



*Boris Lanin*

## **Imagination and carnival in Russian utopia and anti-utopia**

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The utopia always claims to be global, whereas the anti-utopia claims to be categorical. The anti-utopia serves as the basis for a bold look into the future, a kind of provocative prognosis. It is of interest in that it examines both an external reality fashioned in a particular way, and apparently traditional human standards of behavior. Yet they are both linked in that both the utopia and the anti-utopia reject the present. But what do they propose in its place?

The utopia plans future development with a 'plus' sign (that is, it seemingly suggests a recipe for progress), whereas the anti-utopia warns against the possible negative course of history and against the negative, destructive tendencies in contemporary society. The task of the anti-utopia is to bring out the absurdity of the negative features of human life today.

Examples of the carnival that appear in the anti-utopia are scenes of drinking and feasting. Such scenes are prominent in such works as Vasilii Aksenov's *Ostrov Krym* ('The Island of Crimea', 1981), Voinovich's *Moskva 2042* ('Moscow 2042', 1986) and Vladimir Makanin's *Laz* ('The Escape Hatch', 1991), creating a characteristic atmosphere of feasting in the time of plague. The alcohol-fuelled parting with a former life is also a tradition of Menippean satire.

Opposed to the essentially life-affirming carnival is the deadening pseudo-carnival. The pseudo-carnival is designed for permanence, or at least longevity, whereas the carnival is a temporary and fleeting event. The carnival is meant to offer an alternative to the everyday, where ordinary people for a short time acquire the same rights as the ruling elite. It is a festival which makes the humdrum reality of life easier to bear. The occupation of the higher position by the lower echelons removes the tension inherent in coping with a difficult everyday life, and helps people for a while to forget their fear. The carnival cannot be constant, for a festival must have its end.

This, however, is only the superficial feature of the carnival. More important is the freeing up of time. A festival allows an individual to fulfill temporarily a particular social role, and also allows him to be his own master of time. He no longer works for another, he can order his time as he pleases. Only in the course of the carnival does the individual achieve equality, and acquire the right to free choice and freely organize his own life. The carnival allows renewal and regeneration.

The pseudo-carnival, though, is very different. It is designed to exist for ever, for the end of the pseudo-carnival would signify the end of the authoritarian regime that has created and regimented it. In a literary work the most important thing that



can ensure the continuation of the anti-utopia is fear. Fear transforms itself into sado-masochism, on which this dystopian society is based internally. Externally it consists of what Sergei Eizenshtein would call a 'montage of attractions', whereby the attractions are the generic rituals of execution and the meting out of 'justice', designed as a form of public entertainment.

Alexander Zinoviev uses the Menippean satire to bring out the carnival elements, in particular those of debasement and blasphemy. Zinoviev, like Iuz Aleshkovskii, makes free use of words not considered part of the literary lexicon, especially those to do with parts of the body and debased erotic descriptions bordering on pornography.

Two of Zinoviev's titles, 'Gorbachevism', 1988, and 'Katastroika: Legends and Reality of Gorbachevism, 1990, stand out because they address questions of particular interest not only to the troubled Soviet Union of the Gorbachev period but also to a Western world that was transfixed by the events unfolding in Zz's homeland.

Gorbachevism appeared at a time when the West was enchanted by the personality of the first Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev. Zz explains Gorbachev's popularity as a universal "fraud" and "self-deception", "but his historical role he describes aphoristically: "Gorbachev's intentions are Stalinist, but his resources are Brezhnevian."

Katastroika, whose title is a combination of catastrophe and perestroika, is as brilliantly written as Zinoviev's best works, though it is more grotesque. New motifs appear; for example, the author recalls with nostalgia the epoch officially called "developed socialism": "the standard of living was raised to a level one could not even dream of in the pre- and post-war years. A separate apartment for a single

family became the norm. Every family had a television and a refrigerator. Many provided themselves with motorcycles and automobiles; they built dachas (country homes). They began to dress better... Thus they would have continued to live until now, if only they had not been planning perestroika in Moscow."

Zinoviev's 'sociological novels in symphonic form' also have at their heart a grandiose, vivid image which contains the main motifs of Gorbachev's perestroika, an image which is emblematic of the times: "The city represented a gigantic, pink and vibrantly healthy Arse. It bore shiny golden letters that spelled out the fundamental slogan of Suslism, now the State ideology of Marxism: "Arse is first, head is second".<sup>1</sup> This recurring image is evidence enough of the carnival nature of Zinoviev's work.

