionary Russia as a time of “authentic roots, values, and orientation” (235). This sort of cultural impulse could be seen as a form of what Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* calls “restorative nostalgia” – a nostalgia that “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up
the memory gap” through the “total reconstruction of monuments of the past” (41).

“[R]estorative nostalgia” is an effort to overcome the temporal displacement of the past, by “spatializ[ing] time” through reconstructions of “perfect snapshot[s]” from the past (Boym 45). In post-Soviet Russia there have been numerous such efforts, which ignore the recent, Soviet history and visually reconstruct Russia’s tsarist past in films, architecture and other artistic mediums.16 From this perspective, Sorokin is participating (albeit entirely ironically) in a collective project of “restorative nostalgia” by restoring a unique artifact from the past, the perfect nineteenth-century Russian novel. As he says in an interview, Roman “takes place not in time but in the space of the Russian novel” (Roll 81). If tsarist Russia was a space of nostalgia for his contemporaries, then Sorokin is staging a communion with the past by recreating one the most memorable and most beloved products of that time.

Sorokin thus responds to cultural trends that despite their modern framework have quite a few parallels to the cultural and literary context of the late nineteenth-century.

16 For instance, during the Perestroika period, there was a revived interest in the fate of the last Russian tsar Nicholas II, which manifested itself in both literature and visual media (Marsh 228). A number of historical films, such as Nikita Mikhailkov’s Burnt by the Sun or Alexander Sokurov’s Russian Ark, have also been said to engage in restorative nostalgia by vividly recreating Russia’s historical past on screen (see Yana Hashamova, Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in post-Soviet Film). Several post-Soviet architectural projects similarly had a historical bent. St. Petersburg, described a “city awash in heritage and nostalgia” is the most evident site of Russian “restorative nostalgia.” Since its return to its original name in 1991, the city has turned into a museum of the Russian past where memorabilia are carefully preserved (Goscillo xvi-xvii). As Boym argues, Moscow is not entirely immune to these bouts of nostalgia either. “Moscow restorative nostalgia,” writes Boym, “is characterized by a megalomaniacal imagination that recreates the past as a time of mythical giants” often giving rise to architecture “of a historicist style” that actively seeks to make the country “forge[t] its recent history […]” through reconstructions of tsarist monuments and memorials like the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, and the commemoration of Peter the Great, and smaller ones to Dostoevsky and Pushkin (68).
During the 1850s and 60s Russian writers retreated from political affairs and grounded their novels in natural and personal realities, thus giving rise to a form of pastoral realism. During the 1870s, Russian realists responded to this earlier literary heritage by way of the grotesque. In Roman, Sorokin responds to the cultural impulse of nostalgia by creating a nineteenth-century narrative with a strong pastoral component, much in the style of the narratives from the 1850s and 60s that Russian realists had to contend with beginning in the 1870s. While he depicts a kind of grotesque violence that Russian realists would never have depicted, Sorokin, like nineteenth-century realist writers, uses the grotesque as a response to political realities and in reaction to the impulse to avoid those realities. In Roman, he attacks those facets of the traditional Russian novel which realist writers themselves began to challenge in the 1870s: its focus on a natural, stable reality where political and social problems take a backseat to the personal and natural realm.

As I show in this chapter, Sorokin’s Roman brings together in a single narrative the myth of the Russian countryside and its undoing; he reconstructs Russian pastoral realism only to deconstruct it through a disturbing postmodern grotesque. By way of this dual process, Sorokin’s Roman carries out, on more obvious terms, the deconstructive project already begun in the late nineteenth-century in Dostoevsky’s Demons. Somewhat like the conceptualist Sorokin, the realists Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Tolstoy use an earlier language and earlier forms (the “language of others”) while bringing about their deconstruction. Late realist authors wrote novels that would partially allude to or recreate past narratives and then disturbed the familiar through a new, grotesque voice.
I begin my dissertation with a discussion of Roman because it captures my thesis in very overt terms, portraying both idealization (the pastoral) and degradation (the grotesque) in their purest and most essentialized form. The urge to shatter myths about the Russian countryside, and thus Russia itself, did not end with Tolstoy, nor even with Bunin and Chekhov, who could be seen as the last authors to occupy realist territory. Roman shows that the need to idealize the Russian countryside and to escape contemporary political instabilities by retreating there has never fully ceased in Russian culture. For all of his postmodernist idiosyncrasies, Sorokin is thus creating in a literary and cultural context not so different from the one late nineteenth-century writers faced: he also faces an unstable contemporary political reality and a collective urge to avoid it.

1) Pieces of the Past

Sorokin’s Roman opens with a snapshot of an abandoned cemetery, as the narrator asserts that “there is nothing in the world more pleasant than an overgrown Russian cemetery on the side of a small village” (Sorokin 5). What draws the narrator to this site is the opportunity it affords the observer to withdraw from “everything perishable, paltry and ephemeral” (6). He concludes that it must be the sort of place made for the silent and pensive viewer, for it facilitates “spiritual peace, clarity of mind and a feeling of elation” (7). The sky above the cemetery and the clouds overlooking what happens below, add yet another layer of majesty to the scene, thus reinforcing the contrast between human mortality and nature’s largesse.

This depiction of nature as an all-powerful force subsisting all around us, taking over our abandoned spaces, and providing a frame of reference for our lives, is a familiar image in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Gogol describes in great poetic detail the
garden of the pathologically hoarding landlord Pliushkin in *Dead Souls*. Despite being “overgrown and overrun,” the garden with its tangled plants and reeds is the only thing that grants any sort of “freshness” to Pliushkin’s dilapidated estate (Gogol 125). In *The Nest of the Gentry*, Turgenev walks us through the estate Vasilevskoe, which has gone back to nature after the death of its owner Glafira Petrovna. When we come upon it, we learn that once freed from human "restlessness", the house has almost entirely "run wild," falling into the quiet "slumber" of the natural order (Turgenev, *Essential Turgenev* 385).

Even more directly, the prologue in *Roman* is reminiscent of the famous epilogue in *Fathers and Sons* where the narrator returns to have one last look at his lost hero Bazarov. Here we are transported to a space closely resembling the cemetery in *Roman*. Turgenev’s novel ends with the description of a “small village graveyard” where “the surrounding ditches” are “overgrown,” and “the gray, wooden crosses have fallen over and lie rotting under their once painted little roofs; the stone slabs are all tilted […]”; the two or three bare trees hardly provide any shade; sheep wander amid the graves unchecked” (*Essential Turgenev* 746). Yet among these abandoned graves there is one grave, Bazarov’s, “that no one touches, and no animal tramples,” and only the birds come near and “sing at daybreak” (*Essential Turgenev* 746). The overgrown messy cemetery is juxtaposed to Bazarov’s neat grave with an iron railing around it and the symmetrically placed fir trees that adorn its sides. A similar moment occurs in *Roman* as well, when, in the novel’s prologue, the narrator struggles to tell the graves apart because the crosses on many of them have fallen, or have been damaged over the years, but eventually stumbles upon one gravestone with only a first name: “Roman.” With their dilapidated gravestones and images of overgrown nature, these scenes are intimately related. In a
a retrospective prologue that meditates on the events of the novel, a prologue reminiscent of an epilogue, Sorokin’s narrator, like the narrator from *Fathers and Sons*, casts one last look at his lost hero.

As early as the prologue, Sorokin thus recreates both realist literary tropes and essential ideas of the Russian novel. The depiction of nature as an all-powerful presence in human lives in this section, as well as of the large gulf between human smallness and natural vastness, was a prominent idea of Russian realism. Such an idea assumes center-stage in Turgenev’s writings. As Robert Louis Jackson puts it: “Turgenev’s art begins with a vision of a real order and beatitude in nature” (*Dialogues with Dostoevsky* 164). The innocent little flowers growing on Bazarov’s grave seem to proclaim the “glorious peace of ‘indifferent’ nature,” as well as “eternal reconciliation and life ever-lasting” (Turgenev, *Essential Turgenev* 746). Though at times (as in the brief sketch “Enough” ["ДОВОЛЬНО"]), Turgenev despaired at nature’s indifference toward human individuality, Jackson suggests that the natural perspective is essential to Turgenev’s art. As he puts it, Turgenev the writer “finds nature in himself” and from a “calm and measure[d]” stance brings out life’s “essential relationships, laws, and continuities” (*Dialogues with Dostoevsky* 164). A view of the world from the perspective of something larger than human beings is a defining attribute in Turgenev’s aesthetic worldview, which may be the reason his art has been said to be objective and detached.

Among other realists, Tolstoy paid a great deal of attention to the rapport between humanity and nature. In *Tolstoy’s Art and Thought*, Donna Orwin has argued that Tolstoy saw nature as an essential force in human existence, that “which lurks beneath the surface of everything we do and determines it” (26). Though he would change some
of his views on nature in later years, the earlier War and Peace vividly illustrate nature’s supremacy in the world and in human lives. Like Sorokin’s pensive viewer in the prologue, Tolstoy’s protagonists gain perspective on their lives by gazing at the sky (Andrei and Pierre) or an old dry oak tree that flourishes again in the spring (Andrei). The natural setting allows Tolstoyan characters to transcend their social selves and to commune with something higher and more significant. For instance, a wounded Prince Andrei looks up at the sky and immediately realizes that the self-important emperor Napoleon is entirely insignificant in the face of the sky’s majesty above.

In the prologue of Roman and beyond, the reader familiar with nineteenth-century Russian literature will likely identify the numerous intertextual ties between Roman and the nineteenth-century novels it is patterned after. Yet from a meta-textual perspective, the cemetery that opens the novel is instructive on how Sorokin seeks to represent the rich nineteenth-century heritage.

The nameless graves in the cemetery recall a famous statement by Marcel Proust connecting the book to the cemetery. As Proust writes in his À la recherche du temps perdu [Remembrance of Things Past]: “A book is a huge cemetery in which on the majority of the tombs the names are effaced and can no longer be read” (940). This sentence made its way into the Russian canon as an epigraph to Boris Pasternak’s last poetry collection, When the Weather Clears (Когда разгуляется, 1960). Both in Proust and subsequently in Pasternak, the association between the book and the cemetery evokes grief, memory, and loss. In particular, both authors bemoan the corrosive quality of time and the ability of a text, just like an effaced tombstone, to preserve bits and pieces of the past, of people lost in the passage of time.
In light of this comparison, it can be argued that the prologue to Roman presents us with the gravesite of the Russian novel: the tombstone with the name “Roman” is simultaneously the grave of Sorokin’s murderous protagonist and the resting place of the Russian novel. Throughout the rest of the narrative Sorokin bridges the temporal distance and transports us right into the space of the Russian novel, but in the prologue he hints at the unconventional nature of his resurrection of a genre that has long ceased to exist. The prologue implies that in Roman Sorokin is not resurrecting the Russian novel, but merely exhuming it from its temporal grave. Like a long-buried archaeological artifact, the Russian novel emerges to the surface cracked and eroded by time. While the countless echoes of past texts throughout the body of the text provoke an unmistakable sensation of a nagging déjà vu in the reader, the setting of the prologue suggests that just as one cannot tell the tombstones apart in the cemetery, so perhaps it is futile to begin listing the independent identities of the various texts that make up Roman, or seek for specific scenes and characters from various texts. The titles, like the names on the tombstones, merge together. Sorokin shows the names on the tombstones as “fall[ing] into the ever strengthening darkness” (7). The implication is that the Russian novel has also disappeared into the ether of the past and much of it has been lost. Sorokin’s Roman exhumes bits and pieces of time-battered texts that evoke a feeling of remembrance and faint familiarity, but just as we cannot discern the names on the tombstones, so these fragments from a lost world lack the specific outlines and traits of the originals. We may try to match them to nineteenth-century texts, but the matchings will be vague and tenuous at best. Roman is a synthesis of several texts with motifs and images that crisscross and blur into one another, a mixture of vanished texts that survive in the
memory of the reader as pieces mashed together. Sorokin is recreating the Russian novel, but he’s often just recreating common, obvious motifs that will provoke an immediate but vague sense of recognition in our memories.

Because of its nature as a simulated nineteenth-century novel, Sorokin’s Roman draws the reader’s attention to its various borrowed parts. Yet it seems that observing what Sorokin does with all those borrowed parts (before and after he deconstructs them) is what brings out Roman as a creative text in its own right, rather than a series of recycled clichés. Sorokin’s grouping and his choices of the unidentified fragments that make up the first half of Roman add up to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. From the large arsenal of Russian realist texts that deal with nature, the first part of Roman recycles the most positive, idealized images of nature. Russian novelists of the nineteenth-century also idealized nature and the countryside in their own way, but such moments in their texts are not as pure as they are in Roman. In Roman, however, Sorokin brings together fragments of several key instances of nature-idealization, thus producing an intense idealization of the Russian countryside, which is helpful illustrative because it brings out in palpable, obvious terms tendencies already present but more subtle and therefore more occluded in nineteenth-century narratives from the 1850s and 60s.

2) “Pastoral Realism”

Sorokin’s pastoral realism in Roman is made up of both realistic properties and pastoral properties. The realistic aspects of Roman are immediately visible. Realism is hotly contested as a notion, yet for my purposes here, I would suggest that realism’s attempts at verisimilitude are an element of the style that most directly interests Sorokin.
Sorokin mimics realism by focusing on its efforts at verisimilitude most directly. He thus focuses precisely on that feature of realism – its effort at recreating life – that is perhaps most fraught with contradictions and most artificial. (I have previously defined realism also as a style that can police reality, but those properties of Sorokin’s pastoral realism appear in sections of Roman that most directly mirror the pastoral.)

Scholars have discussed verisimilitude – the attempt at recreating a given reality as a key feature of realism as a style – as a key feature of realism. Roman Jakobson’s definition of Russian realism is especially relevant for my purposes. Jakobson has argued that in the Russian canon realistic representation is often achieved through “unessential details,” such as the recording of events not related to the main plot of a text. For instance, a character might meet an “unimportant and (from the point of view of the story) superfluous passer-by,” which in turn results in a conversation that has no real bearing on the plot (Jakobson 25). Possibly aware of Jakobson’s study and certainly aware of the rich supply of extraneous detail in Russian realism proper, Sorokin takes the descriptive prerogative of realism very seriously. So much so, that he makes a mockery of it.

Sorokin devotes significant attention to realistic description in the traditional sections of Roman: from the train station where Roman arrives, to the home of his aunt.

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17 My understanding of realism has been informed by a number of secondary sources, including Ian Watt’s The Rise of the Novel, Ronald Barthes’ S/Z, and Peter Brooks’ Realist Vision. Watt argues that the “novel form is a full and authentic report of human experiences, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms” (32). What he refers to as a “referential use of language,” has been termed the “cultural code” of the text by Roland Barthes, and the “descriptive imperative” by Peter Brooks. See Barthes S/Z p. 18-21, 97, 100; Brooks Realist Vision, 17.
and uncle, the church, and especially the surrounding natural world, the author engages in detailed realistic depictions of the spaces and people of the Russian countryside. Whenever Roman arrives at a new place, the author gives long elaborate lists of “unessential details” about the place and the people in it. There are lists of the food items on the Vospevennikovs’ dining table, the furniture in their home, the items in Roman’s suitcase when he first arrives to Krutoi Iar, and myriad other ornate descriptions. This rigorous though somewhat formulaic capturing of “unessential details” almost suggests that the narrator is perfunctorily completing an obligatory task.

Though the “descriptive imperative” (Brooks 17) of the conventional novel is dutifully recreated, it is the pastoral element that is most directly emphasized by Sorokin. Over the years the pastoral has eluded precise definition. In the narrowest terms, the style was intimately tied to shepherds and often involved poetic descriptions of their labor or romantic attachments alongside idealized depictions of their country surroundings. Leo Marx aptly captures this traditional definition of the pastoral through the phrase: “no shepherd, no pastoral” (qtd. in Gifford 1). In this dissertation, however, I employ a definition of the pastoral based on the psychological motivations of this style, rather than its particular affiliation with the life of the shepherd. Above all else, the pastoral can be understood as an escapist style that allows for an evasion of the contradictions of the present time and space. The escape can happen in either time or space, but it allows characters to live simpler, more innocent, and ultimately more wholesome lives.

Scholars have discussed the escapist features of the pastoral. Renato Poggioli argues that “[t]he psychological root of the pastoral is a double longing after innocence
and happiness, to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration, but merely through a retreat” (1). Because the pastoral was designed for an urban audience, the preferred locus for this retreat was invariably the countryside. Conceived as a space of greater innocence and simplicity, the countryside appeared isolated from the wheels of dehumanizing urban progress and brought individuals in close communion with nature.

In the Russian tradition the psychological impulse for retreat can be traced all the way back to Horace’s famous Second Epode (“Beatus ille, qui”), which was one of the first pastorals to enter Russian culture through a translation by Trediakovskii in 1757. In this Epode, a moneylender speaks of abandoning his trade for the simpler, purer joys of the countryside (Newlin 32). Over the years, the Horatian pastoral trope of retreat to the countryside was echoed time and again in works by Russian writers, including Derzhavin, Pushkin, Tolstoy, and others.

The psychological need for retreat at the core of the pastoral would make a strong reappearance in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. In this case the retreat would not be exclusively to the countryside, or rather not exclusively to the contemporary countryside, but manifested itself as nostalgia for the past. In his discussion of pastoral literature in England, Raymond Williams considers how at various points in the history of pastoral

18 As Thomas Newlin points out in The Voice in the Garden: Andrei Bolotov and the Anxieties of the Russian Pastoral, Trediakovsky in his translation of Horace’s Epode chose to omit the “bitingly ironic, bubble-popping” last four lines of the poem in order to preserve the purity of the idyllic pastoral. In these last four lines we are told that the moneylender has gone back to collecting money, so his flowery rhetoric about retreat to the countryside is deceptive at best. Yet Trediakovsky felt that the more idyllic parts of the poem were “most in keeping with the manner and the custom of the present times,” so he did not spoil the pastoral impulse with doubts (qtd. in Newlin 32).

19 It is not my intention to describe the post-Soviet period as the only time when the pastoral reemerged in the Russian tradition after the nineteenth-century. Certainly, the movement of the village writers in the 1960s and 70s had its touches of the pastoral.
modern England, the pastoral was "[a]n idealization, based on a temporary situation and on a deep desire for stability served to cover and to evade the actual and bitter contradictions of the time" (45). As he puts it, the "idea of an ordered and happier past (was) set against the disturbance and disorder of the present" (45). In crime-ridden and chaotic post-Soviet Russia, the desire to escape the tensions of a convoluted present for an “ordered and happier past,” was understandably significant. In post-Soviet Russian culture, the antan was tsarist times; nineteenth-century Russia was given a place of honor in atavistic post-Soviet Russian mythology and conceptualized as the true home of the Russian nation. On the most basic level, therefore, Roman is Sorokin’s tongue-in-cheek realization of this collective pastoral fantasy. The novel retreats into the space of Russian literature and entirely avoids the messy post-Soviet landscape. (Although, as I show later, the violence at the novel’s ending, is, among other things, an attempt to bring the narrative to the present.)

As the site of national retreat, the “space of the Russian novel” is constructed by Sorokin in all its pastoral glory in Roman. The most immediate hint of the pastoral in Roman is the dichotomy set up between the city and the country. The novel begins at the train station of Krutoi Iar, precisely when the protagonist Roman has enacted a pastoral fantasy and left the city “forever” [навсегда] (Sorokin 140) for a life in the countryside. Ecstatic to have returned to his childhood nest, Roman asserts that he “would not exchange [the countryside] for any capital” (Sorokin 14-15). Roman calls the city an "octopus" [спруёт] that sucks the life out of people (Sorokin 49), a soulless metropolis where he had no emotional ties to the city – "no home, no family, [and] no friends" there (Sorokin 50).
Moreover, Roman is not the only character in the novel who prefers the country to the city and views urban reality as soulless and corrupting. Krutoi Iar has quite a few pastoralists who have abandoned the city for the country. His aunt and uncle have also retreated to the countryside from the capital, while Kunitsin – Tatiana's father and Roman's prospective father-in-law – holds a negative view of the city as a place full of corrupt people; he is grateful that he and his daughter have escaped it. In fact, Kunitsin's initial refusal of Roman's proposal to Tatiana is at least partly because Roman had been a city dweller.

The novel reinforces the pastoral impulses of characters by showing the countryside as a fundamentally benign place where healthy relationships and a healthy life are possible. Roman's appreciation for the countryside is colored by his view of it as a space of ultimate freedom. When he returns to the country, Roman realizes that he has now chosen a life of "independence" over a life driven by career advancement. Having left the city, he knows that he will no longer bind himself to ambition. "I left there [the city]," he declares, "[a]nd I will no longer try to be a famous lawyer or a renowned artist" (Sorokin 151). Rather, Roman happily replaces the urban rat-race with the luxurious freedom of the countryside. "How wonderful it is that I am here," he thinks to himself when first arriving in Krutoi Iar. He then remembers his "small apartment" (маленькая квартира) in the city and how when he was there he often thought about his small room in Krutoi Iar and, in particular, “that blessed [блаженном] sensation of peace, when,
waking up, one could just lie there like that, looking at the high white ceiling or the 
window, and feel truly free” (Sorokin 72).

It is nature that facilitates the feeling of freedom that comes over Roman in his
native home. Indeed, the natural beauty of the Russian countryside is Sorokin’s true hero
in the first part of Roman. There is a plot to the novel, but it feels incidental, merely
there to facilitate more encounters with the Russian countryside and its pastoral
goodness. When wandering the woods of Krutoi Iar Roman observes how free the forest
appears. "What a wonder," he cries out to himself when seeing the forest, "the forest is
eternal, like life itself [...] It needs nothing from us [humans]. It is free" (Sorokin 94).
Nature emits freedom with every breath, which seems to rub off on those humans lucky
enough to be in nature's vicinity. For instance, Roman often notices the "free laughter" of
the Russian peasants, who "live in the midst of nature," and he himself, despite being a
member of the gentry, also cherishes this sensation in Krutoi Iar (Sorokin 211, 208). The
peasant who lives in the bosom of nature is described as more healthy, good, and God-
fearing than the urban factory worker who "everyday deals with dead metal" (Sorokin
208). Even the gentry appear surprisingly unconflicted and more or less at ease with
themselves. Like the peasants, they are described as “simple-hearted” (простодушье)
people who are generous, fun-loving, and uncomplicated (Sorokin 31). The two notable
exceptions are Roman’s former romantic interest Zoia who hates Russia and is desperate
to escape abroad and doctor Kliugin who displays Bazarovian nihilism. Yet these two
characters do not affect the overall idealization of the countryside or the sensation that the

20 Here Sorokin uses the adjective “блаженный” which seems like a nod to the Russian
title of Horace’s Epode “Блажен тот, кто.”
people who live in its bosom are happy, cheerful, and able to indulge in the simple joys of life.

In addition to being immersed in the natural world and perhaps because of this, Krutoi Iar also bears an atemporal quality essential to the pastoral. The pastoral is not simply an escape from the present; it is virtually an annihilation of time and its corrosive properties. In his essay on chronotope in the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin considers the chronotope of the pastoral idyll and mentions the “special relationship that time has to space” in this style. In the pastoral idyll life happens in space rather than in time; the *locus amoenus* of the pastoral reality is the same place where one’s ancestors have lived and one’s children and grandchildren will live, so the generations merge, which renders the passage of time less palpable within the bounds of this space. As Bakhtin writes, “the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life” are rendered less distinct (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 225).

The timeless quality that defines Krutoi Iar becomes apparent when Roman first wanders out in the countryside in order to revisit previously familiar places. In a direct nod to the pastoralism of the novel, the first thing he spots on his walk is a shepherd's hut:

With every step the village got closer, it grew and approached, recalling the old days, which were carefully stored in memory, and recalling also the rest – which was already forgotten and only now suddenly popped into consciousness like good tidings. “God, is this not a dream…” – happily thought Roman, walking towards the huts, which extended up white smoke. But this was no dream: the white window moldings of the lame shepherd Nikolai’s hut already showed through, the shepherd’s same old dog barked at Roman, from the open porch, leaned out, drying her hands with a rag, the heavy-set wife of the shepherd. She carefully examined the approaching man. (Sorokin 39)

Although it is possible to dismiss the shepherd's appearance as circumstantial – considering that it is the countryside and he does not play a significant role within the
narrative – the allusions to memory and time in this scene add important pastoral overtones. This moment also permits a communion with the past because everything has survived virtually unscathed into the present. When hunting in the forest, Roman observes that “for three years, the forest had not changed at all” (Sorokin 94). Indeed, despite the passage of time, the entirety of Krutoi Iar is completely intact. Upon his return, Roman is confronted with familiar landscapes and beloved spots that appear completely immune to structural erosions dealt by time.

In fact, it is not only the forest and the surroundings that have remained unchanged, but also the individuals who live in the bosom of nature. Roman learns that one of his favorite peasants and his family died of the typhoid, but everyone else is as before. Roman lovingly looks at the faces of his aunt and uncle and mentions that they are “almost unchanged” (Sorokin 32). Similarly, he notices the “permanence and unchangeability” of the “intelligence, erudition, and tact” that he always valued in the science teacher Nikolai Ivanovich (Sorokin 49).

Roman’s sense that the space where his family and his ancestors have lived is timeless and his perception of his friends and relatives as also timeless are symptomatic of the blurring of temporal boundaries so characteristic of the pastoral. Along these lines, history has also left almost no mark on Krutoi Iar. The region’s violent past appears to have been completely wiped out. When walking by the Krutoi Iar River, Roman wonders whether the "clay earth or the round stones by the little bridge remember the Tartars, the Time of Troubles, Pugachev's peasants and the French guard?" (Sorokin 38). He wonders whether the space was then as it is now, and if the river was even there, while history and epoch-making events were passing through Krutoi Iar. In the end, however,
this moment reveals that within this space history cannot compete with nature. The presence of the constantly replenishing nature tends to wipe the slate clean for the region. It provides, as Jameson suggests in his *Political Unconscious*, an oasis isolated from history, historical consequences, and even real-time events that might have any sort of historical consequence.

The aura of timelessness goes back to the image of the flowers by Bazarov’s grave in *Fathers and Sons*. Those flowers speak of the glorious peace of ‘indifferent’ nature,” as well as “eternal reconciliation and life ever-lasting,” which was Turgenev’s way of showing the smallness of the mortal individual when compared to nature. In his works Turgenev showed those characters whose lives paralleled the rhythms of nature as being the most successful; individuals who create familial nests and perpetuate the replication of the generations seem to be ones who get the happy ending. Yet despite showing the perpetuation of the natural cycle, Turgenev was always elegiac – as at the end of *Fathers and Sons* with Bazarov – about the loss of the individual. In *The Nest of Gentry* one feels an overwhelming sense of loss when Liza and Lavretsky share one last stolen look and part forever. The happiness of the young people at the ancestral nest does not provide enough consolation for the loss that these characters have suffered.

Yet in the innocent, pastoral microcosm that is *Roman* there is simply no sense of loss even though there are a great many losses. Roman’s parents have died, Tatiana’s parents have died, Kliugin’s wife and infant child have died and he has been a political prisoner, yet just as the river washes away history, so the narrative washes away the sad memory of these deaths and misfortunes. They are mentioned and promptly forgotten. Kliugin may be a pessimist and a nihilist who hates life, but he is an anomaly and neither
the narrator nor Roman can muster up any genuine sympathy for him. While Sorokin has recreated a narrative reality familiar to readers of nineteenth-century Russian literature, this world is much too innocent and much too unproblematic by mid-nineteenth-century standards.

3) The Pastoral Enclosure

Fittingly, the idyllic Krutoi Iar is the sort of place in which human-engineered, dramatic actions are supressed. Indeed, the temporal and spatial retreat of the pastoral is first and foremost designed to suppress dramatic action. Scholars of the pastoral point out that the term for the pastoral "idyll" derives from the Greek "idyllion," which means "a small framed picture" (Hardin 112). Over the years, the notion of the frame has assumed symbolic significance in pastoral criticism and come to denote the boundaries of the pastoral pleasance – the delimited space where the idyll survives and essentially excludes the non-idyllic. In Sorokin's Roman Krutoi Iar turns into an elaborate pastoral frame that shapes the atmosphere of the narrative. In a sense the pastoral frame is spatially demarcated. Though the village is called "steep ravine," which is reminiscent of the precipices in Goncharov's eponymous novel where seductions, robberies and other transgressions take place, and thus perhaps a hint that this world is not as innocent as it seems (and in the end it is not), within the bounds of the traditional frame, it is only the nihilist Kliugin who lives at the edge of a ravine, and thus outside the pastoral frame. But since he has been outside the pastoral frame all along, his spatial isolation simply

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21 In Goncharov’s novel The Precipice, the precipice is where Vera’s seduction by the nihilist Mark Volokhov takes place. Likewise, in Oblomov’s dream of his past at Oblomovka, we know that it was the precipice that scared him as a child and made him run back to his nanny.
isolates him from the pastoral frame that envelops the other characters and other spaces. Sure enough, the rest of Krutoi Iar is a great deal flatter in terms of conflict.

The parameters of the idyll permit only natural, organic events. In his discussion of pastoral idyll, Bakhtin argues that in this genre, "the rhythm of human life is in harmony with the rhythm of nature" (Dialogic Imagination 229). By this he means that the pastoral idyll is "limited to only a few of life's basic realities," which include "Love, birth, death, marriage, labor, food and drink, stages of growth" (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination 225). For the most part, the first portion of Roman is guided by these very organic life processes.

From the beginning of the novel, we sense that in Krutoi Iar, life runs its course harmoniously, driven by biological rhythms. The most important of these biological processes is eating, for immediately after he returns home at the beginning of the novel, Roman is invited to eat with his aunt and uncle, who are hungry and have delayed their meal to wait for him. Such food rituals take place over the course of the novel at both the home of the Vospevennikovs and at the homes of their friends and acquaintances. Indeed, eating and drinking are perhaps the most important events in Krutoi Iar, and virtually the only events that measure the passage of time.

Aside from eating, Roman and his uncle also engage in manual labor, when they decided to join the village peasants in mowing the land. When he finally masters the mowing, Roman is overwhelmed by the feelings of peace and freedom that he experiences. "God, how wonderful," he says to himself, and with each new movement experiences greater "freedom and self-confidence" (Sorokin 207). He marvels at the sense of personal reward he experiences as a result of an activity as simple as mowing.
Of course, because the protagonists in the novel are not shepherds, we must add leisure as another category to the "basic realities" of the pastoral that Bakhtin cites. Roman and his friends and acquaintances engage in the classic countryside leisure activities: they go hunting, visit a Russian bania, and collect mushrooms.

Much of the novel's first part is taken up by such leisurely activities, which seem perfectly fulfilling for Roman. As he often tells us, he has left the law books and the complexities of the city behind without the slightest regret. In particular, nature itself is a constant presence in the novel. Partly because of his general ardor for the treasures of the countryside, but also because of his newly acquired profession as a landscape painter, Roman ends up spending much of his time taking in the beauty of nature. Though not a shepherd, it is as though he is longing to reconnect with nature and to acquire the natural innocence of the shepherd or the farmer whose life is embedded in nature's gardens. Landscapes are his favorite genre of painting, so we frequently find Roman looking to capture the Krutoi Iar panoramas, as the text follows him in his endeavors, ekphrastically visualizing his would-be paintings of trees, valleys, the lake, and the sand.