In the anti-utopia the protagonist invariably feels himself in a difficult, ironic and potentially tragic relationship with society and its established rituals. His personal, intimate life is sometimes the only way for him to express his own 'I'. Therefore, many anti-utopias contain a significant erotic element, where the protagonist's sexual life is accorded perhaps excessive attention, with a proliferation of graphic sex scenes. The body here arouses the spirit, the lower bodily stratum struggles with the soul, trying to wake it from its lethargy. There is therefore an obvious link of such scenes with the Menippean combination of what Bakhtin defines as 'heterogenous and incompatible elements': 'philosophical dialogue, adventure and fantasticality, slum naturalism, utopia, and so forth'.<sup>2</sup>

Carnival in its original form has long died out. Banned in Europe in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it reappears in the twentieth in the form of the repressive pseudo-carnival, during the period of the



collapse of megacollectives and the tragic cataclysms surrounding totalitarian regimes. The modern menippea thrives on the interplay of narrative masks and styles, on in-depth psychological analysis and, of course, on the legacy of the whole of literary history.

Thus, Menippean traditions in the anti-utopia are manifest in the following themes, motifs and structural qualities:

1) a combination of adventure fantasy and complex philosophy with scabrousness and the laughter of the street;

2) the development of the forbidden lower bodily stratum: the faecal motif, the celebration of explicit carnality, and the widespread use of foul and abusive language;

3) the inclusion of certain genres embedded in the text: philosophical and sociological tracts, anecdotes and the use of a Brechtian chorus, similar to the chorus of Greek drama, which relates events from the point of view of the simple man.

In some cases the anti-utopia is structured like a traditional Russian doll, with several layers that reveal themselves as the reader peels them away in his mind. The levels turn out to be different narratives, whereby one story tells about another narrative, and the text becomes a story about a different text. This is characteristic of Zinoviev's *Ziiaiushchie vysoty* ('The Yawning Heights', 1976), Voinovich's *Moskva 2042* ('Moscow 2042', 1986) and Alexander Kabakov's 'Nevozvrashchenets' ('The Deserter', 1988) and 'Sochinitel' ('The Composer', 1990-1). This narrative structure allows for a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the author of the 'internal manuscript', who is, generally speaking, one of the main protagonists (if not the main one) of the work itself as a generic whole.

In this genre if a person writes, he is not to be trusted, for what he writes is

usually to be forbidden, and, from the point of view of the government, highly undesirable, an Orwellian 'thoughtcrime'. His manuscript creates another reality, for better or worse, structured on different laws than those which govern the society of which the author of the manuscript is a member. Moreover, the act of writing elevates the author of the manuscript above the other characters, because it is above all a manifestation of his subconscious, and the subconscious of his society.

It is hardly fortuitous that the dystopian narrator is often a characteristic and fairly 'typical' member of the current anti-utopian generation. The key moment in his psychological development is his realization that his own philosophical concepts of the world do not tally with the dogma of the 'single true' ideology of his society. This is the beginning of his revolt.

The anti-utopia strives to escape from the everyday world of the present, and instead it creates its own reality, with its own laws and conventions. It cannot exist outside of time and space. The space of the utopia is illustrative here. It opens out like a children's picture book, it is like a walk through a garden in paradise, where at every step there is a new genus of plant life to examine and enjoy.

It is significant, therefore, that the anti-utopia gives new names, with new meanings, to phenomena, objects and processes that we would recognize as part of the 'real' world. Political authority claims to be a divine power, with demiurgic functions, and so the world is renamed, the chaos of yesterday is transformed into the bright utopia of the future. The new order presupposes new names, and he who has the right to bestow new names is equivalent to a God.

The protagonist's manuscript is a written denunciation of society as a whole.



It is written, of course, as the protagonist's sole outlet of self-expression, but its overall aim is to warn and inform the reader about the possible evolution of contemporary social organization.

Generically, the anti-utopia can offer much flexibility. Anatolii Gladilin's 'The French Soviet Socialist Republic', 1985, for instance, contains elements of the detective novel. It begins as a detective story, with an outwardly charming 'superman' anti-hero telling how he met his Waterloo as a spy when he helped establish the Soviet socialist system in France. The first part of the story is the unseen struggle between intelligence agencies in Paris and the pulling of secret political levers.

The narrator employs much self-irony, and this irony makes him bigger, more interesting and more attractive than the other characters. Politics is transformed from 'the art of the possible' into the art of 'big numbers', where characters' lives are but parts of these 'big numbers'. Only a few have their lives recounted as an 'embedded hagiography', similar to Orwell's Comrade Ogilvy in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who never actually existed, but 'who had recently died in battle, in heroic circumstances'<sup>3</sup>).

The reader understands that Gladilin the author is gently mocking his protagonist. Boris Borisovich has established Soviet power in France, and now as the boss of a provincial steamship company watches on TV as French workers queue for fresh cabbage almost 'like people back home'. He has been sent into an honorable exile by a whim of fate, regardless of his past services to the Soviet state, but he has at least understood a banal, but for him precious truth. At the end of the anti-utopia he explains to a French communist currently serving a sentence in a Soviet labour camp that serving a totalitarian regime is not the path to happiness.<sup>4</sup>

The fate of the protagonist in Voinovich's novel *Moskva 2042* is modeled on that of the author himself. He also embodies traits common to other authors of anti-utopias in the 1970s and 1980s: forcibly deported, and officially unrecognized in their homeland even though they were published widely before their fall from grace. Aksenov, Zinoviev and Eduard Topol' all share these characteristics. Voinovich is ironic towards official concepts of fame, with their carefully orchestrated ovations, applause and national hero-worship, and where there is irony, not far away is parody. Edith Clowes comments:

Voinovich makes fun of the rather simpleminded mass consumer of science fiction by poking fun to such generic conventions as time travel (which is no different from any other airplane flight), space travel (the only strange phenomenon Kartsev encounters is his old KGB friend Leshka Bukashev, who has been put into orbit around the earth for being too outspoken and controversial in his role as Genialissimus), and the full-fledged communist utopia of the future (which repeats and reinforces all the bad aspects of the Soviet experience).<sup>5</sup>

The frequent parodies in the novel are obvious. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, his political views and way of life in emigration are lampooned in the figure of Sim Simych Karnavalov. The 'rubble' he writes is a dim reminder of the 'knots' (*uzly*) of Solzhenitsyn's own epic series of novels 'The Red Wheel', 1971-91, and the collection of articles 'From Under the Rubble' that Solzhenitsyn helped to edit and publish in Paris in 1974. Instead of the Genialissimus, as Stalin was called during the War, we have the Genialisimus.

Voinovich also parodies hitherto sanctified values. His hero Vitalii Kartsev travels sixty years into the future to find that the bright future is proclaimed in the truly



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Communist city of Moskorep, an acronym of the Russian form of 'Muscovite Order of the Lenin Red Flag Communist Republic', and that the ruling party is now called the Communist Party of State Security (KPGB). The KPGB declares that one of its founders is none other than Jesus Christ.

The genre of the anti-utopia has provided many opportunities for the parody of things held in high esteem. Voinovich is particularly fond of parodying Church rituals and personalities, cross-referring them with Communism. Thus, in Moskorep there exists the ritual of 'starring' (analogous to Christening), with the use of the verb *perezvezdit'sia* ('to star oneself', as opposed to 'cross oneself').

Other comic parodies include the figure of Father Zvezdonii ('Starman'), the main hierarch of the Communist Church, a major-general of the religious service. The Communist Reformed Church, with their aim to 'educate Commune dwellers in the spirit of Communism and ardent love for the Genialissimus', is established by Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of State Security and Decree of the Supreme Pentagon in Moskorep. The Church has become joined to the State with the condition that it rejects faith in God, and just like other confessions, the Communist Reformed Church has its own pantheon of saints: Saint Karl, Saint Friedrich, Saint Vladimir, heroes of all the revolutions and wars, heroes of labor. It also has its own righteous men: those who fulfill their industrial tasks observe good working discipline, obey the management and display vigilance and irreconcilability with alien ideologies.

Voinovich's novel exists on the border of empirical reality, where characters come alive and demand the author change their destiny. Similarly, marshal Berii Il'ich persuades Kartsev to remove Sim Simych from his novel – once he is airbrushed out

of a novel, he can be airbrushed out of life (a clear reference to actual Soviet practice). This and other slapstick devices (word play, cross-dressing and poking fun at literary conventions and expectations) is, however, ultimately tragic.

In all of these places and spaces the unifying factor is the complex of ideas that is formulated as slogans and mottos, capable of carrying the masses along. This is an ideology which claims to be 'popular' by pretending to come from within the masses themselves. Thus, authority tries to claim legitimacy, since it represents the whole of the population, even though it has gained power through brutal and unceremonious means. The individual's private life is the alternative ideology.

The intimate life of the hero is not only important for the anti-utopia in itself. It is also a particular measure of humanism, a basis for looking boldly into the future, and a kind of provocative prognosis. It is both a consequence of and a challenge to the regimentation of reality, and as an untraditional view of what would otherwise be taken to be the unalterable truths of our life.

It has usually been the case that utopians concern themselves with the 'big' issues of social organization. But they have also recognized that the future of personal relationships is also important. Will the family exist at all? Will people have the right to choose freely their own partner? How will the family be organized? And sex education? What will be the role of the woman? All these questions are discussed in the utopia in detail. But if the utopia maps out the future and is generally positive towards these questions, the anti-utopia warns against the negative course of history and the destructive tendencies in society. The anti-utopia reduces the existing negative features of human life to the point of absurdity.