While Roman steps into one natural landscape after another, he begins to conceive of human life as driven by natural cycles. He believes that the winter, which devastates nature, is "a pause between springs," and that along with nature, during this time "people also do not live, but subsist awaiting the spring" (Sorokin 14). The profound connection between humans and nature in the narrative brings an enduring pastoral stability to Krutoi Iar. Nothing unnatural can happen in this space, everything is controlled and lulled into harmony by the presence of nature. To employ a term used by
Miller in his *The Novel and the Police*, the pastoral realism of Roman essentially "polices" the actions that can take place within the course of the narrative. Certainly, one does not get the sense that the world of Krutoi Lar is susceptible to the kind of drastic, violent actions that take place during the novel's denouement.

The only moment in the first part of the novel that allows for the possibility of disorder and violent disturbances ultimately has its dangerous potential quickly diffused. When a fire breaks out in the village, Roman makes his way through a terrified mob of screaming women and rushes toward the site only to discover the flames floating upwards. The fire looks menacing and the narrator mentions that the flames were “greedy, strong and immediately overwhelmed everything around” (Sorokin 326). In the midst of the confusion, Roman ends up next to the burning hut that had been the source of the fire. Once there, he stands alongside the peasants and witnesses their suffering, wondering to himself about why he cannot fully be one with them, even though he clearly feels great sympathy for their misfortunes. Yet, right at this moment, an old woman cries that they have forgotten the icon of the Theotokos with Three Hands (Троеручица) in the hut and that it will burn. As anxiety rises in the crowd over the sinfulness of abandoning an icon to the flames, Roman grabs a bucket of water from two boys trying to put out the flames, pours it over himself, and rushes into the burning hut. Once inside, he can feel the “hellish flames” surround him, but he walks to the corner where the icons stand, takes the icon of the mother of God, and while constantly uttering “save me” (спаси меня) to the icon, manages to come out from what had initially appeared to be an inescapable situation (Sorokin 332).
This incident is revealing of how crises are dealt with in Roman. A dramatic event like a fire occurs, threatening to devour everything around it, thus destroying the very fabric of peaceful life in Krutoi Iar. Yet before any irreparable damage is done, someone intervenes in order to maintain the stability so characteristic of country life. Roman saves the icon from the fire, just as many years ago Kunitsyn saved Tatiana from the fire, and, as a result, the pastoral frame that wraps around the novel’s first part remains intact. Indeed, the fact that Roman struggles specifically to save an icon from the fire, a sacred object governed by strict aesthetic conventions, further alludes to the maintenance of aesthetic decorum in the novel. Sorokin sets up a world driven by natural tranquility, stability, and simplicity, and it is hard to break with the conventions of this world.

4) From the Pastoral to the Grotesque

If we consider the pastoral idyll in Roman as a frame between events that can happen or can be included and those that cannot, then Tatiana’s and Roman’s wedding functions as a border zone between the idyll and the grotesque that ensues. The wedding feast turns into a celebration of love and social egalitarianism: the whole village attends and all social divisions seemingly evaporate while simple peasants fraternize with the gentry. The ecstasy of communal merriment is so intense that it turns downright utopian. Yet precisely after these instances of utmost jubilation, the novel takes a drastic turn in both style and content. It almost seems as though the violence that takes place is a reaction to the absurdly intense jubilation at the wedding scene. There are touches of exaggeration throughout Roman, but the cloying communion between the gentry and the peasants at the wedding scene crosses the line. If up until this last episode Sorokin,
despite some exaggerations, had been recreating the Russian novel more or less faithfully, the wedding scene is excessive in its positive overtones. Sorokin has pushed the classical Russian paradigm too far, allowing the appearance of the grotesque even before Roman swings his axe.

In this dissertation I define the grotesque as a style that above all estranges the familiar. I base my definition on Wolfgang Kayser’s view of this style as one that estranges our worlds, rendering them unnatural and unusual. As Kayser argues, in the grotesque “our world ceases to be reliable” and “the categories which apply to our world view become inapplicable” (185). Moreover, he also sees the grotesque as “a play with the absurd” (Kayser 187). Though we could go along with Sorokin’s faux-pastoral realism up until the wedding, when everyone is eating, drinking, and laughing blindly at everything during Roman’s wedding feast, Sorokin’s realism reaches a pitch of absurdity. The text we had become used to starts to look strange and unnatural. This is indeed when, the “power of discourse [turns] into the power of the absurd” (Lipovetsky 207). The peaceful and happy pastoral idyll has become almost drunk with inexplicable joy, thus turning absurd.

While participating in the wedding feast, it seems as though the protagonist Roman and his new bride Tatiana cannot endure this extreme happiness. During the ceremony, despite the incredible jubilation, the bride and groom appear emotionally removed from their own wedding and especially from their guests. Everyone at the wedding is having an exceptionally nice time, except for Roman and Tatiana who appear to want to escape the scene. Even before the violence commences, we get the feeling that
the couple is attempting to break free from the tight frame of happiness and simplicity that defines the novel.

When Roman and Tatiana retire to their bedroom to unwrap wedding presents, they realize that their favorites are a wooden bell and an axe. Shortly thereafter, Roman turns to Tatiana and suddenly resolves Chernyshevsky’s and Lenin’s quandary by saying that he “know[s] what is to be done” [я знаю, что делать] (Sorokin 515). The actions that constitute his answer are at once shock-provoking and terrifying. With Tatiana at his side, Roman takes the axe, fittingly a gift from the "life-hating" ( жизнененавистник) doctor Kliugin (Sorokin 145), and carries out a mass-murder within the pastoral stage that was Krutoi Iar. When Roman’s axe pierces his uncle Anton Pavlovich, not only does it kill him, but it also cuts through the pastoral frame of the novel.

The frames and containments in the first part of Roman are so tightly wound that when the seemingly uncontrollable acts of violence in the second part begin, it feels as though Sorokin is unleashing the novel's previously suppressed narrative energies through the horrific violence. During the end of Roman, Sorokin completely does away with literariness and resorts to a simplistic style that merely serves to transport us from one murder and mutilation to the next.

One particular scene in Roman serves as a mise-en-abyme for the novel's duality and tension between the repressed earlier narrative and the unleashed violence of the end. When Roman unpacks his suitcase at the home of his aunt and uncle, from the outside the suitcase looks compact and orderly, yet once it is opened, all of Roman's possessions burst forth because the suitcase has been "messily stuffed with things." As the narrator comments, the contents of the suitcase resembled a "picture of primeval chaos"
The juxtaposition of a closed and visibly neat suitcase – a suitcase forced closed in order to provide the messy inside with a neat facade – to the total chaos that erupts once it is burst open and the contents emerge in their authentic state, essentially captures the aesthetic framework of *Roman*. The tightly packed suitcase functions as a stand-in for the tightly framed, aesthetically restrained portions of the text, while the "primeval chaos" is what comes once this outer frame is forcibly dislodged and the novel's contents allowed to move freely. The suggestion is that had the suitcase not been so tightly packed or so tightly closed, it might not have exploded into full-blown chaos upon being open; and perhaps, had *Roman* not been grounded in a nearly surreal, pristine pastoral realism, then the author might not have felt the same impulse to degrade and violate this space during the novel's closing part.

The pastoral revival that Sorokin enacts is saturated with natural beauty and ultimately also quite a bit of a fantasy. After the wedding ceremony, Sorokin opens up a different world in front of us, a world that is shocking, even though we were prepared for the eventual disruption of the idyll. At the center of this other world is neither beauty nor innocent pastoral goodness, but rather the body in all its gory fleshiness and ugliness. If the sense that the novel’s reality was shifting toward something unexpected estranged our sense of reality during the wedding ceremony, by the time the violence begins, we enter a full-blown grotesque.

As we consider the kind of estrangement carried out by the grotesque, the sort of disturbance it carries out on our world, it is often the case that this style degrades this world into one purely driven by the body. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses the grotesque as a style that degrades, and “turns [the] subject into flesh” (20).
Bakhtin points out, the grotesque degrades everything that is serious, abstract, and dignified to the level of flesh. The grotesque is thus an intrinsically appropriate style for Sorokin, a writer whose preoccupation with the body is evident in every work he has authored. “I work constantly with the border zones in which body intrudes into the text,” Sorokin says in an interview with Serafima Roll. He goes on to say that all of his texts question the extent to which “the literary body” is truly “corporeal.” In a discussion of the Russian classics, he states that an author like Lev Tolstoy could not possibly “describe how Bolkonsky’s armpits and his pimples smelled, because it would have destroyed the very fabric of the text” (qtd. in Roll 79). He suggests that in the case of Tolstoy, and likely all the great Russian classics, the relationship between the body and the text is complicated by “an oppositional relationship between the literary corpus and the body,” which Sorokin believes privileges the literary body over the corporeal one (qtd. in Roll 79). Aware of this antagonism, and aware of the tendency of literature to sanitize or aestheticize the body through literary devices, Sorokin breaks with these conventions in almost all of his works and turns the physical body – with all of its unsavory corporeality – into a central presence in his narratives.

While the pastoral realism of the first part of Roman had referentiality – a key feature of literary realism – as its main narrative function, the last part of the novel ignores literature’s referential prerogative and is strictly devoted to capturing the body and its actions. Roman visits all the residents of the village and kills every single one of them in an indeterminate amount of time. But how he manages this long walk, or how he carries his axe, or how the road feels, or how dirty his clothes get – these are all details of literary physicality that this portion of the text omits. While Roman rushes from one
murder to the next, the text is reduced to stylistic basics and can barely keep up with the overflow of physical action in the novel. As the murders increase in number, even the exchange of repetitive, but loving, words between Roman and Tatiana is eliminated.

The narrative only has eyes and ears for the violence unleashed by the body. Sorokin shows the body as it acts, murders, is murdered or mutilated. There is nothing elevated or spiritual in these scenes, just automated, unceasing, and ultimately nauseating physical actions. All the text can do is be subjugated to this physical movement and strive to keep up with it, thus leaving aside the usual descriptions, the analyses, and the ornate rendering of setting. The words in this last part of Roman read like side stage directions, almost muted, and secondary to what is happening center stage. And at center stage is the grotesque body in all of its fleshiness. Sorokin’s appointing of the body the primary character in a text previously dominated by elevated pastoral messages is a grotesque turn of narrative – a debunking of the abstract principles guiding that earlier narrative. If Roman had formerly been an artist, a lover of nature, and a newlywed, he is now purely a subject turned into flesh.

5. Destroying Symbols

If we follow Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque as a style that degrades everything to the level of flesh and bodily activities, then aside from being a proper grotesque, Sorokin’s Roman also functions as a metatextual grotesque, a degradation of narrative itself and its devices to the level of the body. As Lipovetsky argues, much like Antonin Artaud, Sorokin translates “discursive power” into a “natural language” with a physical dimension governed by the body (216-17). This argument is at least partially based on Derrida’s description of Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” as a literary construct that
narrates the subject in all its fleshiness, thus liberating it from the yoke of literary decorum. “Artaud promises the existence of a speech that is body,” writes Derrida, and by this he means a text that is “no longer enslaved to a writing more ancient than itself, an ur-text or an ur-speech” (174). The end result is then the mind viewed “as body itself, as unseparated thought” (Derrida 179). Derrida’s suggestion is that words are ultimately derivative, built on a long tradition charged with authority, so once they are written or uttered, they are no longer ours. “As soon as I speak, the words I have found (as soon as they are words) no longer belong to me, are originally repeated […] Artaud wants a theater where this repetition is impossible” (emphasis in the original) (Derrida 177).

Derrida suggests that language and literature are shaped by tradition so they functions like palimpsests, where each new word or piece of writing bears the traces of past writings and past theoretical frameworks.

The first part of Sorokin’s novel is “originally repeated,” borrowed from Russian literary history and it does not belong to Sorokin, but rather to the “nineteenth-century Russian writer” (Epstein 77). Within the text, characters are also “originally repeated,” crafted as replicas of earlier literary figures, because they, like the space of Roman, have been exhumed from the vault of Russian literary history. They are not fluid, individualized creations, but rather restorations of past characters of some significance in the Russian cultural imagination. Tatiana is a flat character in the novel, a mere stand-in for the virtuous Russian beauty, perhaps Pushkin’s Tatiana. Other characters in the novel are similarly deprived of their individuality. Doctor Kliugin is predetermined by his literary predecessor Bazarov; Roman is the gentry scion looking to rekindle his attachment to nature; his relatives are the loving countryside couple. No one in Roman
has any sort of original self. Even the landscape has been robbed of true fleshiness and forced into compact, picturesque panoramas. Mochizuki Tetsuo argues that Sorokin’s Roman is a very visual work primarily made up on landscapes that are reminiscent of nineteenth-century Russian landscape paintings (426-427). Roman’s favorite landscape painter is Isaak Levitan, an artist whose pictorial realism was considered on par with Russian literary realism. When he borrowed the panoramic frame of the Russian landscape from Levitan or from Tolstoy and Turgenev, for whose works Levitan’s paintings could easily serve as illustrations, the beginning of Roman endows landscape with an “originally repeated” (Derrida) quality that resembles the treatment of characters.

Indeed, so stripped of individuality are these characters that in their status as originally repeated symbols of the collective literary memory, they are almost iconic in nature. As Boris Uspensky argues, there are strict rules for the depictions of individualized saints in Orthodox icons. He mentions that up until the seventeenth century, a saint’s garments were depicted not according to their personal preferences, but rather according to the order (лик) they belonged to. In later years, icon painters focused on the traits of individuals, but again, these were not idiosyncratic traits: each saint grew to epitomize particular virtues such as nobility, beauty, and other such qualities. These strict regulations in icon painting served to turn the icon of any given saint into a "general, rather than individual, ideographic sign" (Uspensky 14). A number of the characters in Roman appear as "ideographic signs" stripped of individuality. They are intangible, conceptual creations based on past characters. In their function as cultural symbols for abstract values they are deprived of their bodily, individual selves.

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22 There were orders of forefathers, martyrs, venerable men, canonized bishops, holy martyrs, and others.
Tatiana assumes iconic features. There is strong parallelism between Tatiana’s rescue from the fire and the rescue of the icon. Roman saves the icon from the fire, just as many years ago Kunitsyn saved Tatiana from the fire, and, in the process, the pastoral frame that wraps around the novel’s first part remains intact. Tatiana, of whom Roman thinks constantly as he is attempting to save the icon from the fire, is connected with the Virgin Mary. The alignment of the two fire scenes in Roman links an individual to an art form in which individuals are stripped of their individuality. In the process, however, Tatiana loses personal traits. She exists in the text as an icon-like figure capable only of virtue. She has been robbed of her body, left with only borrowed words and a borrowed abstract self.

When Roman goes on his killing rampage and starts to murder all the characters in the novel, he is destroying symbols rather than individual persons. The murders, or the desecrations of iconic characters from Russian literature, are on par with Roman’s desecration of venerated artifacts in the church. After Roman has murdered everyone in the village, he brings their bodies to the church and begins to desecrate all the sacred objects there. He first “places the axe on top of the gospels,” thus already hinting at some of his aggression toward closed ur-narratives that have shaped socio-cultural paradigms, including the pastoral frame of the novel itself (Sorokin 613). Following this act, Roman starts to desecrate the icons on the walls of the church. The scene reads as follows:

Roman took the intestines of Nikolai Egorov and hung them on the icon "Holy Great Martyr Panteleimon.” Roman took the intestines of Fedor Kosorukov and hung them on the icon "The Birth of John the Precursor" [...] Roman took the intestines of Fedor Samsonov and hung them on the icon "Three Sanctifiers." Roman took the intestines of Isaii Gudin and hung them on the icon "Do Not Grieve for Me, Mother" (Sorokin 613).
Roman’s act of throwing intestines on the icons is a violation of these hermetic mini-narratives with the corporeality of the body. Roman's attempts to penetrate a symbolic and closed aesthetic genre like the icon with intestinal fluid, which suggests an effort on Sorokin's part to restore fleshiness to an artwork that has ossified the body.

These actions, just like the murders, though dramatic, are also obviously repetitive, and patterned after the repetitiveness of the writing, thus showing how inescapable linguistic structures can be. Indeed, it might be worth echoing here Groys’ argument that at the end Roman does not “completely emancipat[e] himself from the author, from the narration, from the laws of the literary text as such” (244). Rather, his violent acts are themselves organized as elements of language, “by means of which Roman formulates his messages to God and the world” (Groys 244). Yet even as vestiges of the literary remain, the earlier literary text has still been reduced to a grotesque and fleshy narrative. Sorokin's description of Roman’s acts is still language, but it is a very different language: a language of the grotesque body, rather than the language of literature. The body parts that Roman puts together and stacks against each other are a silent message of a body that is unarticulated and textually present only as a mute actor. While alive Tatiana is an enclosed literary creation, when Roman murders her, she is verbally muted and allowed to signify only through her body parts, which Roman chops into pieces and rearranges. And while these body parts might indeed function as linguistic signifiers of a message that Roman wants to announce to the world, that message is fleshy and physically evident rather than articulated abstractly through words. The symbolic signification that steals the body away and flattens it into an empty token does not apply.
Since in his violent rage Roman targets symbols that turn the body into an abstract symbol, it is fitting that at the very end of the novel he parodies and desecrates the rite of Holy Communion. After all, this rite is based on the notion that the body of Christ is somehow present in the bread and wine consumed by believers. In the Orthodox tradition, it is believed that the body of Christ is mysteriously present in the wine and bread, even though they may not have been chemically altered (Bulgakov 110). When Roman takes the wine and bread of Holy Communion, mixes it with the body parts of his victims, and eats the mixture, he literalizes the rite. By transforming Holy Communion into an unholy communion in which actual human flesh is consumed, Roman is destroying the symbolism of this ritual, turning a metaphysical process of transmutation into cannibalism.

By killing the characters and by engorging himself in their flesh, Roman is simultaneously destroying the novel. He is emptying it of its symbols, and because Roman, the novel’s namesake, dies shortly after engorging himself with human flesh, the implication is that perhaps the novel cannot survive the presence of the human body in all its grotesque fleshiness. As the body count rises, the novel is gradually depleted of narrative descriptions and literariness, until it finally gives out to total silence with Roman’s death.

Sorokin thus exhumes the Russian novel only to destroy it: first enacting the fantasy of the collective restorative nostalgia, then eviscerating that mythologized space of the past. The fact that he carries out this destruction with another artifact of Russian cultural mythology – the axe – hints at a more recent past, a past repressed in the post-Soviet, nostalgic longing for tsarist times. The axe is a well-known symbol of revolution.
When Roman says he “knows what to do,” his answer mirrors Lenin’s violent answer to Russia’s problems through a revolution that destroyed old Russia and precipitated human casualties in numbers substantially greater than Roman’s victims. Chernyshevsky’s answer to Russia’s problems was similarly dependent on the axe. Though he did not bring about a revolution or organize any actual violence, his cry that “only the peasants’ axes can save us” was taken to heart by other Russian revolutionaries in the late nineteenth-century, including Nechaev’s violent group, “Narodnaia Rasprava” (The People’s Summary Justice) which had the axe on its official seal (Venturi 370).

By calling to mind these historical moments through Roman’s violent destruction of his village with an axe, Sorokin is jolting his audience into remembering another facet of Russian history. Sorokin suggests that to as the people of Krutoi Iar have forgotten their losses and their past, so his contemporaries have forgotten their history in their nostalgic revivals of an idyllic past. Through Roman’s carnage, Sorokin is recreating in essentialized fashion the great violence repressed in the national impulse to turn back the clocks and revive tsarist Russia. Theodor Adorno once famously declared that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (qtd. in Tiedeman xv). He would revise this statement later in response to the debate and contention it provoked, but the gist of what he was saying was that there could be no return to the kind of innocence required for writing poetry after the atrocities of the Holocaust, and that “writing poetry before Auschwitz and writing poetry after were separated by an unbridgeable gulf” (Tiedeman xvi). In Roman, Sorokin seems to be implying that there can be no innocent pastoral after the history of violence that defined the twentieth-century for the Soviet Union. He also seems to be saying that there needs to be an “unbridgeable gulf” not only between
the art of the past and that of the present, but also between the cultures of past and present; the gulf should be as “unbridgeable” as the deep gulf between the first and second parts of Roman. The river cannot and should not be allowed to wash away the pain of history.

If the cemetery of the novel’s prologue becomes a site of idealization for the pensive observer, by turning Roman into a murderous maniac, Sorokin gives us pause, leading us to look back at the prologue – despite how drastically different and almost unconnected the two parts of the novel may seem. Turning back to that prologue, we cannot help but feel that there is nothing to linger over in that space, that the grave of Roman is not a site for wistful longing, that Roman, just like the Russian novel, need not be exhumed. First because in the literal context of the novel, it is the grave of a murderer, but also because through his metatextual play Sorokin has implicitly condemned the novel for an inappropriate innocence, or at least declared it irrelevant.

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When we look at Sorokin’s creation alongside the three nineteenth-century novels that I address in the chapters that follow, it could be said that by debunking the conventional Russian novel, he is also carrying out a literary process that is significant to the project of these earlier writers. By taking the axe to the pastoral reality of Roman and unleashing the grotesque, Sorokin realizes the ideological fantasy of late nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries; they wanted to comprehensively and completely destroy tsarist Russia, and through the force of the grotesque, Sorokin destroys the mythical countryside, which was often conceived as a symbolic microcosm for tsarist Russia.
Sorokin shows, albeit in essentialized form, the literal violence revolutionaries wanted to perform on the Russian status quo. As will be seen below, by giving refracted artistic shape to their project through the grotesque, Sorokin is working in parallel ways to the late realist writers. Roman’s direct and violent destruction of the sense of reality created by past pastoral narratives illustrates in exaggerated form the sort of damage that the grotesque realism of Russian realists like Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and the late Tolstoy did to the image of the Russian status quo. Dostoevsky’s *Demons* shows that it was possible to upend the status quo and create chaos, while Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlevs* and Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* reveal that perhaps the status quo merited upending. All in all, these authors were chipping away at the myths about tsarist Russia much as Sorokin does in *Roman* (though his target may have been only a nostalgically reconstructed tsarist Russia). They may not have visualized a full-blown violent evisceration of the status quo in their works, but through their grotesque realism they were bursting the myths and implicitly reconciling themselves to the inevitable violent end that was sure to come. In *Roman* Sorokin reenacts in more obvious terms their covert devices and perhaps even their intentions.
Chapter 2

Grotesque Realism and the Inadequacies of ‘Landowner Literature’ in Dostoevsky’s Demons

In the afterword to Dostoevsky’s Adolescent, Nikolai Semenovich, the former guardian of Arkadii Dolgorukii, declares that if he were a Russian novelist of some talent he "would be sure to take his heroes from the hereditary Russian nobility, because it is only in that type of cultivated Russian people that there is possible at least the appearance of a beautiful order and a beautiful impression" (вид красивого порядка и красивого впечатления) (Dostoevsky, Adolescent 561).23 He attributes his appreciation for such heroes to the fact that novels treating nascent phenomena would lack the smooth finish of a work concerned with established social systems. The writer who seeks to capture the chaos of contemporary society has no “beautiful forms” at his disposal. The only option left to him is “to guess...and be mistaken” (Dostoevsky, Adolescent 563).

Yet despite his appreciation for “landowner literature” (помещичья литература),24 Nikolai Semenovich hints at the profound shortcomings of that literary mode when he declares that novels about the Russian nobility “would belong not so much to Russian literature as to Russian history” (Dostoevsky, Adolescent 562). Even this relegation of contemporary literature to history becomes suspect when Nikolai Semenovich insists that “landowner literature” is not so much a reflection of Russian history as an imaginative rewriting of that history. “It would be an artistically finished picture of a Russian mirage,” [русского миража] writes Nikolai Semenovich about the

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24 The irony becomes obvious when Nikolai Semenovich says that the lives of the nobility only have the “appearance” (вид) of order and harmony.
finished forms of “landowner literature,” “which existed in reality until people realized it was a mirage” (Dostoevsky, Adolescent 562).

These largely ironical statements echo Dostoevsky’s own convictions, including his belief that despite its claims to realism, “landowner literature” was not in fact realistic, but a form of historical fiction at best. In direct statements on the matter, Dostoevsky writes that the “landowner literature” penned by Turgenev and Tolstoy had already “said everything that it had to say” and had grown anachronistic in its detachment from the real world (PSS 28.2:260; qtd. in Frank, Miraculous Years 424). Dostoevsky saw contemporary Russian reality as full of events and phenomena more dynamic and amorphous than traditional finished forms could convey. As Robert Louis Jackson argues, though Dostoevsky had a great appreciation for the aesthetically immaculate forms of classical aesthetics, when it came to his own art, “he undertook […] to express the new social chaos” (Quest for Form 111). “Dostoevsky,” writes Jackson, “recognized the disfigured and chaotic character of the ‘new reality’ and of the ‘Russian majority’ forming that reality. […] He recognized the need for a realism that would cope with a ‘disintegrating life’” (Quest 113). Dostoevsky addressed these ideas in an 1877 entry from Diary of a Writer, where he states that even though Tolstoy and Turgenev had illuminated one small, gentry corner of Russian life, there were countless other corners that needed to be brought under the light of the aesthetic gaze. In Diary he wondered who would give aesthetic life to this other Russia, “who will be the historian of the other corners which, it seems, are so frightfully numerous.” He continues: “We have among us a disintegrating life and, therefore, a disintegrating family […] Who even in the smallest

degree can define and express the laws of this disintegration and of that which is being
created anew?” (Dostoevsky, *Diary* 592; qtd. in Jackson *Quest* 111). As Jackson argues,
Dostoevsky himself took up the burden of representing the new social chaos with its
uncharacteristic features and emergent types; he sought to “define and express the laws of
[…] disintegration” he believed prevailed in Russian social reality.

As the greatest Russian writer of the nineteenth-century who was not a member of
the landed gentry, it is perhaps only appropriate that it fell to Dostoevsky to depict
Russian reality outside the confines of the gentry estate. 26 Dostoevsky depicted the
“disintegrating” life of contemporary Russia in all of his mature works. Yet I would
suggest that it was in *Demons* that he dealt with this component of his aesthetic mission
most directly. Prior to being articulated theoretically at the end of *Adolescent* and in
*Diary of a Writer*, both Dostoevsky’s disavowal of the finished forms of “landowner
literature” and his embrace of “disintegration” are given clearest aesthetic manifestation
in *Demons*.

The subject matter of the novel already pulls in the direction of the “disintegrating
life of the Russian majority” that so preoccupied Dostoevsky. Written in response to the
1869 murder of the student Ivan Ivanov by the revolutionary group Narodnaia Rasprava
under the leadership of Sergei Nechaev – known as the Nechaev Affair – Dostoevsky’s

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26 On strictly technical terms, though Dostoevsky’s family did not belong to the nobility,
Dostoevsky’s father Mikhail Dostoevsky (who came from a family of priests) advanced
through his post as a doctor and eventually attained the status of collegiate assessor,
which meant that he was entitled to claim hereditary nobility in 1828. He eventually
bought a small estate (Darovoe) in the Tula province. Yet being nominally included in
the gentry class did not mean that the Dostoevkys did not keep having financial
hardship. The family often struggled financially. The Darovoe estate was not very
productive and Dostoevsky’s father struggled with the possibility of bankruptcy (Lantz
108-109).
novel was rooted in contemporary historical events that exemplified Russia’s chaotic political climate. To capture the profound social disintegration these events signaled, Dostoevsky gave literary shape to that chaos and alluded to the inadequacies of conventional literary forms for such a task.

Dostoevsky’s depiction of disintegration is delayed in the text of the novel. Toward the end of 1872, in a proposed afterword to Demons titled “On the Question of Who is Healthy and Who is Insane, An Answer to the Critics” Dostoevsky hints at the novel’s aesthetics in list format: “Traditions, the literature of the gentry, ideas, suddenly chaos, people without form [людь без образа] – they have no convictions, no science, no point of emphasis; they believe in the vague mysteries of socialism” (PSS 11: 308).

From Dostoevsky’s list we can infer a disparity between the beginning of the novel (i.e. “traditions, literature of the gentry”) and the anarchy that “suddenly” commences with the incursion of “people without form.” As I will suggest, this list hints at an aesthetic duality in Demons, which was aimed as a response to the limitations of traditional “landowner literature.” In part one of Demons Dostoevsky recreates a version of “landowner literature” by mimicking Turgenev’s aesthetic of restraint (with the occasional Tolstoyan touches) and by evading the “disfigured and chaotic” reality of the “Russian majority.” This part of the novel concentrates on a seemingly orderly reality of the gentry, thus sidestepping the underlying chaos and violence of the underground revolutionaries. Yet beginning from part two through the end of the novel, Dostoevsky embraces the “disfigured and chaotic” reality, which is largely avoided in part one. When this other reality is on display, not only is it “disfigured and chaotic,” but, as I will illustrate, it has many traits of the grotesque. In the course of parts two and three of
Demons, markers of the grotesque, such as violence, the life of the body, despiritualization, and the inversion of all hierarchies assume center stage.

In his *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* Kayser argues that an essential component of the grotesque is that when invoking this style, authors do not leap into the fantastic, but recreate and estrange versions of the familiar. “THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD,” writes Kayser (184, upper case in original). The grotesque does not create new, alien worlds, but turns the worlds we know into alien, disfigured entities. Sorokin’s postmodernist grotesque in *Roman* emerges after a pristine recreation of the nineteenth-century countryside novel, or what Dostoevsky called “landowner literature.” The pastoral reality disintegrates once Sorokin gives voice to the body in the novel’s last section. In *Demons*, Dostoevsky carries out a similar aesthetic project. In part one of the novel he gives us a warped remake of Turgenev’s art, a familiar narrative, which eventually gives way to a grotesque reality of disintegration.

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Scholars of Dostoevsky have documented the presence of the grotesque in his works. Generally, the grotesque is seen as most significant early in Dostoevsky’s career, when Gogol, that great master of the Russian grotesque, influenced his art most strongly. In *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism* Donald Fanger argues that the Gogolian grotesque was “necessary preparation” for Dostoevsky’s works: Dostoevsky “would time and again take elements of the Gogolian grotesque and, by adding a new perspective, draw new power from the expectation of comedy that these grotesque elements raised” (Fanger 125). With his fearless aesthetic eye, which led him to gravitate toward the unnatural and
the odd, the early Dostoevsky used the grotesque as a way to “enlarg[e] the province of realism”27 (Fanger 125).

Yet when discussion turns to Dostoevsky’s more celebrated later works, mentions of the grotesque grow scarcer, even though some scholars have found traces of the grotesque here as well. In the same study, Fanger notes elements of the grotesque in Crime and Punishment; as he suggests, paradoxical scenarios whereby someone as ridiculous as Marmeladov verbalizes some of the novel’s more serious messages, or a prostitute like Sonya is made the novel’s moral center, have the unmistakable touch of the grotesque (231-35). George Gibian, who also writes about the grotesque in Dostoevsky’s novels, similarly argues that the Dostoevskian grotesque is often characterized by the communication of key themes through undignified contexts. Further, Gibian mentions that for Dostoevsky “grotesque distortion” was as “an antidote to the antithetical distortion due to oversimplification of human experience through sorting out its various elements and compartmentalizing them neatly and precisely.” The grotesque was Dostoevsky’s means of avoiding “the facile harmony and stability and classical separation of various emotions” (Gibian 268). The style was a tool for balancing out the dignified and rational; it opened up the aesthetic text to disharmony, messiness, and instability, thus presenting a fuller, more nuanced sense of reality.