The anti-utopia has reflected and analyzed the collapse of family relationships in the twentieth century. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the state has taken upon itself the task of being all things to all men. It has assumed much more than the individual can allow himself. There is a clear line dividing man and society, and it is possible that it passes through the family. Where the state encroaches on the family, there can be no healthy, fulfilling sovereignty of the individual.

Secondly, occasionally the anti-utopia contains a description of the individual's struggle for his own salvation, his own existence. In both instances it is the family that becomes the only real source of support for the individual and his relative independence from destructive social tendencies.

In the 1980s and early 1990s the Russian anti-utopia was filled with a foreboding of collapse. Some writers saw this as a personal tragedy, others as the destruction of the 'evil empire', the 'prison of nations', the 'empire of the Kremlin' and so on. The collapse of huge state structures in any case had immense psychological implications for the population, for it was not just about redrawing state boundaries and the 'perestroika' of socio-political and economic relations. Above all writers noted here the tragedy of the individual.

Anatolii Kurchatkin's 'Notes of an Extremist', written in 1988 but published in 1990, combines several features common to the anti-utopia: the theme of driving history onwards and the struggle of the top and bottom of society (the fundamental spatial conflict of the anti-utopia); the relationship of political power and the individual; allusions to the modern day in a historically specific country.

The novella is set amongst a group of dissidents living underground, who play

through the main moments of the history of the Soviet Union, including terror and show trials. Elena Gessen writes:

The analogies can be read quite plainly. The Brotherhood is, of course, the Party, and it is also not difficult to identify the real-life prototypes of its members: the Philosopher is a sufficiently contrived figure, whereas in the Dean we can see Lenin, in the Seer – Trotskii ('how he could speak, what strength, what power emanated from his words!'), the Magister – Bukharin. Stalin is also there as the Sturdy Man. The novella's plot is a pretty clear replication of the history of the Party: after the death of the Dean power is surreptitiously and simply usurped by the Sturdy Man, the aged Seer begs to be allowed up on to the earth's surface (read: into emigration), and the Magister who accompanies him is allegedly captured while trying to escape and brought to trial.

The voice of the people, with considerable urging by the Sturdy man's underlings, sentences him to the electric chair, and the Sturdy Man gives the task of switching on the current to the Philosopher (the principle handed down in our history of collective guilt).<sup>6</sup>

We know that from the first few pages the Seer wishes to build an underground subway in the city. The subway can be seen as the path to the utopia, a symbol of prosperity and happiness, the bright underground future. The subway is everything at once: the romance of youth, family happiness, the pride of parents in their children, and the future, for which people are prepared to live, suffer and work. But the price to be paid is too much, and here Kurchatkin can be seen to be taking a leaf out of the Strugatskiis' book in his protest against those who would like to give history a push forward.

The Seer suggests that his people go underground and break off links with the

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outside world. They are building for the people, but without the people, for the city, but without the city. Once underground, the utopian dream begins to drift away as, in trying to realize it, people become distanced from human civilization. When the Seer decides to leave his underground existence and go to the surface, he is joined by the Magister. This serves as the pretext for the Sturdy Man's seizure of power, who sees that the Brotherhood's enthusiasm for the construction of the subway has waned, and surmises that repression will be the most effective form of incentive for life underground. It is obvious that the Sturdy Man owes something of his existence to his anti-utopian precursors, such as Orwell's Big Brother, and Zamiatin's Benefactor.

Each period in Russia gives rise to a work of literature that unexpectedly expresses the essence of the time. In the nineteenth century the novels of Ivan Turgenev did this, and at the end of the 1980s Alexander Kabakov's *Nevozvrashchenets* performed the same function. Kabakov's novella is filled with the presentiment of Civil War in Russia. The protagonist is Iurii Il'ich, who also writes prose, but prose about the future. His perspicacity is such that he and his manuscript soon become the subject of attention of the secret police.

Two of their agents, Sergei Ivanovich and Igor' Vasil'evich, make a suggestion: Iurii Il'ich must inform the secret police about events in the 'extrapolated' reality. Iurii Il'ich travels into the future and sees there what is to come: famine, financial collapse, the breakdown of law and order and the rule of violence, the disintegration of the country and, finally, the coming to power of a military dictatorship. In this environment Iurii Il'ich has to be constantly on guard in order to survive, there is a threat to his life around every corner.

Iurii Il'ich is faced with a moral choice. The reality he creates in his manuscript is that of the future. He can try to change the future by remaining in the past and abandoning his literary talent. In 'the future' he has a conversation with Nikolai Lazhe (Nikolai Mikhailovich Lazhechnikov) which crystallizes the choice he has to make: remain in the present, despite all the dangers, and share Russia's destiny, or go to the future and remain there, even though it is dangerous and blood-stained. Iurii Il'ich decides to remain in the future, uncertain and potentially lethal though it is.

The early 1990s was typified by works similar to Vladimir Makanin's 'A Hole'. Life in Russia here is life on the surface, a world of darkness where the mob rule, a mob ready to crush all those who do not conform. The early 1990s were a time when people thought that things could not get any worse, but Makanin shows that they can, and he looks down into the abyss.

Streetlighting is smashed, houses are abandoned, and violence is committed on every corner. There are no forces to prevent it, or even frighten away those responsible. Fear governs everything. Transport hardly runs, and there is little to eat. There is no one to bury the dead, and a child's cry attracts burglars (there must be nobody at home). People dig themselves into the earth to escape, and the protagonist Kliucharev is lucky, as he digs and finds an escape hatch.

Makanin has written a novel that is set in the near future, but which addresses the contemporary concerns of the early 1990s. Then, too, it was feared that society would collapse, that it was the end of all things, and, in a peculiarly Russian apocalyptic scenario, that civilization would come to an end.

Kliucharev has to find the eye of a needle that the proverbial camel can pass





through, and he goes through it carrying the burden of his past sins and torments. Underground his soul, previously bereft of any hope, revives. Above ground remains the land of shadows, the dark kingdom of Hades, but underground is the land of gentle light, celebrations, medicines, street lights, even discussions among the intelligentsia about what is 'sublime'.

We can decipher this quite easily. The land underground is the land outside of Russia, the 'abroad' that Russians are perennially both attracted to and repelled by. The 'escape hatch' is the window on to foreign lands (an echo of Peter the Great's 'Window on Europe', as he envisaged the construction of St Petersburg). This window is open both ways: Kliucharev can enter through it and stay, or he can go back through it and above ground.

Kliucharev returns to the surface for the sake of his wife, although he no longer loves her, and his disabled child (a symbol of the degeneration of life above ground; a comparison with Tarkovskii's 1978 film *Stalker* would be apposite). He always returns to the surface, even though each return is more difficult than the last, and the escape hatch gets smaller for him each time. When he returns each time he is like a rich man, weighed down with the goodies he has brought with him, the ray of hope in his soul for a better life not quite dimmed.

Kliucharev is a literal embodiment of Dostoevskii's nineteenth century anti-hero who pens the 'notes from underground'. But Dostoevskii's man of reflection has been transformed into the twentieth century Russian man of poverty, a man of few material possessions but for whom these possessions are important. His possessions are no use to him underground, and a burden for him above ground. The escape route to the other side may be nearby, but it brings Kliucharev scant real reward.

Not long after the publication of Makanin's novella the newspaper *Nezavisimaia gazeta* published a double-sided review by the literary critics Alexander Genis and Peter Vail'. Genis's half of the review was entitled 'Agoraphobia', and Vail' named his half 'Claustrophobia'. Thus, the death of the Russian intelligentsia is viewed as a descent into the gulf of claustrophobia in flight from agoraphobia. Vail' sees the protagonist Kliucharev as 'a classical man in the middle, a mediator straight from mythology'.<sup>7</sup> The novella's arrangement of vertical space is also based on mythology, with the upwards-downwards movement reminiscent of the journeys of the Gods to earth and back again. The 'escape hatch' thereby becomes a kind of 'tree of life' which brings cultural items to a primitive society, such as light (batteries for the torch), fire (a paraffin stove) and the instruments of work (a spade). To Vail', Kliucharev can be ranked alongside Prometheus as a cultural hero.

Vail' goes on to say that in the novella there is, in fact, no nether world, but rather that it is an illusion of Kliucharev's own making, and his escape hatch brings him to the half-forgotten, half-destroyed hypostasis of the intelligentsia. And this world is doomed. The world is one, but it is divided into 'here' and 'there'. The only hope is to escape from the barbaric mass of the 'here' into the nostalgic, subconscious world over 'there'. The anti-utopia shows us how the absurdity of our life turns into hope that is equally absurd.

Can there be an escape from the utopia without blood? Here we go beyond discussion of the socialist utopia and the accompanying pauperization of its people. Authors look at the reaction of people to catastrophe, how they cope with their disenchantment. Literary anti-utopias make their own prognoses for the future, and



formulate their own answers to the questions they pose.

One of the first mysteries that arises when one reads the detective anti-utopias is how Gorbachev managed to leave office in one piece. Neither Eduard Topol', nor Alexander Kabakov, nor Vladimir Voinovich expected his departure from power to be so peaceful and, relatively speaking, painless. In their works the theme of violence, and the premonition of an imminent coup, stand out in stark relief. Topol' even managed to forecast the August 1991 attempted coup to the exact day.

The writers of these anti-utopias suppose that the people will rebel against the violence of the authorities. In Topol''s *Zavtra v Rossii* ('Tomorrow in Russia', 1986-8) the people's anger is roused when a little girl standing in a queue is killed. The workers, grown thin on whale meat, take this event as the starting point for their tank assault on the National Communist citadel.