27 Whereas the Gogolian grotesque was more or less detached, emotionless, and comical, Dostoevsky never permits the reader to emotionally detach from grotesque situations. The grotesque in Dostoevsky results from situations and behaviors and is not inherent in the characters; rather, Dostoevsky manages to create grotesque individuals who are not dehumanized. Victor Terras likewise suggests that Gogol’s grotesque “disquieted Dostoevsky,” who could not condone the Gogolian “metamorphosis of a human being into a puppet” (21). Instead, in Poor Folk Dostoevsky clearly showed that affect author could evoke the grotesque while still treating characters as live human beings.
Gibian’s argument indirectly intimates that, among other things, the grotesque allowed Dostoevsky to overcome the finished, harmonious forms of “landowner literature.” As a style that often captures the disharmonious and misshapen, the grotesque acts as a key device in Dostoevsky’s polemics against “landowner literature.” In this chapter, I will explore this problem further by relying on a definition of the grotesque that fuses Wolfgang Kayser’s principle of grotesque estrangement and the concepts of degradation and the grotesque that Bakhtin formulates in his *Rabelais and His World*. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin’s own discussion of Menippean satire – a style that shares features of the grotesque – throughout Dostoevsky’s oeuvre already suggests that the Bakhtinan brand of the grotesque may also be relevant to this oeuvre.

As Bakhtin states in his Rabelais book, grotesque realism inherits “the culture of (medieval) folk humor” (*Rabelais* 18). Carnival principles, which were rooted in the original practices of the folk carnival, could infiltrate and “carnivalize” literary styles. The grotesque is an example of a carnivalized style. As Bakhtin puts it, the “people’s laughter […] characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times” (*Rabelais* 20). The raucous laughter of the carnivalesque, which “degrades and materializes,” is an essential component of the grotesque (*Rabelais* 20). The grotesque also inherits the carnival’s tendency to upend reality. In Bakhtin’s words, the carnival causes the “temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life” (*Rabelais* 15).

A number of these principles are also present in Menippean satire, a style that also inherits carnival principles. Yet aside from sharing the carnivalesque features of the
grotesque, Menippea also contains elements such as utopian overtones, scandals, inserted genres, experimental fantasticality, and “slum naturalism” – representations of dens of thieves, brothels, taverns and similar such low-brow places. In contrast to the grotesque, Menippea does not degrade and materialize. In fact, in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin argues that Menippean satire lacks the preoccupation with the body that we find in the grotesque. As I address grotesque realism in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, I will rely on Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque in his book on Rabelais, but will adjust that definition through notions that Bakhtin introduces in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*.

In its original medieval and Renaissance form, the grotesque emerges as an innocent, joyful, and restorative style. Over time, however, the grotesque took on more sinister traits. In his Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin argues that “in carnivalized literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, laughter is as a rule considerably muffled” (*Dostoevsky* 165). Bakhtin traces this “reduced laughter” in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre through the Menippea. As I will suggest in this chapter, just like the Menippea, the grotesque also coexists with the “somber coloration” of Dostoevsky’s works. The grotesque realism that I will trace in Dostoevsky’s *Demons* shares many properties of the grotesque as Bakhtin outlines it in *Rabelais and his World*, yet it is a darker, less innocent version of this earlier grotesque. In *Demons* we can find grotesque estrangement, degradation of the spiritual to the level of the physical, and finally, the inversion of hierarchies. Yet in Dostoevsky’s “somber” work, all of these features of the original grotesque are stripped of their celebratory, carnival joy. In *Demons* laughter dies on the lips and grotesque degradation merely points to social degradation.
1. Turgenevian Beginnings

While the grotesque and its carnivalistic principles eventually take over the novel, Dostoevsky’s *Demons* begins in what seems to be a more traditional style, with an appearance of order that strongly recalls earlier works of “landowner literature.” In particular, in the first part of *Demons* Dostoevsky recreates the poetics of Turgenev’s works, which he makes into the target of his grotesque in later parts of the novel.

Though mocked and maligned through the acclaimed, but untalented writer Karmazinov, Turgenev was nevertheless a significant creative presence in *Demons*. Dostoevsky’s dialogue with Turgenev in the novel went far beyond the caricature. In a letter to Apollon Maikov from 14 March 1871, Dostoevsky alludes to having thought about Turgenev’s earlier *Fathers and Sons* when writing the first part of *Demons*. In the letter Dostoevsky expresses his pleasure at Maikov’s suggestion that characters in the first part of *Demons* reminded him of “Turgenev’s characters grown old.” Dostoevsky characterizes this remark as “brilliant” and goes on to say: “I had something like that in mind while I was writing, but you have summed it up in a pithy formula. Thank you for those words, they have shed light on the whole thing for me” (*PSS* 29.1:185; qtd. in Frank, *Miraculous Years* 637). This statement documents the close connection between *Demons* and Turgenev’s earlier novel, which has received much critical attention. When identifying Turgenevian thematic concerns in *Demons*, critics have focused on the relations between “fathers and sons” in the novel, both the generational tensions between the liberals of the 40s and the nihilists of the 60s and the unquestionable relatedness of

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28 The complicated, often antagonistic rapport between Dostoevsky and Turgenev no doubt contributed to the negative depiction of Karmazinov.
these two different cohorts, which Dostoevsky makes explicit by casting Stepan
Trofimovich as the biological father of Pyotr Stepanovich.  

But Dostoevsky engages Turgenev and his works in yet another important way: he polemicizes with Turgenev the writer of “landowner literature” and through him with the poetics of “landowner literature” at large. The styles of these two authors are as different as they could be. Unlike Dostoevsky, who wanted to depict contemporary chaos and disintegration, Turgenev sought to create in art the kind of order that did not exist in reality. Robert Louis Jackson, who adopts Merezhkovsky’s characterization of Turgenev as a “genius of measure,” argues that Turgenev’s art is driven by a “principle of moderation.” In Turgenev’s narratives, we find ourselves “in the presence of an archetypal vision of epic unity, wholeness, and organic character,” which mirrors nature’s inherent harmony and measure (Jackson Dialogues with Dostoevsky 164). More recently, Elizabeth Cheresh Allen has identified Turgenev’s art as a form of Nietzschean Apollonian art, which does not simply mirror nature in its strivings for harmony and order, but rather imposes that order poetically. According to Allen, Turgenev’s Apollonian art “insists on the installation of constraints in the representation of all human experience, regardless of any inherent, elemental unconstraint” (45). Turgenev adopted a “poetics of secular salvation,” which provides “psychic security” by excising images of disruption from the artistic gaze and “presenting events as constrained and organized, by molding them into harmonious shapes comforting in their coherence” (Allen 47). Turgenev is thus the antithesis of Dostoevsky as an artist; whereas Turgenev was the

author of nearly classical, “harmonious shapes” and balance, Dostoevsky, was the writer of the liminal threshold, tragedy, and disorder.³⁰

In part one of *Demons*, however, differences between Dostoevsky’s style and Turgenev’s are not as marked as usual. After all, it was after reading this part of the novel that Maikov made his remark about being reminded of Turgenev’s characters. This part, which spans the length of a Turgenevian novel, is driven by aesthetic agendas independent from the rest of the text. As a result, it brings out similarities, rather than differences, between Dostoevsky and Turgenev. More specifically, unlike what follows, part one of *Demons* is defined by the principles of narrative containment and restraint fundamental to Turgenev the artist.

Dostoevsky employs a number of narrative strategies, whether intentionally or not, to bridge the great divide between his artistic style and Turgenev’s. For instance, even though the historical events on which the novel was based took place in Moscow, *Demons* is situated in the heart of provincial Russia, possibly in Tver’. This revision of historical realities moves the novel closer to the territory of “landowner literature.” Had Dostoevsky situated *Demons* in St. Petersburg, in “his Petersburg,” “with all its spectral inhabitants, its buildings, canals, bridges, and street lamps,” in “his Petersburg,” which “seems so perpetually on the point of evanescence” (Fanger 132), it would have been difficult to minimize the aesthetic chasm between his narratives and Turgenev’s. Certainly, it would have been difficult to create any sense of stability in a city that later in the *Adolescent* is described as possibly being someone’s dream.

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³⁰M. Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, V. Ivanov *Freedom and the Tragic Life*, M. Jones *Dostoevsky and the Novel of Disorder*, respectively.
As he moves into Turgenev’s novelistic territory, Dostoevsky peoples this space with characters reminiscent of those found in Turgenev’s novels and in “landowner literature.” In part one, the world of the landowner Varvara Stavrogina and her retainer Stepan Verkhovensky is center stage. Dostoevsky introduces Kirillov, Shatov, the Lebyadkins and others, but as outsiders whose status in the action is still unclear.

Dostoevsky’s narrator-chronicler, Anton Lavrentievich, an especially significant presence in part one, adds to the aura of normalcy in this part because he insistently presents life in the world around him as stable and uneventful. He knows many people in town and possesses privileged information about their lives. As Joseph Frank argues, due to his inside knowledge of the town, the chronicler’s perspective can “reduce the turbulent events of the book to eccentric and isolated manifestations” (Frank, “Masks of Stavrogin” 661). This statement is especially true in the chronicler’s depiction of Stepan Trofimovich, about whom the chronicler is the most informed, because he has the dubious honor of being his confidant. The rapport between these two characters is fundamental to our understanding of Stepan. Until their close ties peter out later in the book, Stepan is portrayed exclusively through the subjective perspective of the chronicler. The close friendship feels like a controlling device in the narrative, designed both to keep Stepan Trofimovich in check and to adjust our expectations of the story.

The washed-up liberal and man of the 1840s Stepan Trofimovich was based on the historian T. N. Granovsky. Stepan is the leader of a liberal circle in town that includes the chronicler in its ranks. Through his interventions, the chronicler depicts Stepan Trofimovich as a harmless old man who, despite his boasts and sincere fears of
persecution, never did anything remotely revolutionary.\textsuperscript{31} The chronicler’s assurances that Stepan has never acted and will never act pave the way for his characterizations of all liberals in town as innocuous and politically insignificant. Residents of the province may view the circle “as a hotbed of freethinking, depravity, and godlessness,” but Anton Lavrentevich assures us that it was merely a place for “the most innocent, perfectly Russian, jolly liberal chatter” (Dostoevsky, \textit{Demons} 33; 10:30).\textsuperscript{32} In the chronicler’s eyes, Stepan Trofimovich and his circle exemplify the aimlessness of Russian liberalism and prove the dictum that a “higher liberal” in Russia means “a liberal without aim” [либерал без всякой цели] (Dostoevsky, \textit{Demons} 33; 10:30).

Such descriptions paint a picture of Stepan Trofimovich as a Turgenevian character, another idealistic liberal like the many who populate Turgenev’s works. Frank has compared Stepan to the protagonist of Turgenev’s novel \textit{Rudin} (1856), who was based on Bakunin and envisioned as a “Romantic-Idealist of the 1840s” prone to

\textsuperscript{31} The chronicler mentions that Stepan Trofimovich liked to think of himself as a “persecuted’ man” and an “exile,” but declares, quite definitively, that “in the end [Stepan Trofimovich] was forgotten by everyone everywhere,” and that it could have been possible that he was “completely unknown earlier as well,” because “his activity ended almost the moment it began” (8). Of course, though Stepan Trofimovich holds that his political activity ended due to a “whirlwind of concurrent circumstances” [вихря сошедшихся обстоятельств], the chronicler explains that there had been neither a “whirlwind” nor any “circumstances.” In fact, according to the chronicler, Stepan Trofimovitch’s career or pseudo-career ended, prosaically enough, when Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina invited him to serve in the capacity of tutor to her son Nikolai Stavrogin. Even the narrative poem, which Stepan regards as a token of supreme rebellion and therefore something that could lead to retribution from the government, is deemed perfectly harmless by the chronicler and as something that could easily be published in a contemporary journal. Time and again, through his relentless corrective narrative interventions, the chronicler affirms that Stepan is a man of whom no surprises can be expected, a man of words incapable of action.

\textsuperscript{32} I use the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation of \textit{Demons}. 
charismatic speeches, but incapable of action (Frank, Miraculous Years 637). Stepan’s failure to act and his nearly compulsive speech production – his frequent and excessively long monologues, or his long-winded missives to Varvara Petrovna – reveal a parallel between him and Rudin as men of words rather than action.

Stepan Trofimovich also resembles liberals like the Kirsanovs from Fathers and Sons. Pavel and Nikolai Kirsanov are self-declared men of the 40s who value art above science and materialism. Despite his intelligence, like Stepan, Pavel failed to make a life for himself in the city and had to return to his ancestral Marino to live with his brother Nikolai. When pressed by Bazarov, Pavel has to admit that despite his ardent liberal convictions, he is “sitting with [his] arms folded” and not putting his convictions into action (Turgenev, Essential Turgenev 607). The reasons behind the failed careers of both Stepan and Pavel are likewise similar. Pavel’s failure was precipitated by an unfortunate affair. Stepan Trofimovich similarly spent much of his youth pursuing unsuccessful romances. Allen argues that in Turgenev, romantic love “leads to an expenditure of energy that would otherwise be devoted to self-preservation” (59). In the case of Stepan, two marriages and a tortured platonic romance with Varvara cause an expenditure of energy, which inhibits self-preservation and precludes concrete action.

The chronicler’s tone, coupled with Stepan’s similarities to Turgenevian characters, could lead a reader unaware of the tragic ending ahead to believe that no dramatic action will be seen in this novel. The descriptions of Stepan Trofimovich and of his circle as incompetent liberals establish an atmosphere of routine and safety for the

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33 Stepan is somewhat of a composite figure in Demons. Just as he resembles Rudin, he also has Rousseau-like qualities. See Robin Feuer Miller’s article: "Intimations of Rousseau in The Possessed," Dostoevsky Studies 5, 1984 (1984): 77-91.
reader. No political or revolutionary action can be expected in this first part of the novel. Instead, this section takes a more conventional turn and is focused on romantic love. Not only are Stepan’s marriages and his failed romance with Varvara recalled but Anton Lavrentevich also dwells on Stepan’s potential marriage to Dasha. Much of the gossip in town, many of the events in this part of the novel, and virtually all conversations fixate on romantic love. We learn that Liza and Stavrogin may have been carrying on a courtship abroad and rumors float about relations between Dasha and Stavrogin. Members of the liberal circle are also almost exclusively described in terms of their romantic affairs.

There is talk of Shatov’s unsuccessful marriage, Virginsky’s romantic turmoil when his wife takes Lebyadkin as a lover, Liputin’s domineering nature as a husband, and similar such details. When not engaged in idle chats, card games, and drinking, the liberal progressives in the town are busy disseminating romantic gossip, seeing to their own problematic romantic lives, or simply recovering from unfortunate or failed romances.

The precedence given to romantic plots over revolution is an unmistakably Turgenevian touch in this part of Demons. Though Turgenev tackled political questions in his novels, his narratives frequently suggest that real life is not guided by ideology, but by more organic forces, the most important of which are love and nature. Nature is the great spiritual balm in Fathers and Sons and responsible for larger rhythms of stability. While Arkadii Kirsanov thinks about land reform, he cannot help but marvel at the surrounding natural beauty, as thoughts of reform are dispelled from his mind. Romantic love similarly outweighs political convictions, often assuming center stage even in Turgenev’s political novels like Fathers and Sons. In the process, political ideology is domesticated, direct political actions suppressed, and political questions peacefully
resolved in the sphere of romantic love. The marriage of Nikolai Kirsanov and the peasant woman Fenichka is perhaps the most progressive political gesture in Fathers and Sons, yet it happens within the bounds of the romantic, family plot, rather than through revolutionary activities.

With its depictions of romantic plots rather than revolutionary activities, the first part of Demons chronicles the unremarkable elements of the town. Romantic affairs assume center stage and characters are more concerned with their own emotions or with beauty and idealism than with revolution. Under the circumstances, the chronicler’s depiction of life in the town as uneventful seems only appropriate. “[V]ery strange events,” writes the chronicler at the beginning of the book, “took place in our town, hitherto not remarkable for anything” (Dostoevsky, Demons 8; 10:8). The foregrounding on the town’s average human concerns rather than extraordinary disrupting revolutionary acts suggests an aura of peace and stability.

2. Closets and Restraints

Toward the end of part one, however, there is a sense that the non-dramatic, restrained atmosphere of the novel might suddenly change. When Maria Timofeevna shows up at church with her clownish makeup, her hair in a knot on the nape of her neck, and in a thin old dress, the aura of stability and tranquility in part one begins to shatter. “There was something unusual and unexpected for everyone in such a person [Maria Timofeevna] suddenly appearing out of nowhere, in the street, among people,” writes the

34 Anne Lounsbery argues that the town in Demons is a “quintessentially average town” that “evokes […] averageness” (212).
chronicler (Dostoevsky, Demons 152; 10:122). Maria does not fit within the confines of the cathedral where only members of high society had gathered. Nor does she fit within the familiar Turgenevian narrative that Dostoevsky recreates in part one. Her presence in the novel is out of place, just like her presence in the cathedral. The appearance of a giggling Maria in the cathedral is a strange turn of events that disrupts the uneventfulness of the novel and suggests that even as he recreates a version of the stable landowner narrative Dostoevsky estranges that narrative.

After this unexpected event virtually all the novel’s characters are collected in Varvara’s drawing room. The gathering and mingling of individuals like the Lebyadkins with Varvara Petrovna, Stepan Trofimovich, Shatov, the Drozdos, and Mavrikii, is so unconventional that scandal starts to feel imminent. Yet despite her condition, Maria Timofeevna does not break social etiquette. She giggles, but she immediately “recoil[s] against the back of her chair” when Varvara casts a stern look at her. Her brother, Captain Lebyadkin, is “not the sort of man who can enter society,” and “want[s] to offend” (Dostoevsky, Demons 178; 10:142), yet Varvara manages to silence him too with her authoritative words and looks. Varvara’s drawing room, which could be seen as a token of civilization, has a restraining effect on the Lebyadkins. Even though they are unpredictable characters capable of social improprieties, they are uncharacteristically demure within the bounds of this space. Despite all the potential for scandal, tensions abate and an uneasy order is maintained.

Throughout the scene in Varvara’s drawing room Dostoevsky brings the narrative to the point of scandal several times, but then pulls back. Once the Lebyadkins are silenced, questions about Stavrogin’s potential marriage to Maria Timofeevna are raised
and the potential for scandal reintroduced into the scene. These questions are answered by Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich who arrive on the scene just at the right moment. Yet immediately after one potential scandal has been laid to rest, another, even greater disruption of propriety takes place: Shatov violently slaps Stavrogin across the face. Surprisingly, despite all the dramatic potential of this moment, restraint prevails once again as Stavrogin puts his hands behind his back and refuses to retaliate for the offense.

In showing decorum to prevail over chaos at various points in the drawing room scene, Dostoevsky appears to have been mimicking the aura of restraint that he associated with traditional “landowner literature.” In an 1877 entry from *Diary of a Writer* (titled “The Boy Celebrating His Name Day”), Dostoevsky highlights restraint as a distinctive feature of landowner literature. Dostoevsky discusses the moment in *Youth* when Tolstoy’s young Nikolenka is locked in the closet as punishment for showing his tongue to his tutor. Dostoevsky acknowledges that these passages are “wonderfully written” (*Diary* 590), but cites this tale as a counterpoint to a real story about another unhappy little boy, which he heard from his friend “K-v.” This other boy had not learned his lessons, so he was forced to stay at school in detention. Dostoevsky explains that after walking around for a while, the pupil “untied a rope from a pulley, which he happened to notice; he tied the rope to a nail […] and he hanged himself” (*Diary* 590). When the proper authorities arrived, they could not revive the boy.

Despite the similar impulses both boys experience, only one of them commits suicide, while the other merely *imagines* killing himself. Dostoevsky’s explanation for the different outcomes, for why one boy could only dream while the other acted, is a sociological one. As he argues, “the rigorous order of the historically formed noble
family would have had its effect (on the boy), and would have prevented the *dream* (of Tolstoy’s Nikolenka) from being converted into reality” (Dostoevsky, *Diary* 592). It follows then, that the other boy, who “*meditated* and *acted* accordingly” (Dostoevsky, *Diary* 592), did so because he belonged to a different family and thus inherited a different perspective on reality. These sociological disparities bring forth two diverging narratives: one that averts violence by literally putting the protagonist in the closet where he cannot act out masochistic fantasies and the other that allows him to pick up a rope from a pulley. Tolstoy’s variant suggests to Dostoevsky that the gentry live their lives in the shadow of this closet. Order is thus preserved; violent impulses are curbed. The other narrative suggests that the distance between our thoughts and actions is not so great, and that therefore dark, destructive thoughts can easily translate into violent acts against the self or others.

In the first part of *Demons* Stavrogin is subjected to restraints that resemble the restraint of Nikolenka in *Youth*. During his return to the province three years prior to the novel’s present, Stavrogin was responsible for bizarre acts like pulling Gaganov by the nose or biting the ear of the former governor. During that time, he was forcibly removed from the social sphere by the authorities and thrown in a jail cell, where he could only “raise[s] a clamor,” “beating violently on the door with his fists” (Dostoevsky, *Demons* 51; 10:43). In the novel’s present, the moment when Shatov slaps Stavrogin across the face in Varvara Petrovna’s drawing room has the potential to precipitate immediate bloodshed. Yet instead of retaliating, Stavrogin seemingly reenacts his arrest from three years earlier by policing himself and forcing his own hands behind his back.
When witnessing this scene, the chronicler suggests that it probably took tremendous self-restraint for Stavrogin not to attack Shatov. As he informs us, Stavrogin was the type of man capable of killing another on the spot for an offense like Shatov’s. In fact, during the scene, Stavrogin first grabs Shatov by the shoulders and only afterwards does he force his hands behind his back. The chronicler compares the effort it takes Stavrogin to restrain himself to the effort that it would require for a man to “seize a red-hot bar of iron [раскаленную докрасна железную полосу] and clutch it in his hand” until he finally overcomes “the intolerable pain [нестерпимую боль]” (Dostoevsky, Demons 205; 10:165). Tolstoy’s Nikolenka may imagine hurting himself, but Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin is a grown man who has already killed several people in duels and who clearly has the potential, and perhaps even the inherent inclination, to hurt others. Nikolai has been restrained and groomed from childhood to be a good nobleman. But Stavrogin grew up spending the nights weeping with Stepan Trofimovich, who we are told “call[ed] forth […] sacred anguish” in the young boy’s soul – a masochistic anguish of the sort that could not be replaced with simple satisfaction (Dostoevsky, Demons 41; 10:35). Stavrogin undergoes the same anguish when he restrains himself in Varvara’s drawing room. Dostoevsky may invoke some of the same restraints he noticed in “landowner literature,” but the violent impulses of the person he is restraining are a great deal more forceful and sinister than those of any person who could have appeared in traditional “landowner” narratives. The force in Stavrogin, the effort it requires for him to be still and not to act, is so irreconcilable with the reality of ennui, inaction, and sentimentality that defines Varvara, Stepan Trofimovich, and the rest of provincial society up to this point, that even as Stavrogin compels himself not to disrupt their fragile
order, we know that its disruption is only natural. Dostoevsky signals that there is something unnatural about trying to make a person capable of killing someone on the spot fit into proper society and behave amenably like Mavriky Nikolaevich. Stavrogin will not submit to the constraints of the closet. Stavrogin does not fit into the Turgenevian reality that Dostoevsky’s chronicler has been constructing. As he tries to make himself fit, it becomes clear that even as Dostoevsky recreates the restraint of earlier traditional narratives, he simultaneously estranges that earlier narrative, rendering one of its core principles – restraint – so unnatural that we can already begin to see more intense traces of his grotesque realism.

The fact that, as Stavrogin restrains himself and bloodshed is prevented, Pyotr Stepanovich, the Nechaev figure in the novel and the mastermind of great violence, also politely navigates Varvara’s drawing room only highlights the invasion of the novel by the grotesque. Pyotr is remarkably different from the real Nechaev. When describing Nechaev’s social behavior, his acquaintance Aleksei Kapatsinsky mentioned that the revolutionary “was pathologically touchy,” would try to “trick and humiliate his opponent” in debates, and, more importantly, was unable to “tolerate people who [were] his equals,” and “with those stronger than he, maintain[ed] a strict silence and trie[d] to cast a shadow of suspicion over them” (qtd. in Kelly 261). On the other hand, Pyotr is a smooth talker who moments after arriving at Varvara’s manages to win over the hostess, clear Stavrogin from suspicions of illicit marriages, and humiliate his father, in one fell swoop.

Yet even as Pyotr displays impeccable public behavior with his smooth talking, the chronicler depicts him as a physically grotesque being. When Pyotr speaks, the
chronicler describes this process in purely anatomical terms. His enunciation is so clear that “his words spill out like big, uniform grains” (Dostoevsky, Demons 180; 10:144).

The chronicler dwells on a description of Pyotr Stepanovich’s tongue, which draws his attention by seemingly jutting outward. “You somehow begin to imagine,” writes the chronicler, “that the tongue in his mouth must be of some special form, somehow unusually long and thin, terrible red, and with an extremely sharp, constantly and involuntarily wriggling tip” (Dostoevsky, Demons 180; 10:144). Pyotr’s sharp, red, and wriggling tongue reaches outwards in grotesque fashion. In Bakhtin’s definition, the grotesque body is characterized through its apertures and outward protrusions: "the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (Rabelais 26). Bakhtin argues that with their protrusions and apertures grotesque bodies do not fit within the mold of the classical ideal. Grotesque bodies are: “ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics [...]” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 25). Though Pyotr may attempt to politely infiltrate Varvara’s drawing room, the descriptions of his grotesque tongue indicate that he is just as much an aberration within that space as Stavrogin with his violent impulses.

The arrivals of Pyotr and Stavrogin at Varvara’s drawing room, arrivals which mirror the homecoming of Arkadii and his friend Bazarov to Mar’ino in Fathers and Sons, signal the limitations of the earlier Turgenevian narrative and virtually ensure the dissipation of stability. Unlike Arkadii and Bazarov who are, respectively, successfully integrated into the estate life or cast out of it as the status quo continues unhindered, Dostoevsky’s efforts to integrate Pyotr and Stavrogin into the earlier paradigm of stability are fraught with unnaturalness. In contrast to Arkadii and Bazarov who are impotent
against a stable status quo, Pyotr and Stavrogin will disrupt Dostoevsky’s provincial reality. Their arrival is delayed until the very end of part one, which may account for the stability that reigned until then, but once they arrive, nothing stays the same.

3. A “New Story”

Shortly after the scene at Varvara’s, early in part two, the chronicler announces the beginning of a whole new story. “I will begin precisely from the eighth day following that Sunday,” he writes, “[…] because it was essentially from that evening that the ‘new story’ [новая история] began” (Dostoevsky, Demons 217, emphasis mine; 10:173). At this point, after both Pyotr and Stavrogin have just arrived, it is hard to say which character will be the main protagonist of the “new story” and therefore responsible for the changes to come. During the gathering at Varvara’s, Pyotr and Stavrogin are revealed as very different characters. One is competent at social manipulation (Pyotr), while the other capable of great physical strength and self-control (Stavrogin). After their arrival, the presence of either character is bound to shake the life of provincial society. Yet their differences suggest that anything could happen in the novel’s provincial society, depending on which character becomes the primary figure. Since at least by heritage, Stavrogin is a nobleman protagonist of the sort that had dominated “landowner literature,” at this stage in the novel it still seems feasible for the narrative to assume a traditional route.

Dostoevsky’s mock “landowner realism” in part one leaves this possibility open. In the first part of the novel Stepan Trofimovich declares that despite his wild behaviors Stavrogin is ultimately just like Shakespeare’s “Prince Harry”: despite youthful rebelliousness he will eventually return to proper society and assume his rightful role.
This suggestion implies that Stavrogin could assume his rightful role as a great gentry protagonist in the novel as well. The several marriage prospects for Stavrogin discussed in part one and his promise to his mother early in part two that he will propose to Liza in five days keep alive the possibility of a proper gentry future for him.

Dostoevsky’s superficial “landowner realism” comes apart in part two. The disintegration of the earlier narrative begins with Stavrogin. Ultimately, as Varvara herself lets slip at the end part one, Stavrogin is not in the likeness of Prince Harry but resembles another Shakespearean hero: Hamlet. As Robert Belknap has argued, many members of provincial society have expectations of Stavrogin (which he decidedly frustrating) just as there are expectations of Hamlet who is seen as the “rose of our fair state” (68). Stavrogin lets people down throughout the book and especially fails to fulfill the expectation that he is going to adopt the proper lifestyle of a nobleman. Contrary to what we have been told in part one or early in part two, Stavrogin is already married to the demented Maria Timofeevna. Stavrogin’s mother may have hopes that he will marry Liza, but he has entered an improper union, which, as he himself knows, has severed him from society. This marriage ensures the failure of all attempts to reintegrate Stavrogin into the social structure. Exile in Switzerland is the only way for him to live out his life with Maria.

Stavrogin’s defiance of and total escape from civilization is made clear during his nocturnal journey in part two. Shortly after having promised to propose to Liza, Stavrogin leaves in the middle of the night on a clandestine journey through a narrow door in the back of his mother’s estate. He eventually crosses into the disorderly territory behind the river, Zarechie, which highlights his withdrawal from civilization and his
entrance into a whole different world. “[T]he road went downhill,” explains the chronicler, “his feet slid in the mud, a wide, misty as if empty space opened out suddenly – the river. Houses turned into hovels, the street vanished into a multitude of disorderly lanes” (улица пропала во множестве беспорядочных закоулков) (Dostoevsky, Demons 257; 10:203). The transformation we witness as Stavrogin leaves the estate and crosses into more disorderly spaces hints at his own contemporaneous move away from the old gentry order into disorder.

In the course of his night journey, Stavrogin transitions into a grotesque narrative where he adopts a role completely at odds with the social role his mother hopes he will assume. Stavrogin goes to visit Kirillov and Shatov, at which point it becomes clear that he is not merely a would be great gentry protagonist, but rather a charismatic leader with profound influence on the ideological characters in the novel. Kirillov and Shatov both view him as a person who has changed their lives. Indeed, their admiration of Stavrogin verges on worship and veneration. As Boris Wolfson argues, Stavrogin is praised by others “in terms that might be used for a divinity,” a fact which does not go unnoticed by Stavrogin himself (109). “Remember what you’ve meant in my life, Stavrogin,” says Kirillov (Dostoevsky, Demons 239; 10:189). Shatov repeats the sentiments and calls himself Stavrogin’s “disciple” who “rose from the dead” after having spoken with him (Demons PV, 247; 10:196). These moments come after Maria Timofeevna asks to bow to Stavrogin at the end of book one. Stavrogin, as Belknap points out, lets these admirers down; Shatov slaps him for his fall whereas Maria runs after him screaming (68). The only person for whom Stavrogin remains a divinity is Pyotr Stepanovich. Later in the
story, Pyotr calls Stavrogin his “sun” and reduces himself to the status of a “worm” by comparison.

Dostoevsky’s description of Stavrogin through the eyes of his ‘disciples’ as a quasi-deified, superior being is as much a feature of grotesque realism as the image of Pyotr with his red tongue. In the eyes of his would-be ‘disciples’ Stavrogin is essentially a being of divine essence in the shape of a physical person. The veneration of a human being as though he were a God is a degradation of the divine to the level of the physical. Jacques Catteau, who suggests that there are a number of “grotesque imitations of Christ” in Demons, argues that the lowering of Christ “reaches its peak” through Stavrogin (34). The role of human divinity assigned to Stavrogin estranges the image of Christ and turns Stavrogin into a grotesque double of Christ.

The mixture of two frames of reference in the person of Stavrogin also points in the direction of the grotesque. Kayser argues that grotesque estrangement can lead to mixing of frames of reference and a circumstance in which “the natural order of things has been subverted” (21). In this case mixing the human and divine in Stavrogin is an unnatural conflation of what we understand as two separate spheres. By showing Stavrogin as turned into an object of veneration, into an idol to replace the Christ icon, Dostoevsky reveals a distortion of the natural perspective in Demons and moves us into the grotesque.

The depiction of Stavrogin as grotesque finds its opposite, though equally grotesque, incarnation in Pyotr. Unlike Stavrogin, who is deified as super-human, Pyotr is depicted as having animalistic traits. Both the young men who enter the novel at the end of part one are depicted as grotesque beings, but one turns grotesque through
elevation while the other does so by being lowered to the level of animal. Pyotr’s red, snake-like tongue displayed at the end of part one already suggests animalistic traits. Moreover, throughout the novel, Dostoevsky shows Pyotr eating with gusto at the most perverse times. Food consumption punctuates every single one of Pyotr’s crimes. For instance, in the third part of the novel, after having planned Shatov’s murder, Pyotr enters a tavern to eat a beefsteak. When trying to coax Kirillov to assume all the crimes committed by his fivesome – right after having participated in Shatov’s murder and right before Kirillov’s suicide – Pyotr again indulges in food. He asks whether he can eat Kirillov’s leftover chicken, because Kirillov will die soon, while he (Pyotr) “had hardly any dinner at all” with everything happening (Dostoevsky, Demons 611; 10:464). We are told that at this time, Pyotr fell with “extraordinary greediness” upon his food (Dostoevsky, Demons 611; 10:464). This ravenous consumption of food at times when he has just taken human lives suggests a disturbing, animal-like lack of conscience. Who can ask for chicken after having murdered another man? Pyotr has the ability to destroy the world around him and still enjoy a bountiful meal afterward without the slightest pangs of conscience.

This complete lack of remorse or even of a sense of shock resemble the behavior of a predatory animal that can kill its prey and eat it shortly thereafter. The mixing of frames of reference between the animal and the human in Pyotr is a key feature of grotesque estrangement going back all the way to the grottos in late fifteenth-century Italy where the first grotesques were found. Kayser mentions that in these paintings the natural order was distorted and frames of references mixed when stems of plants given with human or animal heads (20). In Dostoevsky’s depiction of Pyotr, just as in his
depiction of Stavrogin, similar distortions take place. Realms that were supposed to be separated come together to generate unfamiliar, grotesque beings.

Once they burst out of the restraints we witness in Varvara’s drawing room, not only do both Pyotr and Stavrogin assume grotesque traits themselves, but the provincial reality around them also turns grotesque. As the grotesque becomes more and more prevalent in parts two and three of the novel, it is the animalistic Pyotr that ultimately assumes a pivotal role in the narrative. As scholars have noted, after his nighttime journey and duel, Stavrogin fades out and is “relegated to the second plane” (Mochul’skii 409). As the traditional roles mapped out for him in the more traditional first part of the novel are discarded and he disappoints his disciples, his storyline dies out. Stavrogin’s last act as a gentry protagonist, his duel with Gaganov, merely highlights the degree to which he cannot be accommodated by conventional narrative forms. We know that Gaganov is “one of those strange but still surviving Russian noblemen who greatly value the antiquity and purity of their noble lineage and are all too seriously interested in it” (Dostoevsky, Demons 285; 10:224). When compared to someone who puts a great deal of stock into social conventions and being a member of the gentry, Stavrogin immediately emerges as an outcast. He is as different from Gaganov as he is from Mavriky. As Irina Reyfman argues, by profusely apologizing to Gaganov and refusing to engage him during his duel, Stavrogin behaves insultingly toward his opponent and violates the duelist’s honor code (243). Unable to thrive along traditional narrative lines as a gentry protagonist, yet also unable to forge a new, appropriate path for himself, Stavrogin is left with a grotesque role in Pyotr’s narrative of destruction.
Stavrogin’s most significant action in part two of the novel, his freeing of Fedka, initiates the grotesque degradation that eventually dominates provincial society. During this sojourn in disorderly Zarechie, Stavrogin encourages Fedka, a murderer who has admitted to killing and robbing, to “kill more, steal more” (Режъ еще, обокради еще) (Dostoevsky, Demons 280; 10:221). After having restrained himself and allowed for the perpetuation of order, Stavrogin brings the traditional segment of the novel to a close as he himself also fades out with it. The psychological change in him is a token of the larger changes in mindset that take over the town. In his study of Dostoevsky, Leonid Grossman proposes that Dostoevskian landscape functions like a “visual accessory for huge murals […] crowded with people” (81). When it came to landscape, it was the landscape of the mind that mattered most to Dostoevsky; in fact, if we follow Grossman, it is usually the perception of characters that creates a sense of space in Dostoevsky’s writings. So judging by Stavrogin’s dramatic change in behavior, then perhaps one might venture to guess that what makes part one of Demons stable is the mental stability of characters, while the later instability in the province could be attributed to their mental instability.

Pyotr contributes a great deal to the psychological instability that comes to define the townspeople. When Stavrogin’s story peters out, the grotesque Pyotr gains prominence in the novel, essentially infecting provincial reality with his own grotesquery. To complement his animalistic appearance, throughout the novel Pyotr also espouses principles of grotesque degradation. As revealed by his callous eating at times when others like Lyamshin lose their minds as a result of having participated in a murder, Pyotr
is a person virtually devoid of a conscience. He navigates the world with the physical aspects of reality as primary, with no emotions or moral convictions.

The grotesque principles of physical degradation that he holds as primary become dominant in the novel. Indeed, the merging of Stavrogin’s storyline into Pyotr’s revolutionary grotesque parallels the transition in provincial society from uneasy order into a grotesque reality. Once Pyotr enters the reality of the novel and commences his revolutionary activity, he bends the people in that reality to his will. He may not bend Stavrogin to his will, but Stavrogin is left with no story of his own other than the one Pyotr provides for him as a pretender and pseudo-deity. The rest of the town is similarly immersed in Pyotr’s scenarios of grotesque degradation. If part one was devoted to idealism and older gentry ideals, in part two and beyond Pyotr prevails, ideals are degraded and Dostoevsky’s province along with its people embrace Pyotr’s grotesque obsession with the physical.

4. The Revolutionary Carnivalesque

Immediately after Pyotr’s arrival in town, the general mindset of the population signals the complete dissipation of the uneasy order from part one. As the chronicler notes, many in town have abandoned both propriety and spirituality for the sake of a good laugh. A mischievous and at times cruel playfulness takes over the town. “Strange was the state of people’s minds at that time,” writes the chronicler. “A certain frivolity emerged […] Something light and happy-go-lucky […] A certain disorderliness of mind became fashionable” (Dostoevsky, Demons 319; 10:249). As a result of this altered state of mind, the chronicler mentions that the town has turned into a “Foolsbury” (Glupov) of sorts, plagued by scandals and mischief (Dostoevsky, Demons 319; 10:249).
The description of the town as a “Glupov” implies a similarity between *Demons* and Saltykov-Shchedrin’s work of grotesque realism *History of a Town*. Irrespective of whether Dostoevsky recognized this work as an example of grotesque realism, the chronicler’s mention of Saltykov-Shchedrin’s earlier work, which reveals Russia as a theater of the grotesque led by brainless leaders devoid of spirituality, already hints at similar processes of grotesque despiritualization in *Demons*.

In the Dostoevskian Glupov, the jocular mindset pushes us in the direction of the carnivalesque, an important component of the grotesque. As Bakhtin argues, the carnivalesque mode leads to a break from social routine and a disruption of hierarchical orders. Social and religious conventions are inverted as laughter and irreverence penetrate everything, including “the highest forms of religious cult and thought” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 13). While the grotesque and the carnivalesque are not entirely equivalent, Bakhtin often treats them interchangeably in his Rabelais book, and in Dostoevsky’s *Demons* they are especially intertwined. The upending of reality that is at the heart of the carnivalesque bears distinct traits of the grotesque in *Demons* because social and moral values are inverted and supplant by a glorification of the physical aspects of reality. In their carnivalesque mentality, the townspeople are thus engaged in grotesque degradations of spirituality for the sake of the body.

Guided exclusively by a need for laughter and amusement, people in town create scandals that violate all ethical and religious standards. In Bakhtin’s carnival, laughter and irreverence were a positive development, a way for people to break with social conventions and at least temporarily live a freer existence. Yet in *Demons* Dostoevsky distinctly describes the jocular atmosphere in town as destructive and blasphemous.
William Leatherbarrow, who traces the carnival in *Demons* in a demonic context, argues that “[d]estructive laughter becomes symptomatic of Pyotr’s growing hold over the town and the breakdown of propriety and social and moral values” (124).

The collective destructive laughter that Leatherbarrow mentions has at its center the group of “sneerers and jeerers” (Dostoevsky, *Demons* 320; 10:250) led by the buffoon Lyamshin. The individuals in the group are irreverent about behavioral norms and mock religious symbols. When a respectable book-seller comes into town selling Gospels, Lyamshin and a young seminarian place pornographic photographs in her bag while pretending to buy books. The fact that a venerable man in town assists them by providing the pictures simply proves that this carnivalesque mentality is a systemic phenomenon that extends beyond the group.

Even religious figures are shown to be driven by the same jocular mentality and objectify faith like everyone else. The same group of “sneerers and jeerers” pays a visit to the town’s “blessed man and prophet” Semyon Yakovlevich (Dostoevsky, *Demons* 325; 10:254), who is perceived as a holy fool and should be an ascetic. Yet Semyon is inappropriately attached to the material world. He lives with a merchant “in ease and comfort” and he often appropriates the “sometimes significant” charitable donations instead of conveying them to the church (Dostoevsky, *Demons* 325; 10:254). When the group arrives, Semyon is shown eating with gusto, no differently from Pyotr. During the visit we are told that in response to the sufferings of his visitors, Semyon gives them pounds of sugar and mocks and profanely curses them, instead of providing wisdom.

When religious figures are attached to physical comforts, it is perhaps no wonder that the mentality of the town as a whole degrades. Blasphemous behaviors take place as
the unbound Fedka and Pyotr Stepanovich desecrate the icon of the Nativity of the
Mother of God, a symbol of tradition as a “notable antiquity” in the town and therefore
also a token of the town’s spiritual heritage. According to the chronicler, the icon had
been built into the wall “behind the grating and near the gates of the enclosure”
(Dostoevsky, Demons 323; 10:253). Yet this separation of the holy from the unholy is
breached, the icon is robbed, and a mouse is released in the sacred space. Pyotr lets the
mouse inside of a sacred space of the town’s spiritual inheritance, and, in so doing,
degrades that space, rendering it on par with a squalid alley or a street corner. Directly or
indirectly, the town is similarly degraded through his presence. Any traces of the former
spirituality that the icon signifies disappear as townspeople lose their spirituality and
adopt Pyotr’s grotesque mentality.

The townspeople are so deprived of spirituality that they even display irreverence
toward the dead. The same group led by Lyamshin goes on a bizarre outing to see the
body of a man who has committed suicide. The group stands in front of the young man’s
corpse utterly devoid of sympathy. “Our people all stared with greedy curiosity,” writes
the chronicler (Dostoevsky, Demons 328; 10:256). More disturbingly, like Pyotr during
Kirillov’s dying hour, Lyamshin starts to eat some of the grapes the young man left
behind after his suicide. The group is so amused by this visit that “the general merriment,
laughter, and brisk chatter became almost twice as lively” after seeing the suicide
(Dostoevsky, Demons 328; 10:256). The group’s bizarre celebration is precisely the sort of
grotesque celebration in which behavior is exclusively defined through the registers of
laughter and bodily joy. Yet whereas in the original folk carnival this degrading laughter
was imbued with positive overtones, in Demons lack of respect for the dead does not
evoke the same benevolent sentiments. The group’s jocular irreverence in the face of death, though it suggests an escape from fear essential to the grotesque, is also unnatural and distressing. Lyamshin’s laughter is not pure. In Dostoevsky’s “somber” (Bakhtin) work, this sort of joyous celebration in front of someone’s corpse signals a disturbing absence of spirituality. In their lack of spirituality, the townspeople mirror Pyotr Stepanovich’s behavior as defined by his ability to eat joyously after having committed murder.

Wittingly or unwittingly, the group of individuals guided by Lyamshin, with their carnivalesque irreverence for everything socially acceptable or sanctioned, are doing Pyotr’s bidding. Their degrading laughter destabilizes the reality of the province and has an inadvertently revolutionary effect. Though Lyamshin and his group are not participating in revolutionary activity at this stage, as Shigalyov explains, Pyotr’s “program” consists of “scandals,” “the discontent of the population,” the “fall of [the] local administration,” and finally a “fire” (Dostoevsky, Demons 548; 10:419). Lyamshin and everyone in town caught up in the mentality of laughter and degradation seem to be working toward these aims when they contribute to the general atmosphere of disorder by inciting conflict among people and profaning the town’s sacred symbols.

When discussing the carnivalesque elements of the grotesque, Bakhtin mentions that it is defined by the “peculiar logic of the ‘inside out,’ of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (Rabelais 11). The carnival as a social phenomenon is an occurrence of shifting, fluid hierarchies. Pyotr seeks to generate an atmosphere in the province that resembles the carnival mindset. In
all his activities, he reaches for destruction by destabilizing presiding official figures (like governor Lembke and his wife Yulia). After dismantling existing hierarchies, he hopes to crown Stavrogin “Ivan Tsarevich” (Ivan the crown prince), a charismatic aristocratic pretender that could appease people still attached to the old world and old ways. The carnivalesque displays by the townspeople play right into Pyotr’s goals of degradation and disorder. They crown Lyamshin as their carnival king, but when they stir up trouble and destabilize the foundations of civil society in the province, they are realizing Pyotr’s aims. Though he does not precipitate revolution in the province, the grotesquery that coincides with Pyotr’s arrival in town is a step in the right direction for him.

5. Carnivalesque Violence

The somber tone of Dostoevsky’s realist grotesque comes into full view during part three. Two events at the end of the novel – the fete and the fire – indicate the full degree to which carnivalesque laughter can turn into revolutionary destruction. To the people in town the laughter and pranks that pervade their reality are simply a way to blow off steam; to them, their activity is simply a make-believe unraveling of the status quo for the sake of amusement. In some respects, though it is clear to the reader that the carnivalesque laughter of the townspeople is not benign, the townspeople themselves construe their behaviors as innocent displays of laughter. Yet, as Dostoevsky so distinctly shows, there are very real, permanent consequences to their activities.

The fete organized in honor of the governesses of the province brings into full display the destructive potential inherent in the townspeople’s carnivalesque behavior. The governor’s wife Yulia Mikhailovna conceives of the fete as a democratic event that can bring together people from different classes (provided they pay for a ticket) and lead
to the enlightenment of the lower classes. With her obtuse detachment from reality Yulia declares that “the fete is essentially only a proclamation of the great idea” that will “annihilate the very idea of food” in the minds of the public. She hopes instead to provide them with spiritual food in the form of Karmazinov’s latest sketch “Merci,” which she believes to be “colossally significant” (Dostoevsky, Demons 465; 10:356).

Blinded by her own idealism, which Dostoevsky tacitly mocks as misguided in its own right, Yulia organizes a purely intellectual gathering. Once the public arrives, their natural expectations of food turn Yulia’s idealistic fete into a scene for carnivalesque degradation. Instead of turning into the enlightening experience it was supposed to be, the fete serves as a battleground in which the abstract idealism of characters like Yulia and Stepan Trofimovich collides with the grotesque laughter of the likes of Lyamshin and Liputin. In the end, the carnivalesque mentality decidedly prevails. As the chronicler explains, even before the fete, a carnivalesque inversion takes place in town, as the “foremost people” suddenly “began listening to [trashy people], and became silent themselves, and some even chuckled along in a most disgraceful way” (Dostoevsky, Demons 462; 10:354). When everyone gathers at the fete, the lesser people dominate the high and mighty. A public that only cares about food and a good scandal ridicules Karmazinov and Stepan Trofimovich and mocks Yulia. Everyone wants to know about the buffet, and they begin to swear profanely when they learn that there is no buffet for the morning sequence.

Yulia and Lembke lose control of their own gathering while Lyamshin and other “trashy” people take over. In many respects, the fete functions as the inverse image of the earlier gathering (in part one) at Varvara’s. Instead of beginning as planned with
Karmazinov’s “Merci,” it begins with captain Lebyadkin’s ridiculous and inflammatory
doggerel that alludes to the social instability in the province. Whereas during the
gathering in part one Lebyadkin was restrained and not allowed to offend, during the
carnivalesque fete where hierarchies are inverted, he is let loose to hasten disorder.
Lebyadkin’s liberation and the chaos that soon ensues on the scene after his performance
reverse the outcome of the gathering at Varvara’s.

The fact that the carnivalesque spectacle that ensues in the fete has serious,
destructive consequences becomes evident soon enough. In Dostoevsky’s “somber”
新型, the carnivalesque rioting at the fete turns into a destructive force with genuine
consequences. Just as in Roman where the protagonist implodes and engages in violence
in the midst of a seemingly joyous feast, when the carnivalesque spirit of the townspeople
reaches its height, it causes immediate harm. The grotesque carnival in Dostoevsky’s
Demons claims its first victim when governor Lembke’s brain fever commences and he
loses all control over the province. Lembke is one of the few remaining proponents of
order in the novel. As he declares to Pyotr Stepanovich, he is trying to "hold together
that which you are shaking apart, and which without us would go sprawling in all
directions" (Dostoevsky, Demons 314; 10:246). Yet when Lemke succumbs to madness,
it becomes clear that while it may have begun like a good joke, the carnival laughter in
the province has drastic consequences. The grotesque mentality in town deposes
authority and damages the very foundation of provincial society.

The fact that as the fire begins Lembke and Yulia are almost crushed to death
points to the violence underneath the degrading laughter of the townspeople. The fire
itself is merely the culmination of the destructive grotesque that has been building up in
the novel. As the chronicler mentions, “a fire at night produces a stirring and exhilarating impression,” for the force inherent in it “produce[s] in the spectator a sort of brain concussion, and a challenge, to his own destructive instincts […] which lie hidden in every soul, even in that of the most humble and familial titular counselor” (Dostoevsky, *Demons* 514; 10:394). The fire awakens the terrible potential for destruction in individuals, that terrible negative freedom which ultimately takes account of no institutions or rules. Seeing the fire destroy everything in uncontrollable fashion one can notice a terrible negation of reality that Dostoevsky displays through grotesque realism. He had certainly written works of grotesque realism before (*Selo Stepanchikovo* is one such example), but never had he shown such sheer destruction through the grotesque. Much like the axe of Roman, the fire in *Demons* ravages provincial reality, thus enacting in fiction the violent fantasies of revolutionary groups. Not only is most of Zarechie destroyed, but Liza also dies due to careless, destructive carnivalesque violence.

The images of the mob killing Liza or almost crushing the Lembkes to death are far removed from the innocent laughter of the carnival as Bakhtin describes it and even from the laughter that initially defines Lyamshin’s group. By the novel’s ending virtually all the protagonists of the story, except Pyotr Stepanovich and Varvara Petrovna, have died. The Lebyadkins have been murdered, Liza has been killed in the crowd, Shatov has been killed, his wife and baby die, Kirillov and Stavrogin commit suicide, and Stepan Trofimovich dies after his long journey. All these deaths are permanent. In Dostoevsky’s darker grotesque, there is no joy or regeneration.
At the novel’s ending, Stepan Trofimovich assumes an important role once again, this time to articulate the possibility of some hope for the future after all that has happened. As Frank argues, through the second and third parts of the novel, “only poor Stepan Trofimovich, more and more lonely, isolated and agitated, resists the general disintegration and still plans to vindicate his ideals” (“Masks of Stavrogin” 681). When his ideals will not be heard by the carnivalesque mob at the fete, Stepan leaves town in an attempt to find Russia. “I’m running from a delirium,” he says to Liza, “from a feverish dream, running to seek Russia, existe-t-elle la Russie [does Russia exist]” (Dostoevsky, Demons 538; 10:412). Stepan becomes ill soon enough and in the course of his rapidly progressing illness, he sits with Sofya Matveevna – the gospel saleswoman from earlier – who reads him passages from the gospels.

They eventually happen upon the parable from Luke (8.32-36), which also serves as the novel’s epilogue. The parable tells of how Jesus chased away the demons who had possessed a sick man and forced them to enter the bodies of a herd of swine nearby; once the demons entered the swine, the whole herd jumped into a lake and died as the formerly possessed man sat by Jesus. Upon hearing this passage, Stepan proclaims that “it is exactly like our Russia” (Dostoevsky, Demons 655; 10:499). He compares Russia to the sick man and himself and his son to the swine. “We will rush,” he says, “insane and raging, from the cliff down into the sea, and all be drowned, and good riddance to us, because that’s the most we’re fit for. But the sick man (Russia) will be healed and sit at the feet of Jesus” (Dostoevsky, Demons 655; 10:499).
Even after Stepan’s promise of regeneration through faith, it is difficult to experience any hopefulness at the end of *Demons*. When almost all the novel’s protagonists die, it does not seem as though the sick man that is Russia could ever be healed. Stavrogin’s suicide, which follows these statements, further reinforces the notion that Russia may be gravely diseased, much more so than Stepan accounts for. In the course of the novel, despite the significance assigned to him early in the novel, Stavrogin fades into the background, is ushered by Pyotr into a meeting of the revolutionary society, and eventually, as a result of Pyotr’s machinations, spends a night with Liza. Pyotr does not control Stavrogin, but Stavrogin fits in neither the traditional narrative of part one, nor in the later grotesque reality. He is as out of place in the novel as a whole as he is while restraining himself in Varvara’s drawing room. He spends the novel seemingly searching for meaning, but in the end is only capable of violent action, either toward himself or others. With great calculation and planning he hangs himself at his mother’s estate, the heart of the novel’s civilizational confines.

Considering how important Stavrogin seems to be to everyone in the novel – all the women are enamored with him and the men adore him – the fact that he cannot seem to do anything else with himself but takes his own life suggests that perhaps the disease in Russia is much more serious than Stepan anticipates. Stavrogin was the hope of the town who disappoints long before his actual death. As grotesque God, nobleman, lover, husband, fiancé, Stavrogin is at the center of everyone’s lives. The fact that he is merely the “pretender and the impostor to the throne of God” (Frank, “Masks of Stavrogin,” 665) squanders all his potential and cannot step up for any of the people who look for him to assume one role or another, suggests that at its core the townspeople’s lives is terribly
hollow. Beyond that, since Stavrogin is perhaps one of the only characters in the novel (aside from Stepan Trofimovich) who is not controlled by Pyotr, his death suggests that irrespective of the revolutionaries, the very marrow of provincial society is rotten. It is not Pyotr who pushes Stavrogin to suicide; he dies all on his own.

It may indeed be the case, as the Pushkin poem in the epigraph implies, that a demon is “leading” the townspeople into chaos, but the people are also much too willing to follow the demon. If Stavrogin is one of the key representatives of provincial society and he perishes without any apparent cause, then perhaps there is something inherently wrong with the province even before Pyotr arrives. In fact, Pyotr is often merely the catalyst to events that take place: the discontent was there to begin with, which is why Pyotr is so successful. As Irving Howe puts it, the society in Demons has grown “stale from the lack of freedom, seedy from lack of cultivation” (“Dostoevsky: The Politics of Salvation" 136), so everyone willingly embraces the chaos that Pyotr creates. By allowing the decimation of virtually all of provincial society in Demons, Dostoevsky visualizes not only revolutionary violence but also the downfall of the current order. Although originally conceived as a pamphlet against revolutionary activity, through the terrible destruction at the end, the novel produces an effect no less subversive than that of Sorokin’s postmodernist Roman. As he shows provincial society disintegrating because it is rotten to the core, Dostoevsky suggests that disorder is more the natural state of affairs than the state of balanced harmony portrayed elsewhere in the literature of the landed gentry.
Chapter 3

Grotesque Realism and the Downfall of the Family Novel in M. Saltykov-Shchedrin’s The Golovlevs

When writing his best-known novel, The Golovlevs [Господа Головлевы] (1875-1880), Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, like Dostoevsky, wrestled with questions of literary form. Despite their opposing political affiliations, both authors agreed that existing literary forms were out of touch with questions of the present. As I. B. Pavlova argues in a study of the family theme in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s oeuvre, the author shared the opinions on “landowner literature” expressed in Dostoevsky’s Adolescent (117). In the series of essays and sketches published under the rubric Gentlemen from Tashkent [Господа «ташкентцы»] (1869-72), Saltykov-Shchedrin suggests that the novel has grown into an obsolete genre because of its exclusive focus on the family. “It seems to me,” he writes, “that the novel has lost its former basis, since the family and everything connected with it has begun to change its character. The novel (at least in the way it has appeared till now) is chiefly a work about family life. Its drama begins in the family, does not go outside it, and ends there, too. Whether in a positive sense (the English novel) or in a negative one (the French novel), family life plays a central role in the novel” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 10:31-32; qtd. in Kramer 124).  

In light of these sentiments, when Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina began to be published in Katkov’s The Russian Herald, Saltykov-Shchedrin was annoyed to see another novel about love and family. The first installments of Anna Karenina published in January and

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35 All references pertain to the following edition of Saltykov-Shchedrin’s works: eds: A. S. Bushmin, V. Ia. Kirpotin, Sobranie sochinenii v dvatsati tomakh (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965-77). The novel The Golovlevs is volume thirteen. All translations are my own.
February of 1875 were especially focused on these themes. In a private letter to P.V. Annenkov in March 1875, Saltykov-Shchedrin fumes about the novel, complaining that “Count Tolstoy’s novel” is much too focused on “genitalia” [детор <одных> частей]. “This worries me a great deal,” he writes, “It is terrible to think that it is still possible to construct a novel on only sexual urges [половых побуждениях]. […] But this is what the conservative party, which now triumphs, clings to [прицепится]. Is it possible to imagine that any sort of political banner will emerge out of Tolstoy’s bovine novel [коровьего романа]?” (18.2, 180). The indelicate description of Anna Karenina as “bovine” suggests that Saltykov-Shchedrin believed Tolstoy was much too preoccupied with man’s animal existence. The early chapters featuring Levin, where Kitty refuses his marriage proposal and where Pava the cow is shown giving birth, could not have done much to change his mind.

In response to the inadequacies of Anna Karenina and other family novels, in October of that same year (1875) Saltykov-Shchedrin published a sketch titled “Family Court” in Notes of the Fatherland. Over time, this sketch grew into The Golovlevs, a work that to all outside appearances was a family novel. Yet Saltykov-Shchedrin would give The Golovlevs the social purpose he believed Anna Karenina, with its focus on base instincts, lacked. Despite appearances, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel narrates the rot of

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36 The portions treated the romance between Anna and Vronsky, Levin’s love for Kitty, and the consummation of Anna’s and Vronsky’s relationship. Todd, who traces the publication history of Anna Karenina, points out that by February of 1875 the whole first part of Anna Karenina and the first 29 chapters of the second part had been published in The Russian Herald (“Anna on the Instalment Plan” 54-56).

37 Many Russian and Soviet critics view The Golovlevs as a social novel and a vicious exposé of rural, tsarist Russia of which Porfirii is seen as a product. A. S. Bushmin sees Porfirii as the personification of the landowning class at its “historically determined fall,”
the Golovlevs from one generation to the next, their failures as human beings, their
immorality, and finally their deaths. One critic has argued that Saltykov-Shchedrin’s
novel is one “long obituary,” where three generations perish as the Golovlevo estate
passes on to a distant cousin (Foote 7). At least from what the author communicated in
letters, the disintegration of the Golovlev family was designed to express the larger
processes of disintegration occurring in Russian society. Saltykov-Shchedrin saw
contemporary Russian reality as grounded on three deceptive principles: state, family,
and property. He designed The Golovlevs, this “gloomiest” of all Russian novels
(Mirsky 281), “as an attack on the family principle” (Saltykov 19.1:194; qtd. in Foote 7)
that had dominated Russian novels for years.

Yet if Saltykov-Shchedrin wanted to attack the family institution and the novel
form that had sung praises to it for decades, he did not explicitly direct his reprimand to
Anna Karenina. Rather, in his response to the inadequacies of the contemporary novel,
Saltykov-Shchedrin went back to the source of the problem. Like Sorokin years later,
Saltykov-Shchedrin unearthed an earlier narrative. The source or the ur-narrative of the
Russian family novel was Sergei Aksakov’s Family Chronicle [Семейная хроника]
(1856). In a study of Aksakov’s work, Andrew Durkin argues that “in certain respects
[Family Chronicle] served as a model […] in terms of both content and form, to the
family novels of Turgenev, Goncharov, and especially Tolstoi, whose Family Happiness,
War and Peace, and Anna Karenina all confirm the centrality of the patriarchal,
harmonious gentry family in creating value in existence” (244). When addressing the
kind of novel that the “conservative party […] [clung] to,” the kind of novel that did not

and his empty chatter and treacherous ways as a “symptom of the decay of a class that
has outlived its time” (65).
address questions larger than an individual’s personal and family life, Saltykov-Shchedrin targeted Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle*, the “*Aeneid* of Russian conservatism” (Todd, “The Anti-Hero With a Thousand Faces” 102).

Contemporary critics have noted similarities between *The Golovlevs* and Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle*; Todd calls Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel “a near perfect mirror image” of Aksakov’s earlier work (Todd, “The Anti-Hero With a Thousand Faces” 102). As I will argue in this chapter, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s appropriation of Aksakov’s work bears distinctly grotesque traits. In his monograph on the grotesque (*O groteske v literature*, 1966), Iurii Mann argues: “To see in the grotesque merely a reaction to older artistic forms would be a mistake” (Mann 57). Instead, he believes that the author of the grotesque specifically works to rupture familiar patterns and ties in order to “sharpen” or completely “unravel” what we understand as the norm; he creates “his own, particular, grotesque microcosm” that can ultimately engulf the whole outer world into itself (Mann 57). Mann points to some of the same principles of grotesque estrangement that Kayser highlights. However, his definition provides a more descriptive view of one particular manner in which grotesque estrangement can happen; he describes a process of estrangement through a “sharpening” of earlier motifs that pushes them to such an absurd extreme that they “unravel.”

Saltykov-Shchedrin had written grotesques before. One prominent example is *History of a Town*, but never before had he directed his grotesque realism to the tradition of the earlier realist novel. In *The Golovlevs* Saltykov-Shchedrin appropriates the Aksakovian estate narrative, but sharpens earlier motifs, unraveling them in the process. The role of the landowner, the overall aura of pastoral stability that surrounded the estate,
and food rituals in Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle* are three important features that Saltykov-Shchedrin recreates. Beginning with a sharpening and estrangement of these images, Saltykov-Shchedrin unravels the underlying meaning of the old form, and then pushes these forms so far into the grotesque that the narrative acquires fantastic traits.

Like Dostoevsky in *Demons*, Saltykov-Shchedrin responds to the inadequacy of old forms and the absence of new ones by appropriating an older literary form to make a contemporary point. In the epilogue of *Adolescent* written around this same period (1875), Nikolai Semenovich claims that contemporary societal problems cannot be addressed through literary forms developed within the confines of the gentry estate. In *The Golovlevs*, Saltykov-Shchedrin suggests that it is indeed possible to describe a contemporary problem through an older form. Saltykov-Shchedrin depicts a broken family and a broken gentry reality by mimicking the narrative of Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle* as a baseline and then unleashing the grotesque on that form – and implicitly also on all the novels that resemble it.