*Zavtra v Rossii* is not a brilliant work of literature. Its style is journalistic and impersonal, not memorable so much for its imagery but rather for its occasional witticisms. A few years ago it would not have been mentioned in studies of literary works, but, after Orwell and then Kabakov, it would be wrong to dismiss Eduard Topol'.

Topol's is perhaps better known in the West for detective novels such as *Dangerous Games* and *Red Square*. They were co-written in the 1980s with Fridrikh Neznanski and were sensationalist, violent and sexy, but they had a ring of authenticity in their recreation of late Soviet reality. In *Zavtra v Rossii* Topol' (without Neznanski) describes how the Russian political process is irrevocably corrupt. The Russian democrats win the election, but power is placed in the hands of the 'Patriots of Russia', who then go on to occupy all the significant posts in the Party hierarchy. At a Party

Congress the General Secretary, with the tell-tale name of Goriachev, is shot at by a Congress delegate. He survives, but is eventually replaced and put under house arrest – although he retains the title of President.

This is in the Kremlin. In the provinces the Soviet proletariat goes on hunger strike in one of the Defence Ministry factories, and then seize the tanks that the factory produces. The Siberian town of Novocherkassk becomes the site of a twentieth century Pugachev rebellion.<sup>8</sup> Written in 1986-88, Topol''s novel is accurate in its posing of the problem: at what cost will the Party give up power? Topol''s own reply is: extremely high.

The novel ends in apocalypse. The country is in chaos, and even the President's private bodyguard has fled. President Goriachev in the Kremlin is subjected to nuclear attack by his enemies as the world looks on in horror. When some sort of order is restored, the American president issues an order for the arrest of Goriachev's successors Mitrokhin and Strizh.

Topol''s novel is obviously written as a pot-boiler with an eye to the paperback market, and works well on those premises. But it also serves as a warning about the possible course of Russian history which, if Topol's is to be believed, is impossible to change or avert.

Viacheslav P'etsukh, a historian by training, is the author of *Rommat* ('Romantic Materialism', 1990), a treatise on Russian history which offers an interpretation different from that of dialectical or historical materialism. 'Romantic materialism' is, according to the note: 'when the artist seemingly places himself above the fact to suggest his own concept, his own interpretation of the truth. Basing himself, of course, on Russian historical experience, in particular the



palace coups of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

At the very beginning of his novella P'etsukh advises us that 'historical truths are not understood, they are created'. This thesis allows him to put first not fact then concept, but, on the contrary, to use his over-arching concept to illuminate the fact. This is a device beloved of many Soviet historians.

P'etsukh's narrator plays an active part in the narrative, and is distinguished by a penchant for speaking in vivid paradoxes: 'from the point of view of man, what they call living history is a chain of events and changes which especially graphically illustrate the fact that nothing fundamentally changes and nothing essentially happens'. What is especially true of Russia is that 'its movement has always resembled more Brownian movement than forward movement, or that which is called progress' (p. 3).

At least outwardly, the author denies the possibility of chance in history. He develops his ideas over a whole page, where he compares chance in nature with chance in society:

What happens cannot help but happen, it is unequivocally conditioned by inevitability, that is a sum of conditions which reduces to a common denominator everything that works by chance or design and which does not allegedly work for the history of transmutation. (p. 40)

But the denial of chance is simply a manifestation of authorial cunning. The first two parts of the book consist of an amusing and ironic illumination of the facts of Russian history, and only in the third and final part does the author give his fantasy free rein with the tantalising question: what if the Decembrist Revolt had succeeded?<sup>10</sup>

For P'etsukh the Russian people is an irrational force which is always in the

epicenter of historical and literary events, so it is easy for him, a writer, to deal with a people that 'constantly brings forth miracle-workers who are capable of risking their necks for the sake of the most tentative ideals and even for the sake of curtailing their own rights'. Furthermore, this is a people which does not always 'subordinate itself to logic', and so 'it would be imprudent not to lose sight of the moral legacy of the eighteenth century' (p. 44). For the Russian national character, an 'undignified outward life is a normal abnormality' (p. 69).

If the Decembrists had succeeded, according to P'etsukh Russia would have gained a constitutional monarchy. Serfdom would have been abolished, but without any land given to the peasants, and there would have been much discontent and bloodshed in the countryside. It is possible then that a strong ruler ('a home-grown Napoleon') would have emerged to take control, resulting in a restoration of the autocracy but greater social stability:

The First World War, we should assume, would not have ended with the Great October coup, but at the most with broad parliamentary debates; it is possible that in the conditions of social decorum Tolstoi would have been a celebrated military and religious writer. Dostoevskii would have been the founder of the genre of the psychological thriller, and Chekhov would only have been the writer of elegant anecdotes.' (p. 96)

A similar story to P'etsukh's is Sergei Abramov's novella 'A Quiet Angel Flew By', 1994, where the author imagines a German victory in the Second World War. Communism instead takes root in Africa, beginning in South Africa in 1947 and then spreading to neighbouring countries Rhodesia, Mozambique and Namibia (the latter a German colony). This is no accident: South Africa had seen an influx of



immigrants from the former Soviet Union after the German victory.

One of the best writers of the 1990s has been Viktor Pelevin. In his novella 'Omon Ra' (1992) he subverts the myths and archetypes of the Soviet period, such as space and the prestige accorded to fighter pilots. Here, in a bitter parody of the heroic status attached to the legless Soviet pilot Alexei Meres'ev, pilots undergoing specialist training to become cosmonauts have their legs amputated, to make them think and act like the great Meres'ev...

The last work to be discussed in this section is another by P'etsukh, the novella 'Child of the State', 1997, where the future looks suspiciously like the long-forgotten past. The lazy but resourceful Vasia Zlotkin passes himself off as the presumed dead heir to the throne Arkadii, and enlists the help of the Estonian embassy. The Russian secret service is only too pleased to divert its aggressive neighbor's attention from territorial claims in the Baltic region, and sets about equipping a military force to restore 'the rightful heir to the throne':

It was difficult to imagine, but at the Pskov railway station the train of the False Arkadii was met by a large deputation headed by the most senior Pskov governor Rasskazov, the garrison's troops were paraded along the platform and cheered as loudly as their throats would permit, half of the station building was taken up with a huge banner proclaiming 'Welcome to the Legitimate Sovereign!', and pretty young girls from the local operetta troupe greeted Vasilii Zlotkin with the traditional bread and salt on a cupronickel plate, and a silver cigarette case.<sup>11</sup>

When finally the False Pretender seizes power, his utopian dream turns into a veritable anti-utopia:

As ill-luck would have it, despite the unimpeachable assiduity of the reformers, all of Vasilii Zlotkin's efforts somehow fell

away, and even if they did bear fruit somewhere along the way, they seemingly fell up against an invisible wall of resistance as if it were not in the interests of those higher up to implement them. Preliminary censorship had been abolished, but, as if in mockery, some cheap newspapers emerged which offered ugly caricatures of the new sovereign; pavements were cordoned off from the roadways by barbed wire, but it became the norm to walk the streets now with wire cutters. Of the ten young boys sent to Estonia to study accountancy only one returned, and he did not complete his course and came back an alcoholic overcome with home sickness. Vasilii Zlotkin would have fallen into a deep depression, but spin doctors told him that innovations were not necessary here, the vicious circle of life in Russia could not be broken, and that the people need to be ruled with a rod of iron but not allowed to starve.<sup>12</sup>

Other characters constantly reflect on Russia's utopian intentions and tendencies. Captain Pravdiuk notes how Russians are always unhappy with their lot: 'The main thing is they are dissatisfied! With the Tsar, with the Communists, with the liberals! They're only happy with themselves, they say they're a great people, they put the Germans' noses out of joint!'<sup>13</sup>

The novella ends ironically. Vasia Zlotkin is arrested by policemen in his native town of Novorossiisk, suspected of being a smuggler or a terrorist. Despite his protestations of diplomatic immunity, he is taken away with the words of one policeman ringing in his ears: 'If you want, I'll go down to the market and buy some identification to prove that I am Nikolai II'.<sup>14</sup>

The rejection of utopia is one of the major challenges of Russia in its transitional period at the end of the twentieth century.



Both the utopia and the anti-utopia, even though they might lose out on literary merit, demonstrate their claim to be something larger than fictional literature. But the current stage of the development of the anti-utopia is also linked to the changing attitudes towards history. The fear of catastrophe that dominates in the early years of perestroika – the works of Kabakov, Makanin, Kurchatkin, Topol' and others – has given way to irony, in the works of P'etsukh, Pelevin and Sergei Abramov.

But, as is typical for the genre, the conflict arises at the point when the individual refuses to perform his or her prescribed role; totalitarian forms and rituals triumph over individual expressions of will. Since utopia does not recognize individualism and needs to resort to violence to suppress it, in *We*, as in the examples of anti-utopia discussed below, violence is treated as a necessary condition of the utopian future.