1. **The Image of the Landowner**

As a member of a wealthy provincial family, which could be considered “old nobility” with marriage ties to the family of Peter the Great, Saltykov-Shchedrin was familiar with the figure of the Russian landowner. It has been suggested that his own mother, Olga, was likely the prototype for the Golovlev matriarch, Arina Golovleva (Proffer ix). *The Golovlevs* opens with an episode that captures the essence of Arina Petrovna. Upon concluding a conversation with one of her estate managers, Anton Vassiliev, Arina realizes that he is withholding important information from her. Over the years she has learned to read his movements and those of her other peasants like an open
book. After a few sharp words and menacing glances from the mistress, Anton Vassiliev reveals that Arina’s son, Stepan Golovlev, has lost his house and is wandering the streets of Moscow penniless. A furious Arina retreats to her private study, “the whole house suddenly grew silent, as if it had died” (в доме все вдруг смолкло, словно умерло) due to her anger (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:18). Arina’s reaction is not that of a disappointed mother, nor is she concerned about Stepan’s situation. Her rage is motivated by his secrecy on the matter, which prevented her from re-purchasing his house for a fraction of the price.

In this opening sketch, Saltykov-Shchedrin sums up Arina Golovleva at the height of her power: fierce and terrifying to those beneath her, more landowner than mother, and more at ease with peasants than with her own children. The image of the stern and shrewd Russian landowner was prevalent in Russian literature and was lionized in Sergei Aksakov’s Family Chronicle. Arina Golovleva can be viewed as Saltykov-Shchedrin’s revival and grotesque distortion of this earlier image born with Aksakov’s hero Bagrov.

Through the person of Stepan Bagrov, Aksakov identifies the landowner as both maintainer of the estate and keeper of the family.38 Truly a “heroic Patriarch” (Todd, “The Anti-Hero With a Thousand Faces” 102), Bagrov moves his family from Simbirsk to Ufa where he domesticates the natural wild to build a comfortable nest. With his “unusually wide shoulders, veined hands, hard, muscular body” (Aksakov, 1:76).39

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38 The figure of Bagrov was based on Aksakov’s own grandfather, but as Andrew Durkin points out, Aksakov did not merely record the behaviors and character traits of real people in Family Chronicle. Rather, individuals in the work are “paradoxically both literary figures and actual people”; their characteristics contain shades of art and fictionalization as well as innate traits, of the universal and of the particular (Durkin 102).

39 I am referring to the following collection of works by Sergei Aksakov: Sobranie sochinenii, 4 vols (Moskva: GIKhL, 1955-56).
Bagrov is a force of nature. He encloses the land, starts up an agricultural enterprise, provides shelter for the peasants, and undertakes seemingly heroic feats like founding a mill or constructing a dam for the river. In the depictions of these feats, Bagrov emerges as an inherently natural leader, a true patriarch.

In *The Golovlevs*, the story of another gentry family and another ancestral nest, Arina is the strong leader single-handedly responsible for expanding the Golovlev fortune tenfold. She does not do so heroically: unlike Bagrov, she uses shrewdness and careful calculation to expand the estate. Arina’s ingenuity and her instincts for when to sell a piece of land or how to outbid everyone in a purchase of serfs are responsible for elevating the family to prosperity. “Thanks to her personal energy,” writes the narrator, “this woman had raised the family to its highest-ever level of prosperity” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:252). Arina’s energy is indeed inexorable; she constantly devises financial schemes, participates in lawsuits, and watches furtively as estates go bankrupt, waiting for the right moment to make a profit.

Yet despite their respective successes, the differences between these two characters are significant. By transforming Stepan Bagrov into Arina Golovleva Saltykov-Shchedrin turns the conventional image of the landowner on its head and produces a grotesquely estranged version of the original. In *Family Chronicle* Bagrov’s strength is complemented by qualities such as great personal integrity and goodness. Underneath his harsh exterior lie benevolence and fairness. Such personality traits render Bagrov the heart and soul of his namesake estate (Bagrovo) where the atmosphere depends entirely on his state of mind. When Bagrov is in good spirits, his infectious joy brightens up the mood of everyone in his household. Alternatively, the whole house
quakes when he is angry: “That kind, virtuous and even lenient man sometimes darkened with such outbursts of rage,” writes the narrator (Aksakov 1:89). These outbursts sometimes result in violence against his wife and daughters, although most of the time Bagrov takes his family’s well-being very close to heart. He protects family members at all times and knows when to bend his strict views for their sake. For instance, despite his initial qualms, he agrees of his son’s marriage to Sofia and then emerges as her protector against jealous sisters-in-law.

Through the character of Bagrov, Aksakov showed the landowner as capable of successfully navigating between the roles of estate manager and family leader. In The Golovlevs, this dynamic shifts and the roles are depicted as antithetical to one another. Arina has inherited Bagrov’s tempestuous anger and she may inspire fear in her family, but she has none of his warmth. The-cruelty that Bagrov occasionally displays is present in her character and it is greatly magnified; Arina only feels anger toward family: there is no love to balance the scales. While busy trying to expand the family fortune, Arina has “grown completely unused to family life.” “[T]he word ‘family’ [is] always on her lips” as she amasses the family fortune, but the word has turned into an empty catchphrase removed from genuine affection and familial bonds (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:13). Arina Golovleva may have the same name as Bagrov’s wife, Arina Vasilevna Bagrova, “a good and simple woman” (была женщина добрая и очень простая) (1:83), but the transformation of the mother figure from simple woman to matriarch amounts to a flourishing estate and a languishing family unit. “She [Arina Golovleva] had too independent, or one might say too spinsterish, a nature [слишком независимая, так сказать, холостая натура],” writes Saltykov-Shchedrin’s narrator, “to see her children as
anything other than a burden [обузы]. She only breathed freely when she was left alone with her business accounts and plans, or when no one interrupted her discussions with estate managers, village elders, housekeepers and others” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:13). Arina builds up the family wealth through careful speculation, but a wealthier estate does not make for a nurturing home.

When she does perform the obligatory motherly duties, Arina allows her entrepreneurial skills as landowner to guide her treatment of her children. We are told that Arina “kept her children half-starving” (держала детей впроголодь) and fed her granddaughters (Annin’ka and Liubin’ka) sour milk “for the sake of economizing” (из экономии) (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:11). As Jenny Kaminer argues, Arina, to the detriment of the family unit, employs a landowner’s economic principles in familial relationships. She “defines her sole maternal responsibility in the callous terminology of an uneven business transaction: she must […] provide them with a parcel of land or some other material recompense, in return for which they will never return to Golovlyovo again” (Kaminer 551). To avoid splitting the estate among several inheritors, Arina banishes two of her children (Anna and Stepan) with small portions of the family wealth. When Stepan wastes his portion, she treats him as a poor investment and refuses to let him stay inside the Golovlev manor.

Arina’s devotion to acquisition is echoed in her son Porfirii (nicknamed “little Judas,” or Iudushka, and Bloodsucker, “кровопийца”), the heir of the estate and a pale shadow of his mother’s enterprising spirit. Porfirii similarly adopts landowner and bureaucratic principles with his children and is indifferent to their plight. In fact, while Arina has occasional maternal impulses, Porfirii is completely devoid of parental feeling
and his three sons perish through his indifference. Looking for new ways to expand his property, he cheats and bullies those around him with his endless empty chatter. As Todd argues, if Bagrov “fully realizes the heroic possibilities of the Russian estate, which permitted the landowner to perfect himself, reform his territories (socially and economically), and achieve a sort of pastoral utopia,” then the ridiculous Porfirii is a travesty of all this; Bagrov’s values as landowner and family patriarch “become the stuff of Porfirii’s hypocrisy” (“The Birth of the Novel from the Work of Russian Journalism”).

The importance assigned to the landowner role in The Golovlevs has its roots in Aksakov’s chronicle. Bagrov is obsessed with his genealogy and belonging to the landowner class. In his youth he did not marry a woman he loved because there was a serf among her ancestors. Later, it is the skills of Kurolesov (the husband of Praskovia, Bagrov’s cousin) as a landowner that blind Bagrov to the former’s cruelty and inhumanity. Being a landowner is treated as a role of fundamental importance in Family Chronicle, even though it does not preclude the landowner from being a good parent and family member.

The role of the landowner was also assigned great importance in Russian culture at large. The notion that being a good landowner was an honorable position could be traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century or even earlier. Thomas Newlin notes

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40 I am grateful to William Mills Todd III for sharing this unpublished article with me.

41 The significance of the Russian landowner can be traced back to the eighteenth-century. Specifically, the role acquired greater cultural value after the gentry were freed from government service in 1762. For more on earlier conceptualizations of the landowner role, see Thomas Newlin The Voice in the Garden: Andrei Bolotov and the Anxieties of the Russian Pastoral. See also, Bella Grigoryan’s recent dissertation
that the role of the landowner is described as honorable as early as Karamzin (“Letter of a Country Dweller,” 1803). As Karamzin put it: “the main right of the Russian nobleman is to be a landowner, his main duty to be a good landowner; whoever fulfills this duty is serving his fatherland as a faithful son” (Karamzin 296; qtd. in Newlin 86). Though Karamzin did not state that the role of the landowner should assume greater importance than all other roles in a person’s life, the fact that being a landowner meant a person could be said to have a productive and honorable life, suggests that the role was ascribed great cultural value in Russian culture.

Through the Golovlev landowners, Saltykov-Shchedrin recreates the value ascribed to the landowner vocation in Aksakov’s chronicle and in Russian culture at large, but “sharpens” the motif through the Golovlevs’ single-minded focus on this role at the expense of all others. This treatment of past narrative tropes is a grotesque turn of narrative; it is, as Mann argues, a sharpening of the familiar to such an absurd degree that it unravels. Whereas in Dostoevsky’s Demons the reality of “landowner literature” unravels due to the explosion of carnivalesque behavior and in Sorokin’s Roman that reality is destroyed through Roman’s extreme grotesque violence at the end, in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s The Golovlevs, the downfall of traditional narratives happens inconspicuously and from the inside. The Golovlevs is deprived of the violence of Roman or even Demons, but the forces of disintegration are present within the people themselves. They are destroyed and diseased on the inside from the very beginning.

Saltykov-Shchedrin accomplishes the destruction of earlier motifs simply by recreating his characters’ worldview and refraining from judgment. As Boris

(Columbia University, 2011), Noble Farmers: The Provincial Landowner in the Russian Cultural Imagination.
Eikhenbaum argues, one of the fundamental traits of the grotesque, which separates it from other styles like satire, is that the grotesque cannot be invoked “with a didactic or satirical purpose, but with the purpose of opening up a space for plays with reality” (“Overcoat” 322, emphasis in original). Within the bounds of Golovlevo there are countless plays with reality, countless distorted perspectives – Arina is only one of them. The narrator observes the Golovlevs and their various obsessions within their habitat without morally condemning them. Nor are there any other characters in the novel so morally superior to the Golovlevs as to pass judgment on them. Whatever their grotesque perspective, the narrator never intervenes to show us that they are wrong. There are occasional ironic references to the failures of the Golovlevs as human beings and as parents, but these are only implicit.

Golovlevo represents a closed off world, within which reign the pathologies of the Golovlevs. The reality principle has been distorted within the bounds of that space, but since no outside perspective permeates the space of distortion, what would otherwise be pathologies are accepted as the norm. In this sense Golovlevo functions as a grotesque microcosm where, unlike in Demons, the roots of disintegration are internal and outside forces like revolutionary conspiracies are not to blame for what takes place. In Eikhenbaum’s words, the grotesque can sometimes appear as a world “completely isolated from reality at large and from the true fullness of the inner life” (Eikhenbaum, “Overcoat” 323). In this grotesque world “normal correlations and associations (psychological and logical)” are interrupted and “any trifle can grow to colossal proportions” (323). In Gogol’s “Overcoat,” which has been said to be the “apotheosis of the grotesque” (Eikhenbaum, “Overcoat” 291), it was the overcoat that became
“colossal” in its importance. Within the bounds of Golovlevo our sense of reality is similarly skewed: for Golovlev landowners all value is associated with being a landowner, while being a parent assumes no inherent value.

Since Saltykov-Shchedrin’s narrator only observes without judgment, we can gauge the degree to which Arina has turned into a grotesque double of Sergei Bagrov or the Golovlevs into grotesque doubles of the earlier Bagrovs through traces of the earlier Aksakovian narrative in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel. Arina’s personality evokes the image of Bagrov the landowner who builds the nest out of nothing. This faint association between the world of the Golovlevs and the reality of Bagrovo allows us to notice the disintegration of the family. If The Golovlevs was designed as an attack on the family principle, then by planting seeds that remind us of an earlier narrative where the family was functional and wholesome, Saltykov-Shchedrin reveals the family’s downfall without moralizing. Finding the root of the Golovlev problems in the landowner mentality going back to Aksakov, Saltykov-Shchedrin exaggerates these principles and gives us a horrifying vision of what the Bagrovs could have been had they fixated on land acquisition.

II. Stability As Stagnation

Through Saltykov-Shchedrin’s descriptions of other Golovlev family members we implicitly learn that at the hands of parental figures like Arina and later Porfiri, the Golovlevs are irreversibly damaged. Much as Stravogin was influenced by Stepan Trofimovich in his youth, so too are the identities of the Golovlev children fixed when they are still young. As will be seen below, the Golovlev children are described as empty, helpless creatures who lack the ingenuity and willpower to succeed at anything. They
attempt to build lives for themselves out in the world, but each fails in all endeavors. Like the failures of the Golovlevs as parents, the vocational failures of the Golovlev children have roots in the earlier Aksakovian narrative of countryside stability. By sharpening and exaggerating existing paradigms, Saltykov-Shchedrin turns the original flaws of the Bagrov family into the cosmic failures of the Golovlevs.

Durkin notes that dramatic actions with the potential to produce significant change are curtailed in *Family Chronicle*. Within the sphere of Bagrovo, Aksakov only permits ritualistic actions that maintain an “unchanging equilibrium of man and his environment” (Durkin 121). As Durkin suggests, in *Family Chronicle* “all actions become valuable and significant within the system, but no change can occur without the introduction of characters that seek to either be integrated into this system or to diverge from it” (121). Outsiders like Kurolesov or Sofia are either defeated or integrated into the Bagrovo reality, so despite occasional flare-ups, the estate in *Family Chronicle* is never disturbed for long. Virtually everything that happens at Bagrovo is a repetition of past actions, which lends the chronicle an aura of mythical cyclicality. History and linear historical changes seem to be happening elsewhere and have almost no impact on Bagrovo. For instance, the Pugachev rebellion takes place almost unnoticed and is mentioned only briefly.

The Bagrovs are shown possessing a steadiness and calm that stems directly from nature. Aleksei Bagrov has a profound connection to nature, which provides him with inner equilibrium. We are told that this connection to nature renders Aleksei emotionally healthy and protects him from some of the darker, hysterical impulses that plague his wife Sofia. She may not understand his love for nature, but the narrator implies that this
love gives Aleksei the ability to transcend what haunts others. He does not have the enterprising and strong character of his father Stepan or even of his wife, but he has inner peace, which the narrator describes as a positive character trait.

This familiar image of peace and inner steadiness from *Family Chronicle* is estranged and becomes the source for Saltykov-Shchedrin’s grotesque in *The Golovlevs*. The Golovlevs are so steady that they become immobilized and incapable of action. A number of the Golovlev children attempt to leave Golovlevo for St. Petersburg and Moscow, but fail in their efforts to make a life outside the ancestral nest. Their successive returns to Golovlevo after failed lives in the city mirror Roman’s return to the countryside in Sorokin’s *Roman*, yet unlike in earlier Russian pastorals, return to Golovlevo simply entails death rather than a retreat into a beloved place. These returns endow Saltykov-Shchedrin’s chronicle with a note of vicious cyclicality, a darker version of the Aksakovian cyclicality. In Aksakov’s chronicle, the repetitive nature of life assumes a mythical quality, while in Saltykov-Shchedrin the same cyclicality ensures that the Golovlevs will all follow in the same vicious cycle of failure and death.

The eldest of the Golovlev brothers, Stepan, cannot create a life for himself in the city, but ends up a tramp in the streets of Moscow. His failures are due to an inner passivity that resembles Aleksei’s passivity in *Family Chronicle*. Yet in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s grotesque, alternate reality, this passivity precipitates Stepan’s breakdown as a human being. “Even the last of men could do something for themselves,” thinks Stepan to himself, “earn their living, but only he could not do anything [он один ничего не может]. This thought just occurred to him for the first time” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:29, emphasis in the original). Stepan’s story is a testament to his inability to take
action. No matter what he attempts – bureaucratic service, gambling and speculation, or military service – Stepan fails miserably. He is gifted with a great memory, but is mediocre at school due to his inability to apply himself. He is likewise incompetent when attempting a career in government service. In the end, after squandering the income from his Moscow house, Stepan enlists as a substitute militiaman during the Crimean War. Yet even this last opportunity for action is lost when peace is declared and his regiment stops in Kharkov. In Saltykov-Shchedrin’s hands, Aleksei’s passivity turns into incorrigible indolence. Stepan daydreams of “gratuitous allowance” (дарового довольства) and his empty visions take the place of hard work and activity (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:29). In some respects, his failure to do anything productive with his life and his urban carousing are reminiscent of Stavrogin’s youth from Demons, but unlike Stavrogin who makes several attempts at finding a purpose before eventually taking his own life, Stepan has no hope of finding at purpose from the very start and his efforts are much more anemic.

His younger brother Pavel, the “perfect embodiment of someone completely lacking the will to do anything” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:15), also fails in both personal and professional spheres. The narrator mentions: “Even as a boy he [Pavel] did not display the least inclination for studying, for games, for playing with friends: he preferred to be apart, estranged from others” (жить особняком, в отчуждении от людей) (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:15). Pavel is a morose version of the clownish Stepan: just as incapable of action as his elder brother, but less pleasant or entertaining. At various points in the novel, all Pavel can do is pick his nose and drink alcohol. When given the

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42 This meant that he replaced a wealthy member of the gentry who paid to have someone else serve for him.
opportunity, at his dying hour, to make a difference in the lives of his mother and nieces by leaving his estate to them, Pavel cannot act due to the inexorable listlessness that defines him.

The Golovlev ineptitude may have its beginnings in Aleksei’s passivity in Family Chronicle, but the key difference between these characters and Aleksei is that regardless of his passivity and character flaws, the latter marries and achieves fulfillment in his roles as husband and father. A sensitive man with an incredible ability to love, Aleksei compensates for his other failures in the personal sphere. Yet in The Golovlevs, perhaps because of Saltykov-Shchedrin’s belief that marriage and love were given too much attention in literature and obscured more fundamental issues, marriage does not enter the storylines of most Golovlevs. The marriages that are described are either dysfunctional (like Arina’s and Vladimir’s) or simply inconsequential (like Porfirii’s marriage to an unnamed woman). Without marriage as an escape route, the Golovlevs are exposed in utmost clarity for the wretched beings they have become.

The last Golovlev brother, and the only one capable of any action, is Porfirii. Unlike his two brothers, Porfirii marries and has children. Yet his personal life, like his mother’s, is purely performative in nature and provides no happiness or meaning. Just like his marriage, most of Porfirii’s other “actions” are also emptied of meaning. Porfirii is a creature of routine: he eats meals, has requiems sung, prays before icons, and engages in a web of idle talk and idle calculations. In Family Chronicle, Stepan Bagrov also has an established routine of repetitive actions. He wakes up, takes his tea, eats meals, inspects the estate, and participates in other similar activities. But while Bagrov’s routine evokes stability and tranquility, Saltykov-Shchedrin exaggerates the repetitive nature of
Porfirii’s daily actions to the point where his days evoke nothing but emptiness. We are
told that Porfirii could not even fit into the “deathly affairs of bureaucracy” (в мертвом
dеле бюрократизма) because he was too dead inside even for that world (Saltykov-
Shchedrin 13:139). While Bagrov and Bagrovo at large may be driven by routine,
Saltykov-Shchedrin turns this routine into grotesque lifelessness. Porfirii hides behind
his rituals, including his ritualistic empty chatter. This emptiness shields him from both
fellow human beings and from any traces of humanity left in him.

Whenever he is confronted by an unexpected event, platitudes begin to form in
Porfirii’s mind. These ready-made clichés allow him to remain unperturbed by new or
unexpected events in his life. He overcomes the deaths of his two sons and of his mother
either by occupying himself with unfeeling requiems for the dead or by rearranging their
finances (as in the case of Arina). When his son Volodia asks for help he is offered
“ready-made maxim[s],” which is “like giving stone to a starving man” (Saltykov-
Shchedrin 13:118). After Volodia commits suicide out of desperation, Porfirii resorts to
routine once again and swears to always have a requiem sung on the anniversary of
Volodia’s death. His treatment of his other son, Petia, is similarly callous. When Petia
comes to ask for money after having squandered his regiment’s funds, Porfirii is baffled
but not worried. “Peten’ka’s mysterious arrival did not worry him particularly,” writes
the narrator, “because, whatever happened, Iudushka was prepared for anything in
advance. He knew that nothing could ever catch him unawares and that nothing could
ever force him to depart from that protective layer of empty and thoroughly rotten
aphorisms with which he had cloaked himself head to toe [от той сети пустых и
насквозь прогнивших афоризмов, в которую он закутался с головы до ног]. For him
existed neither sorrow, nor joy, nor hatred, nor love” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:118). His son’s desperate pleas do not pierce through Porfirii’s protective layer of empty words and maxims. He puts up his walls and sends his son packing without any sympathy, let alone financial help.

In many respects, Porfirii is Bagrov emptied of all substance. His routine, his rituals, and his chatter point to his perpetual state of spiritual inertia and death. He may have the appearance of a living human being, but he is on par with an automaton, a grotesque being with no spirituality behind his actions. Bakhtin cites the image of the soulless but moving marionette as an important trademark of the grotesque. As he argues, artistic representations of the marionette focused on the “puppet as the victim of alien, inhuman force, which rules over men by turning them into marionettes” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 40). Porfirii stands a marionette moved about by empty clichés, a puppet and a grotesque double of Bagrov, who may respect traditional wisdom, but does not allow tradition to inhibit Aleksei’s happiness. When his son suffers from brain fever and threatens suicide, Bagrov immediately gives his blessing for the wedding. For the sake of his son, he overcomes traditional notions. In contrast, Porfirii is so dead inside that he pushes his son to suicide when he withdraws all financial support after he marries a woman he did not approve of. He has become so settled down in his deathly stable routine that he can never emerge from it in order to respond to life circumstances or muster up fatherly love.

In some respects, the internal inertia that defines Porfirii is what differentiates him from a negative character in Aksakov’s Family Chronicle like Kurolesov. Unlike Bagrov, Kurolesov is cruel and tortures his serfs for sport. His violent spectacles at his
estate are no less appalling than what Porfirii does to his children, yet Kurolesov is nowhere near as zombified as Porfirii. His cruelty is intentional; it is almost an art form. Porfirii is cruel due to indifference and soullessness.

As we look from the outside in, we can note that Saltykov-Shchedrin gives Porfirii and the entire Golovlev clan the external contours of human beings like any others. They live in their estate, are busy in their daily routines, nothing out of the ordinary takes place. Yet what separates this stable family from the similarly stable Bagrovs is that underneath this façade of stable country living lies spiritual death. In fact, the estate that houses these people is described as a place of death where characters do not so much live as live out their lives. At the end of a novel, a mentally and physically defeated Annin’ka returns to Golovlevo to die and describes the estate as a deathly trap. As she puts it:

Golovlevo – this was death itself [сама смерть], evil, voracious; this was death always looking for its new victim. Two uncles had died here; two cousins were dealt “particularly severe” wounds here, the consequence of which was death; finally, Liubin’ka too…All deaths, all poisons, all wounds – all originated here. It was here that they were fed rotten corn beef, it was here that the orphans first heard the words: odious, beggarly, spongers, insatiable bellies, and the rest of it. Here nothing went unpunished, nothing could be hidden from the penetrating gaze of that callous and capricious old woman: not an extra bite, not a broken, halfpenny doll, not a torn rag, not a worn out shoe. Any misdemeanor immediately repaid with a reproach or a slap. (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:248)

Annin’ka identifies the family nest as a tomb. In these statements she echoes Stepan who keeps chanting the words “Grave! grave! grave!” (Гроб! гроб! гроб!) on his way back to Golovlevo (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:29). These words prove prophetic when he is trapped in an empty existence at the office of the estate manager at Golovlevo, where he is fed rotten food until he finally dies.
Aksakov’s Bagrovo is a “closed and stable world,” a microcosm made up of its own routines and rituals, which offers an “ideal of traditional life” (Durkin 120). These stable realities of past narratives prove fertile ground for grotesque estrangement in *The Golovlevs*. Unlike Dostoevsky or Sorokin who destroy the stability of earlier narratives through violence, Saltykov-Shchedrin takes this stability and renders it so extreme that it turns into complete stagnation. Nothing happens at Golovlevo, yet people die. If Bagrovo was a removed, semi-mythical space of stability and ritualized action, in its removal and tranquility Golovlevo becomes a torpid place of death. Saltykov-Shchedrin introduces the notion of a closed off, stable estate, but pushes it to its absolute extreme by depicting Golovlevo as the stablest, most closed off space he can think of: the tomb. Stability is one thing, but what Arina and later Porfirii create is an airless vacuum of emptiness. Through his heroic efforts Bagrov managed to carve out Bagrovo, which has been called a “pastoral utopia” (Todd, “The Birth of the Novel from the Work of Russian Journalism”), but in *The Golovlevs* Saltykov-Shchedrin sharpens the same pastoral qualities of *Family Chronicle* in order to construct a dystopian space where stability turns into death and decay.

Even those who leave Golovlevo are still doomed to an early death. Annin’ka believes that the past has “poisoned her blood” [отравляло крови] and damaged her to the point where she cannot recover (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:249). This poisoning is part of the disintegration and spoiling that happens throughout the novel to all the Golovlev children. Pavel and Stepan are damaged by their mother at Golovlevo. The narrator mentions that the “constant humiliation” at his mother’s hands while growing up turned Stepan into a person with a “servile character [характер рабский], prone to buffoonery,
not knowing any sense of proportion [не знающий чувства меры] and completely lacking in foresight [предусмотрительности]” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:11). The younger generation is similarly either poisoned in youth or dealt final, deadly blows at Golovlevo. They are fed rotten food and given empty rituals instead of affection or help. Porfiri, like his mother before him, has turned Golovlevo into a tomb. Within the bounds of this space the children are irreparably damaged and have acquired permanent character flaws.

The life of the family resembles the reality of the food cellar Arina so prizes. Food is accounted for and stored in the cellar and vegetables are pickled so that they last longer, but they are not properly used until they turn rancid. As Stepan points out, his mother refuses to let anyone consume the fresh food until the rotten food has been eaten, by which point the fresh food becomes rotten, and the cycle continues. At one point the narrator mentions that Arina had grown so used to her routine and her way of doing things that she could not understand the thirst for life in others. She is always angry when Stepan and his father laugh with one another. In the estate she subjects others to her strict rules, thus keeping her children in the vacuous, stagnant trap that is Golovlevo and not allowing them any room to grow and blossom. In the process, Arina is essentially causing their failures and spoiling their personalities and futures, just as she causes the food to rot due to her parsimony. Todd argues: “The rottenness of food which Arina feeds her children and servants becomes their moral essence” (“Anti-Hero” 93). The Golovlevs are rotten on the inside as early as childhood. They go about life waiting for their bodies to rot along with the already rotten inner emotional core.
By building a grotesque world on the vestiges of past narratives, Saltykov-Shchedrin distinctly reveals that while some of the same institutions remain in place since the time of Aksakov, the family as it was has suffered extreme degradation. Though he observes the Golovlevs from the outside and maintains the consistently neutral tone of the grotesque, at some point toward the end of the novel, the narrator explains that the Golovlevs are only one example of the deterioration of the family in Russian society during the late nineteenth-century. “There are families over which hangs a grim fate,” says the narrator. “This is particularly noticeable among the lesser gentry families, which are scattered the length and breadth of Russia, without any links with the general life of the community, or any ruling sense. They used to be able to take shelter behind serfdom. Now, however, they have no such protection and live out their lives in crumbling manor houses” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:250). Aksakov’s chronicle holds in solution the basic flaws of the Golovlevs. Through the echoes to this earlier text Saltykov-Shchedrin reveals that since Aksakov’s time the family institution has been slowly disintegrating. The gentry estate remains intact in The Golovlevs, but Saltykov-Shchedrin’s grotesque estrangement of the Aksakovian narrative brings out the rot that has taken over the family. “Suddenly these families are attacked by what appears to be a combination of adversity and vice,” writes the narrator, “which eats away at them like some kind of vermin, invading their whole organism, penetrating its very heart, undermining the strength of generation after generation” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:252). Due to poor parenting and idleness, three generations of Golovlevs perish. Like Dostoevsky who showed both the inherent flaws of late nineteenth-century Russia and the damage
revolutionaries dealt to that already ailing world, Saltykov-Shchedrin paints a picture of deterioration.

### III. Food Consumption

The only activity that punctuates the otherwise empty existence of the Golovlev family is food consumption. In the empty, rotting reality of Golovlevo, food appears to be the only genuine act of living. “The only activity centers around eating,” writes Todd about Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel (“Anti-Hero” 91). This statement is reaffirmed throughout the text, as eating is constantly foregrounded in the day-to-day reality of Golovlevo as the only act the Golovlevs have any impetus for. Food is a token of the grotesque in *Demons* as well, but in *The Golovlevs* it is described somewhat differently. The family fetishizes food and virtually all their actions seem driven by the belly rather than by spiritual or mental motivations.

The emphasis Saltykov-Shchedrin places on food is not accidental. In Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle* meals and tea-time are important family rites. The value ascribed to such moments promotes a view of the countryside as a place of simple, wholesome joys. This special significance assigned to food is not exclusive to Aksakov’s text. Rather, as Ronald LeBlanc argues, in Russian culture and literature food became a way for Russian writers to proclaim the importance of native values and old-fashioned customs. Fictionalized meals were described in detail as a way to signify the good life of the Russian countryside, especially within the confines of the gentry estate where meals stood out as key rituals. The detailed descriptions of meals that saturate Sorokin’s *Roman* derive from these earlier narratives that glorified food. For instance, Goncharov’s Oblomov dreams about his native Oblomovka and visions of culinary wonders flood his
mind. At the end of his life, he attempts to recreate this idyllic good life from childhood within the confines of his apartment where Agaf’ia feeds him old-fashioned food. The fact that she virtually feeds him to death suggests that many food descriptions can also have a darker undertone. Nonetheless, as LeBlanc argues, the nostalgia for a good native meal still remains a prominent sentiment, even alongside the irony. This dual description of food is prominent in Gogol’s works as well. Food consumption is laced with a heavy dose of irony in *Dead Souls* or “Old World Landowners,” but the narrator in *Dead Souls* still writes a digressive overture to the capacious appetites of Chichikov. The digression brings out an image of the Russian man as a person of prodigious appetites with a strong digestive system and implicitly a strong constitution.

Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovleys*, despite darker associations of food with spiritual death in the work, nonetheless hints at this earlier association of food and the idyll. In the course of the book, many members of the Golovlev family view eating good food as emblematic of the good life. During his journey to Golovlevo, Stepan Golovlev articulates a purely gastronomic life philosophy. He laments that once he was a “human being,” but now that he is penniless and hungry he has lost of his humanity. In these statements being well-fed is described as a cardinal trait of one’s humanity. On his way to Golovlevo, Stepan hopes for a restoration of his humanity in the rich food stores at the estate. He images that he will make peace with his mother and that “amid the rejoicing, he [will] partake of the fatted calf [упитанного тельца]” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:33). Similarly, Arina, following her fall from power – a fall largely caused by Porfiri – mends fences with her treacherous son for no other reason than an irresistible, almost parasitic food craving. She too conceptualizes the good life as an existence made up of culinary
delights. Porfirii holds the keys to the Golovlevo food cellar so Arina is willing to forget
the past for the sake of a “tasty tidbit” (хороший кусок) (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:98).

Yet in *The Golovlevs* this view of food as a token of living well is shown as a
sign of profound spiritual and moral collapse. Though he recreates the outlines of past
gastronomic myths, Saltykov-Shchedrin is also casting a darker, Gogolian look at food
consumption. As LeBlanc argues, aside from jocular digression on the commodious
Russian stomach, in other parts of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* obsession with food suggests
“mental, moral, and emotional malnourishment” (248). In *Dead Souls* a concern with the
body testifies to failing, dilapidated souls, “dead souls” if you will. “The essentially
bovine existence led by Sobakieviich and several other characters in Gogol's famous
novel,” writes LeBlanc, “invites the reader to infer that low, mundane interests (such as
feeding the body) hinder the development of higher concerns (such as nourishing the
intellect or nurturing the heart)” (248). Gogol’s characters stuff themselves with food,
which takes the place of all other concerns.

In *The Golovlevs* preoccupation with food is similarly revealed to take the place
of higher brain functions. We are told that all her life Arina was not a person who cared
for comforts (culinary or otherwise). She only cared about financial acquisition. When
she is left alone at Pogorelka and the process of aging truly takes its toll on her, her
previously silenced physical impulses come to the surface. She “spen[ds] most of the day
dozing,” gradually falling into a “senile drowsiness” [старческая дремота] (Saltykov-
Shchedrin 13:95). The mental decline causes Arina to crave food. Good food, the thing
she had deprived herself of all her life, now becomes an obsession for her as she
daydreams of the food stores at Golovlevo. As her iron will crumbles, Porfirii uses food
as a way to control her and it is often for fear of being deprived of the gourmet delicacies of Golovlevo that Arina keeps in line.

Saltykov-Shchedrin’s revision of earlier cultural myths about food, his estrangement of these earlier patterns by showing individuals who engorge themselves as morally compromised, is one of the more important features of his grotesque realism. Bakhtin argues that food images are “closely interwoven with those of the grotesque body” (Rabelais 279). “Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body,” he writes (Bakhtin, Rabelais 281). Food ties into the larger notion of grotesque degradation (Bakhtin), the lowering of all that is spiritual to the level of the body and materiality.

When viewing the Golovlevs from this perspective, in their attachment to food above all else they emerge as fundamentally grotesque beings. In their glorification of food we can trace a process of degradation, whereby everything is lowered to the level of the material and characters live their lives divorced from spirituality. Having grown up in the shadow of Arina’s stinginess and the deliberate way in which she begrudged everyone even a crust of bread, the Golovlevs have always had an unsatiated and perhaps insatiable hunger for food. It is due to their childhood deprivation that as adults they fixate on food, place it at the center of their lives and renounce their spirituality and morality for its sake.

Stepan’s entire person is reduced to mere animal functions. He does not know where his next meal will come from, so he cannot think about anything else. As the narrator puts it, Stepan “kept looking with feeling of apprehension as though he might perish from hunger at any moment like a worm [как червяк]” (Saltykov-Shchedrin
At Golovlevo he sniffs around the food storage like a guard dog and gives away his part of the family inheritance for a pouch of tobacco. Physical need and want thus lead to the defeat of personality.

There is nothing in the novel that is sacred in the midst of the degradation that takes place. Food even becomes the way in which parents show their affection for their children and vice versa. Instead of helping his son Petia or saying a kind word, Porfirii sends him away with a roasted turkey. He and Arina are similarly caught in an exchange of food items. She listens to his empty chatter because he lets her have a few tasty morsels. Porfirii similarly attempts to coax Annin’ka into staying at Golovlevo by offering her food. The fact that he obviously lusts after her and likes to stroke her back adds yet another layer to the overall degradation of family relations at Golovlevo.

Whereas in Aksakov’s chronicle food rituals allowed characters to commune with others, in The Golovlevs food replaces affection. Porfirii and Arina may sit around telling stories, but in reality they are just carrying out a calculated exchange of goods with one another. It is only when Porfirii refuses to help Petia that Arina becomes aware of what is happening and curses him. Food does not facilitate bonds; instead predatory beings like Porfirii the “Bloodsucker” can use food to control those around them.

The moment when Porfirii’s sons spread butter on his communion bread provides the “perfect emblem for the book’s reduction of spiritual value to basic, animal functions” (Todd, “Anti-Hero” 93). Like Tolstoy in Resurrection who turns communion into a grotesque rite by describing it as “eating the body of God,” Saltykov-Shchedrin strips communion of spiritual symbolism and reduces it to mere eating. Religion, the last vestige of the spiritual, is constantly degraded in the text. As Todd argues, “Religion is
undermined by its inseparable ties to economic exploitation, gluttony, lechery, and meaningless ritual” (“Anti-Hero” 93). He further mentions that throughout the novel priests are often seen in connection with food and appear to be submissive to Porfirii, because he is the one who holds the purse strings for their churches (Todd, “Anti-Hero” 93). The priest of Golovlevo, Father Aleksandr, is always careful with Porfirii and does not oppose his heretical ideas for fear he may lose revenue. When Porfirii’s bastard child Vladimir is born, the priest does not express his disapproval of extramarital sex, but quietly assents to Porfirii’s self-serving sermons. The fear of material retribution silences the spiritual figure.

The Golovlevs only achieve true freedom and true selfhood when they renounce food at moments of extreme emotional duress. After having cursed Porfirii, a dying Arina finally remembers what matters in life and refuses to take food. Instead, she longs for her granddaughters and implicitly also grieves for her grandson Petia, who perished over three thousand rubles. Her concerns are spiritual as she renounces the material. Aside from starvation, suicide is another way for characters to choose the spiritual over the material. The acts of suicide in the novel – Volodia’s and Liubin’ka’s – can be read as a way for characters to remove themselves from the world of the material. As an extreme mortification of flesh and an annihilation of the body, suicide may be read as the ultimate rejection of the physical. The sheer impulse for self-annihilation shows a denial of physicality, which is the only way characters can transcend their grotesque selves and their grotesque worlds.

In earlier narratives of the countryside food was seen as a symbol of the good life. In The Golovlevs depictions of good food disclose the degree to which characters have
abandoned spirituality for a body-centered reality. In Saltykov-Shchedrin’s hands, the communal, glorious eating rites from past narratives have turned into animal functions that debase individuals into grotesque beings. The fact that the only way to escape the grotesque degradation overwhelming the novel is through starvation or suicide is a clear indication of the idyll’s fall.

While in past narratives the Russian individual was described as robust and this robustness was often seen as a positive trait, in The Golovlevs one must weaken the body to achieve any sort of redemption. Only when they are weak, ill, or otherwise broken down, and thus unable to enjoy the joys of the body, do the Golovlevs assume human traits. Through a transformation of the idyll into an animalistic space, Saltykov-Shchedrin pierces right to the heart of conservative Slavophile fantasies. Lynn Visson has shown that descriptions of hearty Russian food were a way for Russian writers to reveal the superiority of Russia to the West.43 By turning the Russian idyll of good food and stability into a site of human degradation and living death Saltykov-Shchedrin thus purges the Russian countryside of its mythical valor. No narratives of national glory could be built around the tale of loss and failure that is Saltykov-Shchedrin’s The Golovlevs.

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V. Gazing Into the Abyss

By transforming the Russian landowner into a miserly, soulless being, by showing the family disintegrating, and finally, by eviscerating all notions of the good countryside life, Saltykov-Shchedrin takes up tropes from an older estate narrative, sharpens them, and then unravels them to engender his own grotesque realism. But though Saltykov-Shchedrin begins with a familiar baseline, he deforms the familiar so intensely that he pushes the narrative deeper into the grotesque. The grotesque commences with estrangement of the familiar, but it often ends with the alien and unrecognizable. The threshold for this transition can vary: in Roman that particular threshold in not crossed for three-hundred pages, whereas in Demons, Dostoevsky does not cross it for most of the first part of the novel. In The Golovlevs these processes are less demarcated, but there are pockets in the novel where the exaggeration is so extreme that it renders characters and literary spaces unrecognizable. At these moments Saltykov-Shchedrin pushes the poetics of the novel so far into the grotesque that the narrative verges on the fantastic grotesque.

Unlike the grotesque, the fantastic has little in common with the world as we know it. Whereas the grotesque shows “a disquieting estrangement of our world from itself,” “the fantastic creates a world governed by its own esoteric law” (Helbling 6). When the fantastic influences the grotesque, this style can move to unexpected, possibly even supernatural layers of existence. In his discussion of the grotesque, Kayser distinguishes between the “fantastic” and the “satirical” grotesque (185). The estrangement of the familiar and the emphasis on a physical existence deprived of spirituality are key traits of the “satirical grotesque” in The Golovlevs. The “satirical
“grotesque” is a three-dimensional grotesque that does not transcend the bounds of realism. At times, however, these key traits of the “satirical grotesque” can be pushed to another level through phenomena like madness and dreams. In this way the “satirical grotesque” can give rise to the “fantastic grotesque.” “The encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque which life forces upon us,” writes Kayser (184). Dreams provide another means to transcend the real. “The estranged world appears in the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments” (Kayser 185). Because the dreamer and the madman do not actually recreate supernatural phenomena but merely imagine their existence, realist authors can use these life moments to create something larger than realism without technically breaking realist conventions.

In Saltykov-Shchedrin’s chronicle there are several moments when the narrative moves into something beyond three-dimensional reality and into the sphere of the fantastic grotesque. As Ilya Vinitsky argues, the protagonists "have become living ghosts" (113). By this he means that the "torpor and spiritual death" that defines these characters, leads to their being "deprived of ontological status" (Vinitsky 113). When left to their solitude, many members of the Golovlev family are overwhelmed by their inner emptiness. They often find themselves in small rooms, which turn into portals to fantastic realms. In their coffin-like spaces, the Golovlevs lose touch with reality and immerse themselves into subjectively created limbo states, where realities grow shaky and objects lose their solidity. These characters have grown so distanced from their spirituality that they are only left with lackluster fantastic worlds. Their inner worlds feel
like an abyss of emptiness, but they are the only remnants of any kind of spirituality in
The Golovlevs.

When Stepan returns to Golovlevo he is left alone in the office of the estate
manager. After having failed at a reconciliation with the family, he is trapped in a small,
filthy, and unlit room, where his sense of reality is severely constricted. Unable to go
outside, look forward to the future, or even recollect the past, Stepan is stuck in complete
stasis, both physically and mentally. During the night, it almost seems as though he is
walking toward the great beyond:

His numbed imagination struggled to form any kind of images, his deadened
memory endeavored to penetrate into the realm of the past, but the images came
out shredded and senseless [разорванные, бессмысленные], while the past did
not respond with a single memory. [...] Before him was only the present, in the
form of a tightly locked prison, in which all ideas of space and time had vanished
without a trace. The room, the stove, the three windows, the creaky wooden bed
with its thin, worn mattress, the table with the bottle on it – demarcated the
horizons of thought processes. (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:48)

The physical and mental prison Stepan inhabits, the sort of space that essentially blocks
the body, numbs the mind, and turns reality into an abyss of emptiness, provokes
halucinatory reactions in Stepan. With the help of alcohol, his battered and dulled
imagination moves past the tangible and into a strange limbo space between life and
death. The darkness of his room disappears and is replaced by seemingly boundless
space, "filled with brilliant phosphorescence" (наполненное фосфорическим блеском)
(Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:48). Instead being in the dark, limiting, prison of objects, the
intoxicated Stepan finds himself in a "boundless, deathly void [бесконечная пустота,
мертвая]" (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:48). Stepan is elevated from his surroundings and
enters a reality where "There were no walls, no windows – nothing in fact existed but the
boundless phosphorescent void" (13:48). Incapable of succesfully making a life for
himself in the world, yet also still living, Stepan seems— at least spiritually— to move beyond the confines of life.

Stepan’s elevation into the “boundless phosphorescent void” bears strong traits of the fantastic grotesque. Kayser argues that the grotesque is defined by “the fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of ‘natural’ size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of the historical order” (185). Characteristics like the “abolition of the law of statics,” the “loss of identity,” the “distortion of ‘natural’ size and shape,” the “suspension of the category of objects,” the “destruction of personality,” and the “fragmentation of the historical order” have multiple meanings; they could mean deformation, despiritualization, and automatization, while simultaneously signifying ontological instability, the supernatural, and the oneiric. Stepan is so empty inside that when he is forced to cohabitate with his own vacuity in the small confines of his room he loses his personhood to it. In Beyond Good and Evil we find one of Nietzsche’s most famous aphorisms: “[I]f you gaze long into an abyss,” he writes, “the abyss will gaze into you” (48). Stepan stares into the emptiness of his own soul and of Golovlevo for so long that this emptiness looks back at him and he is lost in it. Stepan virtually ceases to exist as an independent entity, he starts to melt into into the void, thus losing not only his identity and his sense of his own history, but even violating the basic properties of physics.

Stepan's escape into an abyss of his own making is mirrored in hallucinatory trances by other family members. The escapes into a world of phantoms by Pavel, Arina, and Porfirii make up other moments of the fantastic grotesque in the novel.
Pavel shuts himself in his room and creates his own "fantasy-world" in which he and Porfiri are in perpetual struggle against one another. As he sits in his room, completely at a distance from reality, Pavel feels "shadows [тени] wandering." In his final hours he experiences a sensation much like the one Stepan does when stuck in the little office at Golovlevo (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:76). The play of light and shadow creates all kinds of illusions in Pavel's mind and he starts to see movement in the corner of his room, believing that his "dressing gown is moving" (халат...двинется) (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:77).

When all alone at Pogorelka, Arina also experiences hallucinations. Sitting in semi-darkness, she finds that the objects in her room are starting to lose their thingness. "The lamp in front of the icons," writes the narrator in Arina's point of view, "gave a deceptive appearance [обманчивый характер] to objects, so that they ceased to be objects, but seemed like outlines of objects [очертания предметов]" (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:97). Shadows, strange noises, objects seemingly moving on their own or turning into ghostly apparitions suggest the presence of another reality creeping underneath the world we see. Because these moments are attributed to the hallucinations of the Golovlevs, they do not disturb the realistic texture of the text. Yet these moments, begotten by the empty, lifeless existence at Golovlevo, are glimpses into an alien realm that coexists with the reality of degradation and food consumption. This alien realm is what the Golovlevs eventually arrive at after living their meaningless lives; it is the absolute blankness at the end of a life stripped of all humanity.

Porfiri, the least spiritual being in the novel, is ultimately the one most drawn to this other layer of reality. When he is left as sole proprietor of Golovlevo after having
destroyed every single member of his family who might have presented a challenge, Porfirii is more isolated than ever. Despite the acres of land at his disposal he ends up trapped in his tiny study with nothing but his own emptiness. Abandoned by everyone, he withdraws into his own "fantastic" sense of reality, which he populates with phantoms of his own making. He grows so detached from the real world that he wants to “see no one, hear no one” (Ничего бы не слышать, никого бы не видеть), as he keeps expanding his own fantastic reality, in which he is constantly taking revenge on the dead (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:214). Caught up in his imaginary world, he literally surrenders his consciousness to it and loses his real ontological status. The narrator provides the following description of Porfirii: “[H]e no longer felt the ground under his feet [земля исчезла у него из-под нор] and believed he had grown wings on his back. His eyes gleamed, his lips trembled and foamed, his face turned pale and assumed a menacing look. And as his fantasies grew [по мере того как росла фантазия], the air around him became filled with phantoms with which he engaged in an imaginary struggle [вступил в воображаемую борьбу ]” (Saltykov-Shchedrin 13:216). This retreat into a purely subjective world provokes a number of symptoms – like the destruction of personality, for one – that Kayser associates with the fantastic grotesque. Porfirii has lost what was left of himself, lost touch with time and space and phenomenal reality.

Vinitsky argues that such moments in The Golovlevs are Saltykov-Shchedrin's way of poking fun at the seances carried out by members of the spiritualist movement and spiritualist ideology in general. "[Saltykov-Shchedrin] found in spiritualism an important ideological metaphor," writes Vinitsky, "it represented the tragico-comic extreme (or self-exposure) of idealism, a symptom of cowardice, inner poverty, and
moral degeneracy of modern man, who lived in an age that was out of joint, confused and teeming with phantoms" (110). Porfirii's phantoms could thus be seen as a form of degenerated idealism so out of touch with reality that it gives rise to a world of phantoms.

Yet I would suggest that while idealism and spiritualism play a role in the novel's fantastic grotesque, the images of characters caught up in their fantastic worlds also tie back to Saltykov-Shchedrin's views of the traditional Russian novel and his rebellion against it. Through the Golovlevs' escape into inner, subjective hollowness, Saltykov-Shchedrin alludes to what he believed was the Russian novel's obsession with love and individual sentiments. The Russian realist novel has been described as "psychological" or, in its Tolstoyan variety, as a treatment of the "dialectics of the soul." By occasionally moving the narrative into the primitive subjective realities of the Golovlevs, Saltykov-Shchedrin hints at past narratives preoccupied with subjective, psychological processes. The dialectics of Golovlev soullessness are profoundly disturbing. When compared to the inner psychological processes of beloved realist protagonists like Andrei Bolkonsky or Evgenii Bazarov, Porfirii Golovlev's grotesque world of phantoms makes him seem to belong to a different species. However, the vast differences between these mental processes suggest that the earlier narratives were giving us only one side of reality, while omitting the rest. Considering Saltykov-Shchedrin's impeccable sense of humor as a satirist, the spiritual wallowings of the grotesque Porfirii may well be the author's way of poking fun at the solemn mental processes of earlier Russian protagonists and also at writers themselves who were so out of touch with contemporary conditions that they believed the world was made up of Andrei Bolkonskis and Konstantin Levins.
Though The Golovlevs was written in response to what Saltykov-Shchedrin describes as the failures of the contemporary novel and its frequent focus on love and personal affairs, Saltykov-Shchedrin nonetheless does not openly address social questions. To some extent, by avoiding direct discussion of social questions, Saltykov-Shchedrin emulates Aksakov’s ahistorical asocial narrative perspective. Moreover, the absence of historical and social issues in The Golovlevs fits well with the mentalities of its protagonists who have no interest in such questions. Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel allows us to enter the world of the Golovlevs and within their grotesque microcosm there can be no discussions of higher causes or social issues. The Golovlevs read no books and have no interest in knowledge or culture of any kind other than the erotic poetry of Barkov read by Vladimir Golovlev. In fact, these characters are so out of touch with current events that Porfirii only learns of the death of Napoleon III a year after the fact when the police superintendent tells him.

Yet despite the limits that the Golovlev worldview places on the novel’s scope of inquiry, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s grotesque poetics ensure that while ignoring the social overtly, he covertly captures it as it is taking place. For instance, the fact that the Golovlevs do not read and have no interests other than food, sex, land, and money is disturbing; it speaks of profound ignorance and backwardness. Aksakov’s protagonists had a similarly limited range of interests. Characters in Family Chronicle do read books, but it is mostly sentimental novels (Aleksei) and they are described as poorly educated. While in Family Chronicle these limitations were not looked down upon, in The Golovlevs Saltykov-Shchedrin implies that the traditional novel going all the way back to
Aksakov has been glorifying the wrong elements of Russian life. By pushing the reality of Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle* to its absurdist extreme and reducing it to a semi-animalistic lifestyle driven by basic bodily functions and hollow fantasies, Saltykov-Shchedrin chronicles the sinister underside of a social reality where all that matters is being a landowner on a stable, backwoods estate where people eat good food and lead healthy, natural lives. By chronicling the death of the traditional estate life as seen in Aksakov and imagined in Slavophile fantasies, Saltykov-Shchedrin implies that there can be no return to that narrative of pastoral purity. Indeed, by going back to one of the sources of the Russian novel tradition and rendering its subject-matter grotesque, it is as if Saltykov-Shchedrin “unwrites” these past narratives. He uses old forms to deliver new messages, but also purges the tradition of old messages about the good Russian life in the country.

Unlike Dostoevsky who showed the revolutionaries as part of the cause of the failure of contemporary society, Saltykov-Shchedrin does not even mention revolutionaries, all the while showing the profound failure of the Russian gentry family and the countryside life. The world of the Golovlevs is rotting and caving in on itself; such a world does not need revolutionaries to foster disorder. Without once invoking the agendas of the left, Saltykov-Shchedrin turns the novel form, a form he believed belonged to the conservatives, against itself. There can be no redemption or regeneration for the likes of the Golovlevs. Their reality is grotesque and beyond fixing. The fact that Porfirii dies while searching for redemption but before he achieves it illustrates Saltykov-Shchedrin’s point that the Golovlevs and their lifestyle cannot be redeemed but must be allowed to perish quietly like Porfirii.
Chapter 4

Grotesque Estrangement in Tolstoy’s Resurrection

In their experimentations with grotesque realism in the 1870s, both Dostoevsky and Saltykov-Shchedrin had Tolstoy in mind as an author of the conventional gentry novel. Despite references to the Balkan Wars at the end, in Anna Karenina, which had so infuriated Saltykov-Shchedrin, Tolstoy largely focused on questions of personal happiness and meaning in a personal sphere. As this novel was being finished, Tolstoy underwent what he described as religious and spiritual awakening, a conversion as it is so often called. When he returned to the novel at the very end of the nineteenth century, he had very different concerns. Tolstoy’s last novel, Resurrection, which was written on and off in the course of ten years, but published in 1899, tackled some of the same challenges of literary forms that had so concerned Dostoevsky and Saltykov-Shchedrin earlier. While they had written with Tolstoy’s novels in mind as a paradigm to be unraveled even if they had to use its very devices to do so, in the 1890s, Tolstoy took a similar stance to both the classic Russian novel and his own novels in particular.

Resurrection has the dual honor of being both the author’s last full novel and also the final major Russian realist novel of the nineteenth-century. The historical associations of its date of publication have shaped and divided critical receptions of the novel. The date 1899 corresponds to a time when Tolstoy’s worldview was entrenched in post-conversion theology, as well as to a time of social tumult in Russian society – a time when discontent with the tsarist regime grew as underground revolutionary activity

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44In my view, Hadji Murat, which Tolstoy finished in 1904, after Resurrection, is a novel manqué. Tolstoy sets up the scene for a full-blown novel, but then drops all the other characters after Hadji Murat dies.
intensified. These social and philosophical factors had their effects on the makeup of Resurrection, but they have also, and perhaps primarily, influenced criticism. The novel is often seen as either purely a container for the rhetoric of Tolstoy the religious thinker, or as a reflection of sociopolitical struggles in tsarist Russia.

The first approach, prominent in Western criticism, has led to a conflation of Resurrection with Tolstoy’s theoretical tracts from the period. “[N]ever had Tolstoy’s pedagogical bent assumed such gargantuan proportions as in Resurrection,” writes Edward Wasiolek, “nor had it ever posed so grave a threat to his art” (191). These sentiments are echoed by George Steiner: “When Tolstoy came to write Resurrection, the teacher and prophet in him did violence to the artist” (92). This perceived prominence of didacticism seems to have deterred scholarly investigations of the novel among Western critics. In general, Resurrection has not nearly received the same critical attention as some of Tolstoy’s other late works – such as The Kreutzer Sonata or “The Death of Ivan Ilych” – while existing studies generally compare it to War and Peace and Anna Karenina, often deeming it a lesser novel. For instance, R. F. Christian commences his analysis of Resurrection with the assertion that “no serious critic would deny that Tolstoy’s last novel is a vastly inferior work of art to the two great novels which preceded it” (221).

In contrast, Soviet critics, who have given Resurrection considerably more attention, often underscore the novel’s political messages. Resurrection has received great acclaim in Soviet criticism as a socio-ideological piece that recreates the socioeconomic milieu at the turn of the nineteenth-century. In a collaborative article, N. K. Gudzii and N. K. Maimin declare that “Tolstoy’s last novel is undoubtedly a social
novel” (483) and that it is perhaps “not simply a novel, but a novel and a proclamation at the same time” (485). They argue that social conflicts “between the oppressors and the oppressed,” which “polarized” late prerevolutionary Russian society, are “at the center of the novel’s (Resurrection) subject-matter” (Gudzii and Maimin 483). This point is reiterated by V. Zhdanov who categorically asserts that “social motifs permeate Resurrection, without them this work would not exist” (246). Mikhail Bakhtin affirms these arguments and calls Resurrection a "socio-ideological novel" (роман социально-идеологический) in his 1929 prefaces to a Tolstoy collection ("Resurrection" 242, emphasis Bakhtin's). Bakhtin aligns this novel with works like Chernyshevsky's What is to Be Done?, Herzen's Who Is to Blame?, and the novels of Georges Sand. Bakhtin suggests that unlike "family-psychological novel[s]" like Anna Karenina or "family-historical novel[s]" like War and Peace, a socio-ideological novel like Resurrection has at its core "an ideological thesis," which helps launch a "critique of all existing social relations and forms" ("Resurrection" 242-243). In what we can surmise to be ironical praise, Bakhtin extols Tolstoy's Resurrection as the "most consistent and perfect example of the socio-ideological novel not only in Russia but in the West as well" ("Resurrection" 253). As he suggests, every detail in the novel is "subordinated to the task of serving as proof of the (ideological) thesis," which makes for "extreme and provocatively naked tendentiousness" (Bakhtin, "Resurrection" 253).

Yet in spite of the novel’s strong ties to Tolstoyan theology, or its treatment of social inequities in Russia, Resurrection has neither the simplicity of a theological pamphlet, nor the ideological direction of What is to Be Done? or the later works of Socialist Realism. Western scholars, who argue for the strong presence of Tolstoy’s
theological rhetoric in *Resurrection*, often follow-up such statements by reaffirming that “the teacher and the prophet [in Tolstoy] [...] did not (seriously) mar *Resurrection*” (Wasiolek 192). Similarly, Steiner suggests that despite Tolstoy’s “puritanical conception of art,” the genre of the novel, with its extensive storyline, permits narrative freedom, making it possible for Tolstoy's theoretical "abstractions [to] assume a colour of life" (284). Likewise, Soviet critics have hesitated about the correctness of the novel’s political messages, which would suggest that *Resurrection* is perhaps not as ideologically over-determined as it might initially appear. Galina Galagan argues that though Tolstoy attempted to come up with a "novel of a new type" (roman нового типа) by bringing his hero closer "to the people and to revolution," it was ultimately Maksim Gorky who fully accomplished the task of writing a new social novel (262). Bakhtin also wavers on Tolstoy's merits as a social writer; he mentions that despite the novel's ideological force, Tolstoy is “deprived of a genuine sense of history” and unable to envision the potential for social change, which prevents him from embracing the revolutionaries he portrays ("Resurrection" 138).

While it would be difficult to dispute that Tolstoy’s last novel has an ideological bent, or that it contains both social and religious messages, it is also worth asking how Tolstoy, who had been previously maligned for writing novels that were exclusively limited to the private sphere, managed to couch such messages in the novel form. His conversion may have changed his ideas, but did it also change his art? Was not the fact

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45 This argument is echoed by Irving Howe who suggests that *Resurrection* "is much richer in felt life and far less monochromatic than ‘The Kreutzer Sonata,’” if only because the novel as a form forces Tolstoy to reveal himself” (“Old Magician” 32).
that Tolstoy had not produced a novel until that point perhaps an indication that the novel was inherently incompatible with or perhaps more difficult to bend to his new ideas?

Based on remarks he made in letters, it was only when most of his post-conversion ideas ripened that Tolstoy felt that he finally had the ability to do the novel justice. Working on *Resurrection* in 1891, he expressed much enthusiasm about the prospect of returning to the novel armed with his new theology. "I was so happy to [...] to start a big work of fiction [большую художественную работу]," he writes in his diary, "Yes, there is a point to starting to write a big novel now. My earlier novels were an unconscious creation [...] now I know what is what and I can mix it all up again and work in this mix [теперь я знаю что и могу все смешать опять и работать в этом смешаном]" (52: 5-6).

Tolstoy did "mix it all up again" in *Resurrection*, but his past novels were also in this mix and he used and abused them to arrive at *Resurrection*. In *Resurrection* Tolstoy captures a thoroughly inverted social reality, a world turned upside-down: a world in which the unnatural is natural, immorality is legitimized to the point of replacing morality, and human beings treat fellow human beings inhumanly while losing basic human traits themselves. All these features, all these inversions and distortions, give the reality of *Resurrection* a distinctly grotesque flavor.46 Yet, as I would like to suggest, at

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46 A few scholars have already noticed that *Resurrection* does not function quite like Tolstoy’s other realist novels. The presence of satire in *Resurrection* and in the late Tolstoy’s works in general is widely recognized, and since the styles are intimately related, this presence also indicates an affinity for the grotesque. (See, among others, Hugh McLean’s article “*Resurrection*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy.*). Further, using the term colloquially, Edward Wasiolek argues that the Korchagins look “grotesque” to Nekhliudov following his moral awakening (194). Harriet Murav also uses the same term to suggest that images of the prison or of the beggar on Easter eve (with “a red scab instead of a nose”) are “grotesque” (37).
the root of the grotesque, inverted world was the familiar narrative of his past novels. In a recent study on Tolstoy, Justin Weir argues that in his later years “the more didactic Tolstoy repeatedly returns to his early fiction, recasting a moral light” (3). As I will argue, *Resurrection* is Tolstoy’s reinvention of the novel as he knew it; in this last novel Tolstoy returned to the novel form and the romantic theme, but through grotesque depictions of both the body and the body politic he redefined their meaning, turned earlier narratives on their head and reduced them to a source for the grotesque. It was by recycling and distorting older forms that Tolstoy managed to create something new in *Resurrection*. Tolstoy’s last novel was thus not merely a byproduct of ideology, but also a vessel for aesthetic innovation.

1. **Unnatural Beginnings**

Before *Resurrection* came to be a novel, before even the countless drafts leading up to its final shape, the plot of the novel had been a true story in the world, a story with a social scope that extended beyond the gentry realities of Tolstoy’s earlier novels. The story that blossomed into a full-blown novel was recounted to Tolstoy in June of 1887 by A. F. Koni, who at the time served as prosecutor in the St. Petersburg court district. Koni told Tolstoy about a nobleman with an expressive face and troubled eyes who visited his chambers, asking permission to correspond with a female prisoner named Rozaliia Oni (Zhdanov 4). A prostitute from a brothel of the sordid type in the Haymarket, Rozaliia was sentenced to four months in prison after stealing one hundred rubles from an intoxicated ‘guest.’ The nobleman informed Koni of his intentions to marry Rozaliia, asking him to intervene at the jail to make the wedding possible. Koni did his best to
dissuade him, but his efforts failed (Zhdanov 5). Rozaliia happily assented to the marriage proposal, the two shared several visits at the jail, and the wedding would likely have taken place had she not unexpectedly died of typhoid. Distraught by the loss, the nobleman took the money he had set aside as dowry for his fiancée and donated it to the prison for the benefit of female prisoners and children (Zhdanov 5).

It was only a few months later that Koni would discover the reasons behind the man’s shocking actions. Rozaliia had been the daughter of a Finnish widower who did handiwork for a wealthy woman in St. Petersburg. The widower developed liver cancer and begged the woman to take care of his daughter who would soon become orphaned. Honoring his request, the wealthy woman took Rozaliia into her home where she lived for seventeen years. However, her time at the noblewoman’s home came to an abrupt end when a young student related to the lady of the house noticed her and seduced her. She became pregnant with his child, was thrown out by the wealthy woman, gave up the baby to an orphanage, and eventually ended up a prostitute in the Haymarket. The student who had seduced her was the same man who proposed marriage years later (Zhdanov 5-6).

As Lidiia Gromova-Opul’skaia shows, when Tolstoy began the transformation of the Koni story into a novel, he struggled with how to arrange the contents, simultaneously drawn to the man’s gentry background and his time with Rozaliia in the countryside, and her horrible downward spiral afterward. Opul’skaia mentions that after the first full draft in 1895, Tolstoy felt that the novel was “falsely begun” (Ложно начато) and that he "must start with her [Maslova]" (должно начать с нее). And indeed, in the end Tolstoy did “start with her.” As a result of this chronological reversal, instead of starting with the
idyllic countryside of the flashbacks, the novel begins on a substantially darker note with depictions of the prison.

Resurrection starts with Tolstoy’s celebrated device of “defamiliarization” (остранение), which launches the reader into an alien, unnatural reality. The novel opens in the spring, but natural beauty is a fragile commodity in this reality, because, as Tolstoy mentions, humans are making every effort to suppress nature:

No matter how hard men tried, one hundred thousand of them gathering in one small place, no matter how they disfigured that land where they had crowded themselves, no matter how they paved the land with stones so that nothing could grow in it, no matter how they cleared away every blade of grass, no matter how they filled the air with coal and gas, no matter how they cut down every tree and chased away every animal and bird, -- spring was spring, even in the city [всена была весною даже и в городе]. (Tolstoy 32: 3)

According to Victor Shklovsky, Tolstoy’s use of “defamiliarization” often consists of the author’s refusal to “call a thing by its name,” instead “describ[ing] it as if it were perceived for the first time” (6). In the sentence quoted above, Tolstoy conveys an original view on Russian urbanization, and perhaps all urbanization, by refusing to acknowledge the process as an established historical fact and by taking the stance of someone unfamiliar with how cities come about; the city as a locus is not properly identified until the very end of the sentence.

Moving from the device to its effects, we can note that urbanization is shown as an unnatural practice, which disrupts natural splendor and the flow of seasons. This defamiliarized rendering of the city as a whole prefigures Tolstoy’s treatment of every institutional layer of Russian society in Resurrection. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, “this

47 All references pertain to the 90-volume Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, v 90 tomakh, akademicheskoe jubileinoe izdanie, (Moskva: Gosudarstvenoe Izdatel’stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1929-64), vols. 16, 19, 32, 52. The novel Resurrection is volume 32. All translations are my own.
wide and purely philosophical picture of the urban spring, the struggle between the good
spring and the evil city culture […] sets the tone of all subsequent exposures of human
inventions: prisons, courts, high society, and others” ("Resurrection" 245). In the
opening sentence, the juxtaposition of nature to the aberrations of social reality – a reality
which depletes the earth of its fecundity and drives away animals – suggests that as we
transition from the large-scale urban panorama into the city’s various institutional
divisions, we will simply alternate between levels of the same world built upon unnatural
premises. In this unnaturalness Tolstoy incorporates behaviors and practices he construes
as immoral, though this choice does not necessarily anoint the natural as the ethical
standard in the text. Rather, Tolstoy uses nature as a neutral measuring tool for the logic
and humanity of social practices without delving into its morality. It is for this reason
that the opening depiction is essential to understanding the author’s critique of society.
The literal unnaturalness in this scene frames the philosophical unnaturalness Tolstoy
associates with social reality. The worst practices and people in Resurrection are not
only cruel and immoral; they are also shown to be against nature and logic.

The most overtly unnatural social institution in the novel is the prison, which
exemplifies all forms of institutionalized unnaturalness. Shortly after the opening
statement, Tolstoy repositions his narrative perspective on the spring to produce a
representation that rings quite positive when compared to the genesis of the city. Using
some of his most poetic language, Tolstoy shows how “plants, birds, insects, and children
– are all happy” (32:3). The notable exceptions to this all-embracing happiness are
adults, the same people responsible for building the city. They cannot be happy at the
face of God’s beautiful world because they are busy trying to “wield power over one
another” (властвовать друг над другом) (32:4). After this statement, the narrative gaze drastically shifts to the prison corridor, where human attempts to “wield power over each other” are enacted. “The fresh, bracing air of the fields had made its way even into the prison yard […]” writes Tolstoy, “[b]ut in the [prison] corridor the air was heavy with the germs of typhoid and the smell of sewage, tar and putrefaction” (32:4). The stench of excrement and disease serves as evidence for the cruelty and inhumanity that define the prison. These phenomena can be associated with the barren land presented in the novel’s opening and seem to follow through the pattern in the novel whereby morally unjust social institutions are depicted as an aberration of natural principles.

The state of Maslova as a prisoner provides direct physical evidence for the effects of unnatural social institutions on those subjected to them. The narrator observes that Maslova “was pale with the pallor peculiar to people who have been shut in for a long time,” and that her appearance resembles that of “potatoes kept in a cellar,” which sprout shoots (Tolstoy 32:21). The image of a potato grown in a cellar, which deviates from its normal makeup, underscores the deformative properties of the prison’s unnatural conditions. The prison, just like the estate in The Golovlevs, could be seen as a microcosm for the larger processes of social degradation in society. Maslova is as damaged in the prison as the Golovlevs in their estate.

If we consider the opening as a whole, the author’s arrangement of this scene seems to be a deft and deliberate choice that captures, with perfect narrative economy, the aesthetics of the novel at large. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that Tolstoy takes a Rousseauian approach to civilization in Resurrection, showing the social as inferior to the natural and the primitive ("Resurrection" 244-46). I would suggest that in Resurrection Tolstoy is
taking an even more extreme stance. The images of nature’s seasonal blossoming connect back to Tolstoy’s earlier works where nature was given a prominent role and depicted in intricate detail. “No novel,” writes George Steiner about *Anna Karenina*, “brings language closer to the sensuous activities of farm life, to the sweet smell of a cow shed on frosty nights or the rustle of the fox through the high grass” (91). Similar statements have also been made about *War and Peace*. Gyorgy Lukacs, who ties Tolstoy’s fondness for the natural to what he construes as the author’s “great and truly epic mentality,” argues that Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* captures “a life based on a community of feeling among simple human beings closely bound to nature, […] adapted to the great rhythm of nature, which moves according to nature’s cycle of birth and death and excludes all structures which are not natural …” (9). This synchronization of human life with nature also indicates, as Donna Orwin puts it, that in *War and Peace* “everything real and good is seen to be natural, and so the unity of the self and nature is realized to the greatest possible extent” (*Tolstoy’s Art and Thought* 100). Orwin shows how under the influence of Rousseau, Tolstoy finds ways to write about human society through the lens of nature, defining even socially-constructed phenomena like political history “as a mysterious force of nature” (*Tolstoy’s Art and Thought* 100), and warfare as “biological law” (*Tolstoy’s Art and Thought* 102).

These critical arguments reveal that not only was the author invested in nature’s role in reality, but that nature and the natural rhythm facilitated the most authentic and most privileged moments in Tolstoy’s art. But if nature and the natural rhythm were an essential presence in Tolstoy’s earlier art, then in *Resurrection*, one is confronted with quite a different perspective. As the narrative gaze abruptly moves from images of spring
into prison corridors, one is left to wonder whether nature with all its glories will receive the same attention it was given in War and Peace and Anna Karenina. For if society ultimately dominates human realities and suppresses nature, then there may be little reason for the author to dwell on nature at all. The extreme contradiction between the spring and the prison suggests that not only is Tolstoy criticizing reality from a Rousseauian point of view, as Bakhtin argues, but that perhaps he has resignedly abandoned depictions of nature altogether. In a society where people are thrown in prison for no good reason, and where “the modesty given to man by nature” (Tolstoy 32:11) is eliminated by the institutionalization of prostitution, there is little room for meditations on how things ought to have been.

Appropriately, in Resurrection it is not the natural that is in focus, but rather the unnatural. Tolstoy condemns this unnaturalness, but it is difficult to find a safe haven from it; the unnaturalness overwhelms the world of the novel. When Nekhliudov goes to the countryside after Maslova’s trial and remembers the times he has spent in the midst of nature’s beauty, he remembers all the terrible things that have happened to Maslova and cannot indulge in the natural beauty around him. The author assumes a comparable stance. The depictions of the natural world in Resurrection are like the few patches of grass that Tolstoy tells us have managed to grow despite urbanization and despite the paving of the land. “[T]he grass,” writes Tolstoy, “grew and shone green everywhere where they had not scraped it away, not only on the narrow strips of lawn on the boulevards, but between the paving-stones as well” (Tolstoy 32:3). This image of small strips of grass overcoming the barrenness of their surroundings, captures the treatment of nature in the novel: like the few patches of grass, so glimpses of nature occasionally
manage to pierce through Tolstoy’s vision of an unnatural society. These depictions are scarce and surrounded by the unnatural, but they serve as a measure of contrast in a world where unnaturalness reigns.

2. In-Between Worlds

The abandonment of natural beauty for depictions of a world marred by unnaturalness is the first, most general display of the grotesque in Resurrection. Kayser has argued that the grotesque is, above all, rooted in the familiar and is a distortion of the familiar. Subsequent scholars have argued that the grotesque shows “a disquieting estrangement of our world from itself” (Helbling 6), but that “[i]n the midst of an overwhelming impression of monstrousness there is much we can recognize, much corrupted or shuffled familiarity” (Harpham 5). In Resurrection, to return to the image of the few patches of grass surrounded by concrete, Tolstoy juxtaposes small glimpses of the familiar and natural to the alien and unnatural, generating pronounced contrasts that constantly frustrate the reader’s expectations.

When the narrative moves into Maslova’s life story, a vein of unnaturalness retrospectively unravels the familiar world of Tolstoy’s pre-conversion writings. As the sixth child of the daughter of a serf-woman, Maslova was almost destined to die at birth – which in itself reads like an affront to nature – and only survives due to the accidental entrance of the lady of the house (Nekhliudov’s aunt) into the cowshed where her mother lies nursing. In the vicious tone of an enraged observer of facts, Tolstoy tells of how Maslova grew up feeling like half-servant, half-young lady, because Nekhliudov’s aunts differed in their treatment of her. Eventually, she is cast out of that world when Nekhliudov seduces her and she becomes pregnant with his child. Her baby dies from
illness and neglect, thus meeting the fate its mother should have met as an infant, and after a series of poor choices and sexual advances by men, Maslova winds up a prostitute.\textsuperscript{48}

In the course of telling Maslova’s story, Tolstoy introduces the gentry estate. The estate had been a familiar and fundamental space of the Tolstoyan novel, a space for the replication of generations and brimming with organic energies. This is certainly the case with Levin’s Pokrovskoe, where not only do the Levins produce an offspring, but so does the cow Pava. In Maslova’s life story, this familiar space is almost unrecognizable and redefined as a site of death and sterility. The spinster aunts who have no heir, except Nekhliudov, live upstairs, while innocent babies die in the barn from neglect and poverty. Such a space is no bucolic haven. The natural progression of generations that was in full force in other Tolstoyan novels is obstructed in \textit{Resurrection}. Virtually all the children in this novel, including Maslova’s siblings who died in infancy, her own child, and the peasant children whom Nekhliudov encounters during his visit to his estates, either do not live past infancy or seem at risk for illness or death.\textsuperscript{49} The fact that many children live in the unnatural conditions of the prison is even more proof that the younger generation is

\textsuperscript{48} Tolstoy traces the character’s fall through plot devices similar to those that dominate late works like “The Forged Coupon” or \textit{The Kreutzer Sonata}. In \textit{The Kreutzer Sonata} sexual desire leads to murder, while in “The Forged Coupon” even as harmless an act as the forgery of a ruble note leads to several deaths and many other misfortunes as the forged money is passed down among people who either suffer or make others suffer as a result of the coupon.

\textsuperscript{49} One exception is the young child that Nekhliudov meets in Siberia, when the governor’s daughter insists that he meet her child.
somehow at risk and not in the best growing environment.\textsuperscript{50} If the world in \textit{War and Peace} and \textit{Anna Karenina} was full of health and virility, in \textit{Resurrection} that world appears diseased and decayed, infected by the rancid air of typhoid emanating from the prison.

But while Maslova’s story pushes the narrative away from natural vigor, Nekhliudov’s flashbacks about their past send the narrative back into the familiarity of earlier Tolstoyan novels.\textsuperscript{51} These chapters in \textit{Resurrection} have been lauded by critics as reminiscent of narrative descriptions in \textit{War and Peace} and \textit{Anna Karenina}, and as the best, most artistic portions of the book. Indeed, like the depictions of spring at the novel’s beginning, these scenes evoke a sense of innocence un tarnished by social conventions. Nekhliudov retreats to the country because, as we are told, “it was quiet” and “there were no distractions” (Tolstoy 32:43). Tolstoy shows him to be in perfect "communion with nature" (общение с природой) (32:47) as he wanders the fields or stops for a nap somewhere in the garden. It is in this idyllic, quasi-pastoral haven that his romance with Maslova commences, a romance described by Tolstoy as the "innocent" love "between an innocent young man and a similarly innocent young girl” (32:45). The two connect when Nekhliudov is quite literally embraced by nature "in a narrow ditch overgrown with nettles” (Tolstoy 32:45). The natural world punctuates every moment of these early encounters between the characters as they accidentally kiss and Maslova

\begin{footnote}{50}Murav takes note of the plight of infants in the novel and argues that \textit{Resurrection} is a “motherless utopia” where Tolstoy replaces the birth-model with the ‘resurrection’ of ancestors advocated by Nikolai Fedorov. See Murav 41-42.
\end{footnote}

\begin{footnote}{51}In fact, these two different versions of the same events also clash stylistically, as Maslova’s story is told in curt, almost-telegraphic sentences, while Nekhliudov’s flashbacks are much more elaborate and literary.
\end{footnote}
wipes her face on a white lilac from a nearby bush. The birth and marriage model do not enter these scenes, but, even so, Tolstoy’s artistic descriptions prevent these moments of innocence from being tarnished. These moments are short-lived, but they are pure; this is Tolstoy the realist at his best.

Yet the familiar is constantly encroached upon by the unfamiliar as this simplicity and peace are surrounded from all sides by narratives of death and decay. Maslova’s story preemptively desecrates the benevolence and innocence conjured in the reminiscences. Moreover, since the plot moves from innocence to seduction and prostitution, this same countryside also emerges as a site of ‘original sin’. Even more disturbingly, the novel drastically transitions from the flashbacks to depictions of the corpse of a merchant Maslova is accused of killing. While forced to witness the nauseatingly detailed autopsy report on the merchant’s various bodily organs, Nekhliudov mentally conflates this body with his own treatment of Maslova. “Katiusha’s life,” thinks Nekhliudov, “and the pus that seeped out of the [merchant’s] nostrils, and the eyes coming out of their sockets, and his act with her, all were, it seemed to him, objects that belonged to one and the same category and he was surrounded from all sides and swallowed by these objects” (Tolstoy 32:69). The appearance of natural beauty alongside the filth of the prison, or of the beautiful estate of Nekhliudov’s memory alongside the place of Maslova’s degradation, and, in general, the presence of a world familiar to readers of Tolstoy alongside a darker incarnation of that world, all have the markings of the grotesque. Tolstoy has thrust small parts of a familiar reality in the midst of a darker one; mixed the natural with the unnatural.
The opening depictions of nature and the innocent world of the estate fill the reader with the sensation of a déjà-vu stopped midstream. One initially approaches these scenes in full recognition, but after a few moments of observation, it is impossible to shake the sickening sensation that what felt like a familiar world was only a short-lived mirage of sorts, and that the familiar countryside or natural setting has given way to something else, something entirely unrecognizable. The reader of Resurrection who has been forced into the suffocating reality of the prison breathes easy when reading the flashback scenes, for they read like Tolstoy’s earlier narratives; they are predictable and familiar. But the author does not seem to permit this comfort for long. He jerks us away from the familiar by shoving the vomit-inducing body of the merchant in front of our eyes, just as he thrust us into the prison shortly after indulging in the glories of the spring.

And the grotesque, after all, is in the eye of the beholder. As Kayser puts it, “the grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception” (181). Though one would not want to define the grotesque solely on the basis of the effect it can produce, Kayser argues that it would be impossible to dispense with the effect of works we call grotesque, even as we attempt to define them stylistically (181). Judging by the abrupt turns of narrative in Resurrection, one cannot help but wonder if Tolstoy especially designed this novel to have such an effect on the reader. Orwin, who considers the various incarnations of Nekhliudov in Tolstoy’s œuvre, argues that in Resurrection there is a “partnership of reader and writer,” whereby the remarkably vivid details at various parts of the book are designed to concretely situate the reader in those realities, allowing the reader to “put himself in Nekhliudov’s place” (“Riddle” 483) and experience the prison realities for himself. Though the experience is didactic, and Orwin affirms that the reader is “only an
apprentice” in the “partnership” with Tolstoy, the graphic depictions in the novel do a lot more than simply transmit Tolstoy’s approved messages. Once the author has reached out to the reader, creating a narrative that is supposed to affect him or her, then the qualities of the effect are unpredictable and outside the author’s control. One cannot depend on the reader’s response alone for a definition of the grotesque in Resurrection, but this effect is another way in which we come across the grotesque in this novel.

3. The Objectified Subject

If the presence of the grotesque at least halfway depends on its effects, then in Resurrection there is nothing more grotesque to the reader’s eye than the body. The unnaturalness of the social edifice as a whole has repercussions on multiple levels: it impairs not only infants, but also full-grown adults. If we transition into small-scale manifestations of the grotesque in Resurrection, we can observe that the human body has turned into a preferred site for the grotesque. From the merchant’s dead body, to Maslova’s “exorbitant body” (Murav, “Maslova’s Exorbitant Body” 35), to the bodies of various prisoners depicted in close details, to the bodies of the Korchagins, to the whole social body, Resurrection stands out as a novel where individuals are depicted (and treated) first and foremost as bodies. Tolstoy’s career-long preoccupation with depictions of the physical side of reality, and the body in particular, has been noted, and has prompted scholars like Dmitrii Merezhkovsky to call him a “seer of the flesh” (тайновидец плоти). But even against this background, Resurrection stands out as a novel fixated on the body and physicality.

In Bakhtin’s understanding, the grotesque lowers the subject to the level of body. Often, the grotesque body is also physically unappealing: “ugly, monstrous, hideous from
the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics…” (Rabelais 25). This body is constantly overcoming its physical boundaries through apertures such as "the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (Bakhtin, Rabelais 26). From this perspective, the corpse of the merchant that spills out from every orifice, breaching boundaries between the inside and the outside, functions as a focal point for the grotesque in Resurrection. As John Bayley puts it, the body of the merchant “poisons the air of the whole novel” (258). This grotesque body, seemingly invading the world of the novel by reaching outwardly, is painstakingly described down to its smallest anatomical details. Rendered piecemeal as a medical artifact – an assortment of pus, enlarged organs, and rotting skin – the merchant’s corpse almost cannot add up to an actual, whole human being. The merchant is objectified and not even given a proper human name. But, the exhaustive descriptions of this nameless, grotesque body, this it, are not accidental; nor do they function as extraneous realistic detail. By way of the merchant whose identity is reduced to a pound of flesh, Tolstoy anatomizes the societal malaises of despiritualization and dehumanization. The body of the merchant thus functions as a metonymic reflection of the wider loss of spiritual identity in the novel – a loss first signaled by Katiusha’s transformation into the prostitute Liubka.

Maslova is shown in a state of living death as a prostitute, utterly devoid of spirituality and burying herself in alcohol and cigarettes. “This woman is dead” (мертвая женщина), thinks Nekhliudov to himself when he first sees Maslova at the jail (Tolstoy 32:149). Of course, the reader knows that Tolstoy does not literally kill Maslova; the woman Nekhliudov qualifies as ‘dead’ is, medically speaking, alive and well. But her life is such that she has been stripped of all spirituality and reduced to a body. This
‘materialization’ begins when her love affair with Nekhliudov is first consummated. Throughout the seduction scene at the country estate, Nekhlidov approaches Maslova as a body, rather than as an integrated person with an inner world. Nekhlidov hears Maslova’s words, which express resistance and beseech him to stop the act, but he ignores the words and gives preference to her body language. He hears her say: “How can you? Your aunts will hear,” but feels that her “whole being cried, ‘I am yours’” (Tolstoy 32:62). As Tolstoy notes, “it [is] only this [body language] that Nekhlidov underst[ands]”; while Maslova’s words reject his advances, he believes that her body welcomes them (32:62).

It is this initial treatment and perception of Maslova as nothing more than a body that leads her into the downward spiral toward prostitution. In fact, when Maslova first gets her yellow card, which signifies that she is legally sanctioned to practice prostitution, she agrees to register formally as a prostitute because, as Tolstoy mentions: “Maslova imagined herself in bright yellow silk trimmed with black velvet – décollete – and she could not resist so she handed over her identity papers” (32:10). The image that Maslova constructs is an exclusively physical one. She sees herself as a beautiful body in a seductive dress. It is for the sake of this physical self-image that she hands over her identity papers and, indirectly, her spiritual identity, for a yellow card. Like the Golovlev women, Annin’ka and Liubin’ka, Maslova is damaged at the estate in her youth and ends up renouncing her spirituality for a life of physical objectification as a prostitute.

The degree to which Maslova is ‘dead’ while still alive is perhaps best illustrated by comparing her to past Russian heroines. As early as “Poor Liza,” suicide provides tidy closure in many Russian stories of amorous affairs gone astray. Two immediate
literary forerunners, with close intertextual ties to *Resurrection* – Turgenev’s “A Quiet Spot,” which is mentioned in *Resurrection* as Maslova’s favorite work, and Tolstoy’s own *Anna Karenina* – both end with the death of their heroines and both give us one last glimpse of their corpses. “A Quiet Spot” shows Maria Pavlovna wearing a white dress, while “a sorrowful puzzlement” [скорбное недоумение] seems to have set in her post-mortem face, as her lips seem to be trying to “spea[k] and ask something or another” (Turgenev, *Polnoe* 4:445).52 The girl is incapable of speech, but her body still radiates some of the spirituality that had previously animated it, seemingly retaining traces of her last sorrowful thoughts. This moment resembles Vronsky’s reminiscences about Anna’s corpse after her suicide in *Anna Karenina*. Vronsky recalls how Anna’s body, “still filled with recent life” is sprawled on a table in a shed. Though the woman herself is long gone, Vronsky discerns vestiges of her spirit in the “heavy plaits and hair curling at the temples thrown back in her still intact head, and on the lovely face with its half-open rosy mouth was fixed a strange expression, pitiful on the lips and terrible in the eyes that had been left unclosed.” While looking at her, Vronsky feels as though they are still connected and she is still “pronouncing that same terrible expression – that he would be sorry – which she had said to him when they were fighting” (Tolstoy 19:362).

In light of such literary precedents, the moment in *Resurrection* when Maslova also considers suicide as an escape becomes especially poignant. “A train will come,” she thinks to herself, “I’ll throw myself under and all will be over” (Tolstoy 32:131). Eventually, however, Nekhliudov’s baby moves inside her and Maslova gives up the idea. But this same moment is also when she renounces God and embraces drinking and

52 References pertain to volume 4, of the 30-volume collection of Turgenev’s work *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii.*
smoking as a way to overcome her grief; this same moment is when she begins the path that will eventually lead to prostitution. And the choice of prostitution over death, of liquor and cigarettes over emotional anguish, can be equated to a choice of materialism over spirituality, of body over spirit.

In both “A Quiet Spot” and Anna Karenina, though the bodies of the dead heroines are disturbing in their own way, these heroines still retain traces of their individual spirituality, even in death. Such depictions of the dead as still retaining traces of spirituality are much more common in Tolstoy’s earlier works than that of the terrifying dead merchant. As Andreas Schönle argues, the mother’s body in Childhood “sets the terms of [Tolstoy’s] treatment of death in many subsequent pieces”; beginning with that first body, Tolstoy often shows the corpses still bearing traces of life, thus implying an overlap between life and death (39). Though her body is smashed by the train, Anna Karenina’s head remains intact and she retains her individual personality. Turgenev’s Maria Pavlovna similarly evinces spirituality despite having been recovered from a pond where she drowned herself. Yet in Resurrection, though Tolstoy does not put his heroine under a train as he did Anna Karenina, before her spiritual ‘resurrection’, Maslova is even less spiritual than the corpse of Anna Karenina. In this deformation of the heroine, we find a reflection of grotesque degradation; to echo Bakhtin: “all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract,” is lowered “to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body” (Rabelais 19). Maslova goes from being a reader of Russian literature and a spiritually pure soul to an intoxicated, sexualized body.

When Nekhliudov mentally conflates his past with Maslova with the merchant’s body, Tolstoy signals the depletion of spirituality in Maslova. The association of the
dead body with the sexualized body of the prostitute certainly fits ideologically and sends us back to the Kreutzer Sonata where sex arguably kills women; by this token, in Resurrection Tolstoy conflates Maslova and the dead body to suggest that even though she is not actually killed, the repeated sexual violations have buried her soul so deep into the subconscious that she may well be dead – a thing-like body not so different from the oozing object that is the merchant’s corpse.

But Maslova in her position as prostitute is not the only character in the novel with a lost spiritual identity. This physical degradation and loss of spiritual identity are not limited to the sexually defiled body of the prostitute, but are rather systemic phenomena in Resurrection. Respected members of the gentry like Nekhliudov’s acquaintances, the Korchagins, are similarly depicted as devoid of spirituality and are reduced to grotesque bodies. The Korchagins belong to the same circles as the Rostovs from War and Peace or the Shcherbatskiis from Anna Karenina and take part in some of the same social activities, but are emptied of their essence and stand as grotesque doubles to these earlier characters.

When visiting the Korchagins for dinner the evening following Maslova’s trial, Nekhliudov is confronted with an alien and grotesque side of them. Tolstoy directly hints at the unusual nature of Nekhliudov’s perception during this dinner. “At that moment,” writes Tolstoy about Nekhliudov, “strange images [стрыные образы] [rose] in his imagination for some unaccountable reason” (32:97). These strange images take the shape of various body parts that are singled out and force their way into Nekhliudov’s field of vision. The false teeth and lidless eyes of old Korchagin, his red face and smacking lips, stick out to Nekhliudov. Instead of seeing a man, we see body parts
extracted from the whole of him; in Tolstoy’s description, old Korchagin is a collection of unappealing appendages menacingly protruding outwards. These images and many others in the scene recall Bakhtin’s arguments about the grotesque as a style of unwieldy body parts that disrupt smooth, shapely imagery.

Aside from the appalling Korchagin, his wife, daughter, and their guests are similarly repulsive to the eye. Missy, whom Nekhliudov has considered marrying, is shown with wrinkles on her ageing face, sharp elbows and fluffed hair sticking out. Her even more decrepit, paralyzed mother, trying to look younger than her age, is so physically unappealing that she is rightfully terrified of being seen in the light of the sun or without her expensive silk outerwear. Looking at her as if for the first time, Nekhliudov is so disgusted and appalled that he has to stop imagining what her shoulders look like under the multiple layers of expensive fabric. “[H]e [Nekhliudov] imagined them [Sophia Vasilevna’s shoulders] in their natural state,” writes Tolstoy, “but this image was too hideous that he tried to banish it from his mind” (32:99). Nekhliudov also sees the friend of the family Kolossov, whom he also imagines without the protective, form-giving layers of clothing, only as “a stomach like a melon, a balding skinny, and whip-like arms” (Tolstoy 32:97). Like Sophia Vasilevna’s shoulders, the protruding belly takes on grotesque qualities.

The ugliness of this world becomes apparent in Tolstoy’s depiction of Filip, Sophia Vasilevna’s footman. Filip is the only one in the Korchagin household not described as a grotesque being. Tolstoy describes him as “muscular, broad-chested, and handsome,” with “strong legs and well-developed calves.” The footman is so handsome that he is even equated with “an artist’s model” (натурщиком) in Nekhliudov’s mind.
In this sense, he serves as a point of reference for the reader, an example of natural beauty and strength in contrast to the Korchagins and their friends. If there ever was a classical ideal, Filip is that person, yet the world he inhabits is so unnatural and paradoxical that he must follow every whim of the paralyzed, frail Korchagina. “The strong, handsome Filip at once concealed his impatience, and went on doing what the feeble, emaciated, artificial creature commanded of him,” writes Tolstoy as Filip closes the curtains in response to Korchagina’s commands (32:99). The emphasis here is on the unnatural foundations of a world in which a weaker, paralyzed, and unattractive being like Korchagina can give orders to Filip who is naturally superior to her. It is this unnaturalness that delineates the larger grotesqueness of the scene.

4. Automated Bodies

The loss of identity at both high and low levels of society is symptomatic of socially endorsed processes of dehumanization; processes which are directed at those at society’s mercy, but that can unexpectedly reflect back on the privileged or on those who are in charge or indifferent. The prison is the center of the alien, estranged world of Resurrection, but instead of being an isolated, peripheral phenomenon, it has a spider-like reach; directly or indirectly, virtually everyone on the outside participates in or validates its abominations. Tolstoy sets up an intricate “labyrinth of linkages” to map out these connections. Characters with direct ties to the prison are prisoners like Maslova and Simonson, jailers, lawyers, judges and everyone with an official role in that superstructure. Nekhliudov also has ties to the prison, both because of the initial seduction, but also because he participates in Maslova’s unjust sentencing. Everyone
who is a member of the jury at Maslova’s trial is connected to the prison as well. So is everyone who has ever had to serve as juror. By its very nature, a participatory legal system certifies that this last group is large and indiscriminate. Family links implicate even more people: Mariette is joined to the system by way of her husband, just like Nekhliudov’s aunt. Individuals who have no connections to the prison, but who permit such injustices to be perpetuated by virtue of their indifference, like the Korchagins, are also indirectly tied to the institution. An individual like Missy’s father, old Korchagin, who was gratuitously cruel during his tenure in the military, is doubly connected to the prison, because his own inherent cruelty fits with the general mentality that inspires the institution.

All these people, irrespective of whether they have ever set foot in a prison, are shown to be guilty towards their fellow men. “There is a thing called government service,” writes Tolstoy, “which allows men to treat other men like they were things [вещи]” (32:352). He elaborates on this notion at various points in the book by suggesting that in dealing with prisoners, those in power act as though prisoners were not fellow human beings but inanimate objects. A revolutionary that Nekhliudov meets during his visit to St. Petersburg corroborates these arguments, by describing her first arrest as precisely a dehumanizing experience. “I realized,” she states, “that I was no longer a human being, but had become a thing [вещь]” (Tolstoy 32:294). The extent to which prisoners are objectified and deprived of their humanity becomes most apparent while Tolstoy describes their procession on the way to Siberia. Dressed alike, walking in line, the prisoners look like a giant machine making its way through the city. Tolstoy describes this procession in detail, highlighting its dehumanizing nature:
The procession was so long that the men in the front were out of sight by the time luggage carts and feeble-bodied prisoners were on the move. [...] It had become very hot. There was no wind, and the dust raised by thousands of feet constantly stood over the prisoners, as they moved to the center of the road. They were walking with a quick step, and the slow-trotting horse of Nekhludov’s cab could barely catch up to them. Row after row walked unknown, strange and fearful creatures dressed alike, thousands of feet shod alike, all in step, swinging their arms as if to keep up spirits. There were so many of them, they all looked so alike and their circumstances were so extraordinarily odd, that to Nekhludov they no longer seemed like men, but peculiar and dreadful creatures of some sort [особенные, страшные существа]. (Tolstoy 32:330)

The description of the marching prisoners, by way of Nekhludov’s gaze, as “strange fearful creatures” or as “peculiar and dreadful creatures of some sort,” indicates that due to their social status, these men and women are no longer viewed as human subjects, but have morphed – at least in the eyes of society – into something strange and unnatural, a grotesque, multi-headed body. The strangeness of these moments aligns with the “strange images” that come into Nekhludov’s mind at the Korchagins. Yet in this case, despite how others might see the prisoners, Nekhludov is able to recognize individual faces and humanity in the dehumanized procession in front of him.

The procession of prisoners, marching forward as one, gives the impression that these individuals are blindly following orders with no will of their own. The prisoners have been turned into empty vessels for societal mandates, which guide their automatized march forward. The image of prisoners set into motion by an overwhelming social force has strong grotesque overtones. When discussing the grotesque in the work of a realist author like Charles Dickens, Kayser writes that, unlike Lewis Carroll whose Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland “immediately remove[s] us to [his] fantastic realm,” Dickens “appears to lead his readers through the familiar everyday world” (122). Yet, as he adds, the Dickensian world is filled with “mechanical” characters “always unwinding and on
the move.’” “The energy they expend in the course of their activities,” writes Kayser, “is not part of their personality but points to an impersonal force which drives them” (123).

An impersonal, societal force is precisely what drives prisoners in Resurrection. Turned into automatons by the system, the prisoners have been robbed of personal identities, made to wear uniforms, have had half of their heads shaven, and have been sent on a journey that, for many of them, will end in death. Persons with a will of their own would not so obediently undertake a death-bound exodus.

The prisoners are not soulless beings; it is their situation that is soulless and grotesque. In fact, the political prisoners are the only individuals in the novel largely immune to Tolstoy’s poetics of the grotesque.53 Though there are negative characters among the political prisoners as well – such as Novodvorov, who is only looking for self-aggrandizement – these individuals fall outside the purview of the grotesque. When depicting political prisoners, Tolstoy dwells primarily on eyes, large sad eyes looking through peepholes in solitary cells. And, as Bakhtin points out, the eye is not very relevant to the grotesque, unless it is somehow deformed (as in the case of the murdered merchant, whose eyes are coming out of their sockets). By virtue of their emotional investment in the cause, political prisoners have managed to preserve their spiritual identities. Even when they die, these individuals die beautiful, dignified deaths.

Kryltsov, who dies of tuberculosis – a disease often associated with spirituality (Murav, “Maslova’s Exorbitant Body” 43) – looks calm and “terribly beautiful” as a corpse (Tolstoy 32:439); he is neither deformed nor dehumanized. Nekhliudov even recognizes

53 I qualify this statement because Kondratiev, who is always studying Marx’s Das Kapital and who slavishly obeys Novodvorov, is not so different from people on the outside devoid of a personal code of ethics.
in the corpse spiritual traces of the person who had been as his friend. “This was Kryltsov,” thinks Nekhliudov, “or, at least whatever trace was left of his material existence” (Tolstoy 32:439).

But if prisoners have been turned into automatons by those in power, this process of dehumanization and automatization is a vicious cycle in Resurrection. This institutionalized dehumanization evident in the prison is not an isolated, peripheral phenomenon. Instead the prison is at the center of the alien, estranged world and has a spider-like reach. Directly or indirectly, virtually everyone on the outside participates in or validates its abominations; by that same token, many on the outside are just as dehumanized as the prisoners. As Tolstoy shows, the rich and mighty have themselves lost their basic humanity and wander about like grotesque soulless bodies driven by impersonal forces. Once the aesthetic gaze is fixed on the prison, that unnatural grotesque institution into which we are ushered at the very beginning of the narrative, the familiar spaces and people of Russian literature (and of Tolstoy’s past novels) cannot be seen in the same light due to their complicity in that system. Even those who participate in the transformation of human beings into marionettes of a merciless social machine simply through their silence – often good and moral human beings like Kryltsov – are themselves shown as soulless marionettes. In fact, if the soulful prisoners are forced to abandon their free will and spirituality because they are part of the penal machinery, members of society are shown as inherently soulless.

The Korchagins are not only grotesque in their physical appearance, but also in behavior. When they converse about various cultural events, Nekhliudov cannot help noticing that they do so simply out of habit, without personal investment. “Nekhliudov
saw,” writes Tolstoy about a conversation between Korchagina and Kolossov, “[…] that neither of them cared about the play or about one another other, and that if they talked, it was only to satisfy the physical necessity to exercise the muscles of the throat and tongue after eating” (32:95). This image of individuals speaking or acting without strong interest or personal opinion reverberates throughout the novel. In particular, the law is a tremendous impersonal force that gives rise to such moments. Those involved in legal processes do not think about the special circumstances of each individual case, but blindly apply legal principles. Even Nekhliudov’s friend Selenin, who had a personal sense of right and wrong in his youth, has abandoned individual morality for the principles of the law, applying these principles to every circumstance, and allowing his own opinions and actions to be exclusively guided by them.

Other novels by Tolstoy also show individuals doing things that they have no sincere impetus to do. Yet in Resurrection, it is not simply dishonesty or some form of latent narcissism that drives characters, nor are believers in the law’s powers merely a few soulless pedants. Countless individuals in the novel renounce their personalities and personal morality by deferring to impersonal forces like the law. Some even subjugate their personal opinions to more ridiculous and more arbitrary forces. For instance, the third juror in the opening of the novel counts steps and mechanically decides life questions based on the results of these counting processes.

Yet the most grotesque, automated, and soulless being in the novel is Toporov, Chief Procurator of the Most Holy Synod. As Hugh Mclean points out, this character is “an obvious caricature” of the arch-conservative Chief Prosecutor Konstantin Pobedonostsev, who was a major advisor to Alexander III (107). During a visit to
Toporov in order to appeal the case of the sectarians, Nekhliudov notes that this man “in the depths of his soul […] really believed in nothing” (Tolstoy 32:297). An underlying nihilism is obvious in the “[p]ale, immobile mask [неподвижная маска]” plastered on his face (Tolstoy 32:298). When Toporov surprisingly decides to help the sectarians by personally settling the affair, Nekhliudov describes a grotesque body at work, moving about automatically to accomplish a task in which he has no sincere investment.

“Nekhliudov continued to stand,” writes Tolstoy, “looking down on the narrow bald skull, at the hand with thick blue veins swiftly moving the pen, and wondered why this man, who was obviously indifferent to everything, was doing what he was doing, and why he has doing it with such care. What for?” (32:299). Nekhliudov cannot discern the reason why this grotesque body with its narrow bald skull is moving so swiftly, but we know that it is to preserve face for his institution; there is no personal principle of righteousness behind his actions.

The depiction of one of the main guardians of spirituality in Russian society as a soulless automaton fits with Tolstoy’s general treatment of Orthodoxy as a religion that has inverted Christ’s thought. In a scene that has become notorious for precipitating Tolstoy’s 1901 excommunication by the Holy Synod, the author depicts the Eucharist through a defamiliarized gaze. Tolstoy shows the priest blessing the bread and wine and then praying afterwards, because “he had eaten a small piece of God’s flesh and swallowed a sip of His blood [кусочек тела Бога и выпил глоток Его крови]” (32:135). Following the priest, the children in the prison congregation also take communion. Tolstoy shows the priest “wiping the children’s mouths,” and then, “sing[ing] a song about the children eating God’s flesh and drinking His blood” (32:136). Scholars have
understood these descriptions as highly satirical (McLean 101), but the effect they produce is also grotesque and fits with other grotesque manifestations in Resurrection. Kayser cites the German poet Christian Morgenstern, who provocatively asserts that: “God’s material form is grotesque” (205). The discussions of communion as “eating God’s flesh” or the images of innocent children “eating God’s flesh” are disturbing because they de-spiritualize the process, removing its mystery, while reducing the theological ritual into a physical exchange. The moment compares to the placement of butter on the communion bread in The Golovlevs and, at least implicitly, conjures the flesh consumption that the postmodernist Sorokin actually literalizes in Roman.

Tolstoy’s literalist, defamiliarized understanding of the Eucharist toys with the basic idea behind this rite in Orthodoxy. It is indeed the case that Orthodoxy holds a more literal understanding of this rite as a genuine rather than a symbolic transformation. Yet there is a definite mystery and a greater layer of theological sophistication surrounding this rite, regardless of how literally it might be understood. For instance, as Sergei Bulgakov writes in his The Holy Grail and the Eucharist, “The body of Christ, being manifested in the bread and wine, does not cease being a spiritual body, abiding above this world. And in becoming Christ’s body and blood […] the bread and wine do not lose their being in this world […] Their transmutation is not a physical but a metaphysical transmutation; it transcends this world” (110). Bulgakov insists that the bread and wine become “immediately, as such” Christ’s body, but do so without any “physico-chemical” process (110). This understanding of the Eucharist as a transformation without any actual transformation and of the body and blood of God as a metaphysical rather than a physical presence is what Tolstoy ignores by depicting the
process literally. Instead of seeing the process as a recognizable ritual, as a type of transfiguration that elevates the wine and bread into something holy and spiritual, Tolstoy focuses on the physical side of the rite – the bread and wine – and the fact that there is eating and drinking involved. By exclusively focusing on these physical acts, he concludes that the church understands God as an anthropomorphized, physical being with flesh and blood. To echo Morgenstern, the implication of the semi-cannibalistic rite Tolstoy recreates that God has flesh and blood, or worse still, that his flesh and blood are edible, indeed provokes a grotesque effect. But then, this is precisely Tolstoy’s aim, which is why this scene is the linchpin of the grotesque in Resurrection. Not only are characters degraded and reduced to mere bodies, but also the mystery of their deity is degraded into flesh and blood.

5. The Defamiliarized World

Tolstoy’s defamiliarization of a familiar but sacred rite like the Eucharist, which transforms this habitual practice into a grotesque performance, is one illustration of a dual narrative vision we encounter in Resurrection. On the one hand, there is the reality we understand, made up of familiar social practices and routine behaviors: urbanization, communion, trial by jury, and many similar practices. On the other hand, there is the sense of reality generated by Tolstoyan defamiliarization, which provides an estranged look at these practices, showing them as unnatural and grotesque. The text accommodates both perspectives, providing both a palpable, nameable reality and also the implied grotesque underneath it all. It is precisely through this pervasive double vision that Tolstoy, who scorned the supernatural and the fantastic, constructs a full-blown grotesque in Resurrection.
Since it was written by a realist like Tolstoy, one cannot expect *Resurrection* to function like a traditional grotesque text. But though Tolstoy has not made any leaps into the supernatural, he still manages to turn the familiar into something alien. The way he does so, the aesthetic vehicle by which the world of *Resurrection* turns into a grotesque realm of automatized beings, is none other than Tolstoy’s favored device of “defamiliarization.” Tolstoy’s use of defamiliarization in the novel’s opening to characterize the entire social structure hints at the heightened significance of the device. Scholars have remarked on the presence of “defamiliarization” in this novel. When explicating the applications of the device in Tolstoy, Shklovsky argues that in *Resurrection* it assists depictions (through the naïve eyes of Nekhliudov) of the legal and penal systems (Shklovsky 9; McLean 103). Yet Tolstoy’s use of the device has also evolved significantly since its previous uses.

George Steiner argues that in a famous scene like that with Natasha at the opera in *War and Peace*, the unnaturalness of the opera triggers the heroine’s dislocation from real nature and her faulty interpretation of distorted imagery on stage as natural (118). This scene is also one of the most pronounced instances of defamiliarization in Tolstoy. But if Natasha’s unnatural reality is bordered by the stage and thus contained within the bounds of the opera experience, in *Resurrection*, the sense of estrangement and unnaturalness has stretched to cover the entire world; the unnaturalness of the stage has morphed into the unnaturalness of a whole society where virtually everyone’s behavior is as unnatural as Natasha’s at the opera. Defamiliarization has turned from device into a major mode of narration. In discussions of the device, Shklovsky argues that it functions both as a moral and representational tool; Tolstoy used defamiliarization to reveal the
problematic nature of “things he scorned,” while also facilitating the rediscovery of habitual, day-to-day reality (Shklovsky 9). In Resurrection these processes overlap as simple depictions frequently turn into condemnations. Tolstoy views the entire social superstructure as fundamentally flawed and systematically exposes those flaws through defamiliarization.

Many grotesque elements in Resurrection, as well as the sense that we have entered an estranged world, are produced through this device. Tolstoy’s narrator presents the unnatural project of urbanization as if seen for the first time; Nekhliudov looks at the Korchagins and the Toporovs of the world with naïve eyes, while the body of the merchant is described in an unusually anatomical, defamiliarizing way. There is nothing outside the realm of three-dimensional physics in Resurrection, but Tolstoy’s defamiliarized gaze at this world provides a sort of double vision of this reality: one viewpoint shows the familiar, while the other defamiliarizes it. If in War and Peace defamiliarization was contained to a few isolated appearances, its constant use in Resurrection makes for a consistent narrative that exposes the underlying grotesque in everything; this other narrative shadows Tolstoy’s realism, as verisimilitude gives life to grotesque apparitions.

By its very nature, defamiliarization is designed to provide new and unconventional views of phenomena that are too familiar to be properly observed. In his well-known essay “Art as Device,” Viktor Shklovsky argues that “automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war” (5). So in order to regain perception of the world, “in order to make a stone, feel stony, man has been given the tool of art” (Shklovsky 6). In Tolstoy’s earlier works, defamiliarization
provided refreshing views of life by teaching us to see things anew. Yet once its role is expanded, the defamiliarized mode not only helps the author expose manifestations of grotesqueness, but, through its unprejudiced gaze, it extends the scope of the grotesque by essentially inverting the positive and negative poles of reality.

I have been considering the unnatural and automatized characteristics of the world of *Resurrection*, and both these features are symptoms of a larger inversion. The kind of world that results from having an automatized, soulless being like Toporov in charge of its spiritual affairs is an absurd one, where all values are inverted – what Bakhtin calls the world of the “inside out (à l’envers).” Through defamiliarization and its unmasking logic Tolstoy tracks down immorality by means of its arbitrary illogic. (In this case unnaturalness and illogicality belong to the same category and both imply aberration and inversion.) What is presented as legal and just in society is actually thoroughly unjust, while justice and equanimity exist in prison cells where political prisoners are held, which are socially designated as places of injustice and crime. Such examples of paradoxical inversions abound in the novel and define every social space. The prison where fellow human beings are locked up under the false premise of social reformation, the court where the guilty stand in judgment of others who are no more guilty than they are, the countryside where peasant children die of hunger because their livelihood (the land) is controlled by landlords, high society where people act according to convention and have no will of their own – Tolstoy’s depictions of these places and people unveils the elemental paradoxes of the entire social edifice, its immorality, but also its illogicality, which is inscrutably masked as logic.
After Tolstoy lays out the various layers of the grotesque in *Resurrection* on both a social and an individual level, the protagonist and, indirectly, the narrative itself eventually move away from this reality. At the end of the novel, Nekhliudov is left a pilgrim on the open road: someone who has seen the grotesquery of his world and who chooses to abandon it. He thus fulfills the fantasy of his earlier literary incarnation in Tolstoy’s first (and failed) attempt at writing a didactic novel – “A Landowner’s Morning.” At the end of “A Landowner’s Morning,” Nekhliudov becomes enthused thinking about the travels of a peasant boy and begins to wonder why he himself cannot travel the world rather than be bound to his estate. Nekhliudov finally gets his wish in *Resurrection* where he unburdens himself of his patrimony at the end of part two and “experiences the joy of the traveler [путешественника] who discovers a new, unknown and beautiful world” (Tolstoy 32:361).

Initially, the political prisoners provide a way toward this new and beautiful world, and Nekhliudov leaves his society so that he can be a co-traveler with the parade of unfortunate souls headed to Siberia. At the time, this decision seems like the right one, especially as at a certain point Nekhliudov remembers Thoreau’s famous dictum that during slavery in America “the only proper place for the honest citizen […] was the prison” (Tolstoy 32:304). Yet even though Nekhliudov temporarily joins the revolutionaries and admires them for their sincerity, he, like the novel’s author, is also

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54 For the evolution of Nekhliudov from “A Landowner’s Morning” to *Resurrection* and the reasons for why he is significant to Tolstoy as a character see Donna Orwin’s article “The Riddle of Prince Nekhljudov.”
skeptical of their ideas. The fierce desire for change among the revolutionaries takes
the form of a destructive impulse; Kryltsov, whom Nekhliudov befriends, seeks the
“destruction of the established order of things [нарушение ... порядка вещей]” that
made possible the death of his comrades (Tolstoy 32:378). He would like to “go up on a
balloon” and effectively annihilate everyone below as if they were bedbugs (Tolstoy
32:409). And despite the grotesqueness, despite the depiction of society as a rotten,
soulless collective, Tolstoy has not gone this far in his critique. He might dehumanize
those he disagrees with in fiction, he might respect the revolutionaries for their
unflagging faith but surely the great pacifist Tolstoy could not accept dehumanization of
the type Kryltsov proposes; he could not see fellow humans as bedbugs: to him they were
children of God.

Nekhliudov’s and Tolstoy’s own response to the political problems of his era was
much more subjective than this. When speaking about Romanticism in his Introductory
Lectures on Aesthetics, Hegel suggests that the romantics withdrew into subjectivity and
their art found its true spiritual content in the freedom of their inner worlds. As Hegel
argues, external reality for the romantics was “left at the mercy of freaks of imagination,
whose caprice (could) throw the shapes of the outer world into chance medley, or distort
them into grotesqueness” (emphasis mine 87-88). The grotesque, as he defines it in this
case, results from the mind’s discontent with and attempt to escape empirical reality. The
revolutionaries, with their concrete historical agendas, are, despite their spirituality,
philosophically tied to the old world – all their goals, however destructionist, are aimed at

55 For a discussion of Tolstoy’s attitudes toward the revolutionaries of his time, see Inessa
Medzhibovskaya’s article: “Tolstoy’s Response to Terror and Political Violence,” Kritika
2008.
that same grotesque world. Whether they burn the world or save it, these people are bound to history. Nekhliudov, and implicitly Tolstoy, engages in the purely subjectivist escape that Hegel writes about. Tolstoy’s exposure of the social grotesque through Nekhliudov’s eyes acknowledges social problems; the author rages against society, but ultimately, when this degraded and purely physical world is exposed, Nekhliudov cuts ties with it. In the end, by separating himself from the revolutionaries, Nekhliudov fully and uncompromisingly chooses the spirit over the body. He does not project outwardly to physically alter a debased world; he searches inwardly into subjectivity for a way to morally navigate that world. This journey inward is the right one, because our own subjectivity, our spirit, is also the presence of the divine in Tolstoy’s religious philosophy. By reaching inwardly for the spirit of God within man, or “awareness” (разумение), Nekhliudov discovers a philosophy of love for all mankind, and it is by way of this socially autonomous philosophy that he plans to live his life.

We are not told what Nekhliudov does with his newfound sense of purpose. But the fact that Tolstoy refuses to give physical outlines and a concrete representation to Nekhliudov’s spiritual resolution fits with the novel’s grotesque poetics. The biblical quotations at the end of the novel almost seem like place-holders for the spiritual unexplored. In a novel where characters simply act automatically without feeling, it is the spiritual side of existence that is rightfully cherished. What matters to Tolstoy is not so much what Nekhliudov does as how he does it, what feeling motivates his actions.

56 For a discussion of Tolstoy’s notion of “awareness” and his reinterpretation of individual birth as partially divine see my article “Authoring Jesus: Novelistic Echoes in Tolstoy’s Harmonization and Translation of the Four Gospels.”
Nekhliudov is left out in the big road, the traveler of a socially autonomous spiritual landscape, armed with the belief that love of others is the only destination.
**Conclusion**

The studies of grotesque realism I have presented touch on a cultural or rather countercultural impulse in Russia. Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, late Tolstoy, and even the postmodern Sorokin present a rather unflattering vision of Russia that ultimately has a sobering effect. Whether depicting a countryside fire, the disintegration of the family, the underbelly of the tsarist prison, or violent carnage, these works hit at the core of Russia’s darkest places or cultural memories. If, as Robert Helbling has argued, the grotesque encompasses within itself the “power of negative thinking,” then both Sorokin and the late Russian realists embraced negative thinking and directed it at their country. The late realists were writing at a time when the gentry way of life was collapsing and revolutionaries sought to hasten that collapse. They witnessed the dying of the old order without any mourning. While some writers may have felt nostalgia for the eroding gentry way of life, Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Tolstoy, burst literary myths about the Russian countryside and refused to idealize a dying institution. Years later, Sorokin would similarly burst the returning myth of the Russian countryside in *Roman*. In their reactions, Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Tolstoy, and Sorokin represent a vein of Russian cultural thought that resists any and all idealizations or nostalgic longings for an idyllic life within the confines of the Russian countryside.

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Nostalgia for past times conceived as purer and more idyllic has been a perpetually repeated impulse in Russian culture. In the nineteenth-century, this impulse can be traced back to the Slavophile movement. The nostalgia of Slavophiles was directed at pre-Petrine Russia, which they believed superior to Western values and
cultural mores forcefully introduced by Peter the Great. Their example is one manifestation of the impulse in Russian culture and literature to look back at the past and view it as superior to the present. Russian nostalgia for the past has taken a number of forms. Two categories used by Svetlana Boym are helpful when describing Russian nostalgic responses to the past. Boym categorizes nostalgia as “restorative” and “reflective.” Restorative nostalgia “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gap” by means of a “total reconstruction of monuments” or “perfect snapshot[s]” from the past (Boym 41, 45). “Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude” (Boym 49). In Russian culture we encounter nostalgia in both these forms as part of a larger cultural preoccupation with the past. Whether attempting to recreate the past, or simply mourning its passing, Russian writers and thinkers have focused a great deal of energy on it and sometimes more so than on the present and the future.

This impulse to look backwards rather than forwards has produced a number of counter-reactions in Russian literature. In response to the post-Soviet obsession with tsarist Russia rather than contemporary chaos, Sorokin embraces the negative power of the grotesque in Roman and unleashed a violent grotesque on a space that had captured the Russian national imagination: traditional life in the countryside in nineteenth-century Russia. Sorokin debunks cultural fantasies about the past both through the pastoral space he recreates and through the grotesque violence Roman carries out. In his ironical recreation of the nineteenth-century Russian countryside as an idyll out of touch with reality, Sorokin hints at the misguided nature of “restorative nostalgia,” the way in which it leads the nation into a simulated, unreal conception of the world tied to the past. At the
end of the novel, Sorokin dismantles that space of nostalgia by having Roman plunge his axe into every last person in it. In so doing, he reveals that for every nostalgic longing for a purer and simpler past there is a parallel impulse to leave the past buried.

Similar nineteenth-century impulses to regard the past with nostalgia would provoke comparable reactions in the late Russian realists. In addition to the Slavophiles whose nostalgia was projected at a very distant past, Russian realist writers also displayed significant nostalgia for the traditional life within the bounds of the gentry estate. When Sergei Aksakov wrote his *Family Chronicle*, although he did not embrace the Slavophile ideals of his son (Konstantin Aksakov), his tone was similarly defined by nostalgia for the harmony of simpler, more wholesome times. Aksakov’s nostalgia was one manifestation of a pervasive social impulse. The return of Sorokin’s Roman to an idyllic countryside he has bitterly missed has its roots in nineteenth-century Russian literature and the contrasts constructed in this tradition between the urban and the rural. The countryside was always depicted as purer, while distance from it often evoked nostalgic longings in realist protagonists. For instance, in Goncharov’s *Oblomov* (1859), the sketch titled “Oblomov’s Dream” (1849) is tinged with nostalgia (though also with irony) for the idyllic days at Oblomovka. At the end of *Oblomov*, the protagonist virtually restores the idyllic reality of Oblomovka in his urban apartment where Agafia constantly feeds him traditional Russian food.

When the traditional way of life on the Russian country estate began to come apart after the emancipation of the serfs, the impulse of cultural nostalgia could be felt even more strongly in Russian literature. In Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, which depicts events from 1859 but was published in 1862 right after the emancipation, pre-
emancipation times on the gentry estate are rendered as idyllic. When Nikolai Kirsanov remembers his time with his wife during the 1840s, we are told that he and his wife “lived together extremely happily and calmly, hardly ever apart, reading together, playing duets on the piano and singing songs: she was fond of planting flowers and looking after the poultry, he occasionally went hunting and looked after the management of the estate” (Turgenev, Essential Turgenev 569).

In later years, as the way of life on the country estate was coming to its natural end, Chekhov’s Cherry Orchard (1904), despite its ironic undertones, nonetheless communicates a sense of mourning for the death of the old world. However, Chekhov’s nostalgia is of a different nature than Aksakov’s. In Cherry Orchard, Chekhov does not attempt to reconstruct the past. His conception of it is fragmentary and despite the sadness provoked by the destruction of the orchard, it is clear that the passing of time is unstoppable and the decay unavoidable. Bunin similarly reacted to the death of the past by conveying a profound sense of loss. Works such as “Dry Valley” (1912) or the Life of Arsenev (written during the 1920s) are rich in nostalgia. Looking at Bunin’s Sukhodol, it becomes clear that the countryside from the Russian past has vanished and all we can do is mourn its loss; there is no restoration to be had.

In the context of this consistent impulse of nostalgia in Russian culture, works like Dostoevsky’s Demons, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s The Golovlevs, Tolstoy’s Resurrection, and Sorokin’s Roman may be seen to embody an impulse that is the antithesis of nostalgia. They respond to earlier traditional forms by recreating parts of them and of the traditional way of life they represented, but for these writers the past is not something that
evokes nostalgic longing. Rather, the past narratives they restore become the root of their grotesque realism.

Like Sorokin in Roman, Dostoevsky begins Demons with a vision of stability and restraint with strong Turgenevian features but ultimately unravels this earlier paradigm as the novel succumbs to grotesque disorder with a very sinister feel. Saltykov-Shchedrin uses the very parameters of “landowner” realism as it appeared in Sergei Aksakov’s Family Chronicle – with emphasis on the landowner, rural stability, and food rituals – to give life to a grotesque family deprived of spirituality that inhabits a tomb-like estate. When decades later Tolstoy published Resurrection, he virtually “unwrote” (Weir) the earlier reality of “landowner literature.” The world that Tolstoy depicts was one where grotesque beings reigned and threatened the innocent with their corruption.

Tracing the evolution of the grotesque in these three nineteenth-century works, we note that instead of participating in the cultural impulses of nostalgia, they foreground the disintegration of the past, which becomes more pervasive with each work. Like Sorokin, who was responding to post-Soviet “restorative nostalgia” through a restoration of his own designed to undermine collective nostalgia, Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Tolstoy restored past narratives and past realities. They did not do so in order to commune with the past, but rather to map out its demise.

As we move from Dostoevsky to Saltykov-Shchedrin, the gentry way of life from the 1850s and 1860s is depicted as progressively more dissipated. In Dostoevsky’s Demons Russia is the sick man poisoned by revolutionaries who are to blame for the chaos and destruction that unfold. As grotesque chaos takes over the action in the novel, it is clear that the old forms of “landowner literature” have no place in the vision of
contemporary disintegration Dostoevsky presents. Traditional forms emerge as too limited in their aesthetic vision and are easily overwhelmed by the grotesque carnival. In fact, Stavrogin’s suicide at the end of Demons distinctly signals the death of the aristocratic hero and implicitly of his world. Yet Stavrogin’s death does not evoke nostalgia for what has been lost; it merely demonstrates that the loss may be permanent.

Saltykov-Shchedrin’s treatment of the past in the mid- to late-1870s is even more irreverent and anti-nostalgic. Saltykov-Shchedrin recreated many elements of Aksakov’s Family Chronicle, but the Saltykov-Shchedrinian ‘restoration’, far from being nostalgic, simply destroys any positive overtones formerly associated with this earlier space. In The Golovlevs, the traditional gentry way of life is recreated as rotten from the inside. Whereas Dostoevsky’s provincial reality was upended by the chaos unleashed by Pyotr Verkhovensky, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s world is stagnant and dying from the novel’s beginning. The poison of the Golovlevs is inherent to them rather than caused by an outside force. Representatives of the traditional gentry family are also depicted as much more damaged in Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel than in Dostoevsky’s Demons. Despite being flawed, Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin, is much more human than any of the Golovlev siblings. The Golovlevs are reduced to soulless grotesque bodies, while Stavrogin retains his humanity despite his failures. It is only the revolutionary Pyotr, the root of the grotesque in Demons, who is a grotesque body. The zombified Golovlevs, however, are as if dead from birth. Their very marrow has been poisoned, and that poison is passed down the generations until the family line is extinguished.

As we move to Resurrection in the 1890s, the degradation of the status quo has reached such a degree that very few spaces and people are left unpolluted by the
grotesque. Tolstoy populates his novel with grotesque beings much like the Golovlevs. With their protruding body parts, the gentry personages in the novel are depicted as automatized and deprived of spirituality. While Tolstoy’s characters do not sit around picking their noses and eating all day, they are still reduced to grotesque bodies. They may be more outwardly sophisticated than the Golovlevs, but while Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel presents the self-contained microcosm of the small-fry gentry, Tolstoy’s Resurrection captures the grotesquity of foremost members of Russian society. When Toporov, the supposed guardian of spirituality in the empire, emerges as a grotesque being, what hope can there be for the system? The grotesque that defines the elite suggests that the world of Resurrection is being led by soulless beings who objectify others and cause them great suffering. In contrast, the revolutionaries, who were blamed for Russia’s grotesque chaos in Dostoevsky’s Demons, appear to be innocent and spiritual in Resurrection. They are locked up in the empire’s jails or sent into hiding as the gentry turn the world into a theater of the grotesque. Dostoevsky’s ‘demons’ become persons with strong convictions in Resurrection; they are no longer held responsible for what has happened to the reality described in the novel.

During the 1870s, both Dostoevsky and Saltykov-Shchedrin looked at the failing gentry way of life without so much as a pang of nostalgia or a sense of loss. In Resurrection, however, the distance between realities of the past and the gentry society of the present is so great and the present grotesque so overwhelming that the few existing mentions of that lost world evoke momentary nostalgia. Even though Tolstoy was unambiguous about the failures of gentry society, when Nekhliudov visits the countryside or when he remembers his past with Maslova, his memories are rich in “reflective
nostalgia.” When confronted with the grotesque reality of the present, Nekhliudov knows that those moments from the past are far away. Tolstoy shows Nekhliudov mourning the loss of that early innocence possessed by both him and Maslova, but does not indulge the sentiment for very long. Instead, the fleeting moments of nostalgia in the narrative may serve as evidence for the degree to which the grotesque resists nostalgia. What differentiates Tolstoy’s grotesque realism from earlier works is the author’s ability to move in and out of nostalgia, to toy with it as he shifts the narrative gaze from the picturesque countryside to images of the merchant’s rotting corpse in one swift movement.

Dostoevsky’s Demons, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s The Golovlevs, Tolstoy’s Resurrection, and finally also Sorokin’s Roman deflate the privileged role assigned to the countryside in the cultural imagination. Instead of mourning the demise of past realities, writers unveiled the underlying grotesquery of what was previously idealized. Unlike writers in the 1850s and 1860s who had contributed to a myth of the countryside that made any talk of revolution seem completely out of place, Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Tolstoy chipped away at cultural myths and left the countryside exposed to revolutionary attacks in both act and deed. These writers did not join the revolutionary movement, but their perspective on Russian reality was not so different from that of the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries referred to the status quo as a “corpse” (Pisarev), while late realists captured the corpse-like status of reality by revealing it as despiritualized and grotesque. Their response to social and political instability was much like Sorokin’s response to it in post-Soviet Russia. As revolutionaries began trying to
destroy an already decaying status quo, realist writers did not encourage direct violence, but they stood watching and never intervened literally to protect the status quo.
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