*Scenario 1: "Violence as Genocide"*

Before turning to the utopian agenda of the post-Soviet era, it is useful to pause on a curious instance of dissident reflection on the consequences of utopian thinking -- Yulii Daniel's *This is Moscow Speaking* (1960-1961). One of the first post-war Russian anti-utopias, this novella was banned in the Soviet Union, but published abroad in 1962, with the result that its author was eventually arrested and imprisoned for five years. *This is Moscow Speaking* opens with a radio announcement that informs the population of a newly instituted "free murder day," a day on which everyone will have the right to kill whomever they want. The narrator, Anatolii Kartsev, faces a dilemma, as his mistress immediately suggests killing her husband so that they can legitimize their relationship. The decree is announced at a birthday party

whose participants perceive the news as a covert attack on Jews, and Kartsev's subsequent dream recalls the Holocaust. Daniel's novella thus suggests how the Nazi's mass extermination continued to reverberate in the USSR during the post-war anti-Semitic hysteria. In the novella, Kartsev becomes confused over the identity of his tormentors: the soldiers who had fought with Nazi Germany now appear in fascist uniforms, but with red stars on their caps. When offered the chance to take revenge on his enemies, the protagonist declines "the invitation to murder."

The novella depicts the results of "free murder day" throughout the country in a rather optimistic light. The number of murders in Russia, we are told, is relatively low, not more than a thousand, which suggests a lack of interest on the part of the population in participating in state-sanctioned bloodletting. Massacres do happen on the outskirts of the empire, though - between Georgians and Armenians and Armenians and Azerbaijanis, especially in Nagorno-Karabakh, already notorious for its ethnic clashes. In Central Asia "there was no inter-ethnic feuding. Everyone was after Russians."<sup>6</sup> In Ukraine newly established youth detachments receive blacklists as recommended guidelines for action, but the list of marked individuals succeed in hiding. The Baltic republics plainly ignore the decree. Jews are not attacked, we are told, although the danger to them does not disappear. The author's astuteness in matters of Soviet nationalist politics is crowned with an appeal to Jews to resist victimization, as the author's voice becomes recognizable in that of the protagonist: "You must not allow them to torment you to death. It is your responsibility to others to be responsible for your own life."<sup>15</sup> Daniel's approach to the problem of state-sponsored anti-Semitism suggests that individual moral responsibility



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is the only way to resist all-pervasive totalitarian politics. The only way for one to preserve one's integrity is to ignore the authorities' criminal decrees. Daniel's anti-utopian novella thus connects the problem of inter-ethnic relations with utopian thinking, suggesting its connection to "total solutions" like genocide, mass terror, and ethnic cleansing, the flip side of the kind of reactionary utopia outlined by Krasnov.

*Scenario 2: "Dictatorship of the Law"*

The following two scenarios in one way or another comment on what is perceived to be the most crucial political problem of today's Russia, its lawlessness. The weakness of law in the face of a popular culture that valorizes disobedience to legal institutions has called for a so-called "dictatorship of the law." This idea has been ascribed to President Vladimir Putin<sup>16</sup> and so works on this theme may thus be seen as challenges to or warnings against the growing popularity of Putin's ideological program.

Oleg Divov's recent *Selective Atomizing* (1999) envisions a society whose main principle is "dictatorship of the law." Under the assumption that it is the lack of law-abiding citizens that hampers society's well-being, Russia embarks on a simple and efficient plan of eliminating those who fail to stay legally clean. Suspension of civil liberties is complemented with endowing "social security agency" operatives with a license to kill all persistent delinquents. After seven years of this policy Russia becomes a totally safe country, or rather, a totally different country, as it is now called "The Union of Slavs." Ten million of its citizens have been sacrificed for the triumph of the law. The novel is narrated by one of the social security operatives, Pavel Gusev, who envisions himself as a modern Robin Hood and, needless to say, spares no mercy

on criminals. Ethnic discrimination in the Union of Slavs achieves unprecedented heights, crowned by the popular slogan "We don't buy from non-Russians." Policies towards undesirable national groups differ: gypsies, for instance, are deported to Ukraine (not so much out of a lack of means to exterminate them, as out of malice towards the Ukraine that refused to join the Union), whereas Jews are relentlessly "atomized" (exterminated). As the narrator rushes to explain, Jews only suffer in connection with financial crimes, e.g., for trying to export the monetary resources of the country abroad. The very population that had been frustrated by post-perestroika lawlessness, however, eventually comes to resent the "atomizers" and the cause they represent, since the dictatorship remains even when it is carried out in behalf of the law. The political elite, a segment of the population that is particularly disgruntled by the atomizers, eventually presses for a secret decree to eliminate them.

*Scenario 3: "Eurasian Empire"*

*Selective Atomizing* is primarily concerned with modes of Russia's future political regime, with its vision of Union of the Slavs, but also touches on the problem of the renewed nostalgia for the Russian imperial past. Russia's geographical position in "Eurasia" has often been interpreted as a call for a higher cultural and political mission in civilizing terms. This brand of political thought that dreams of the reunification of former imperial subjects under Russia's heading provides the background for various fantasies about Russia's renewed superpower status.

A playful engagement with geopolitics is a frequent tool in the hands of Russian utopian writers of the newest wave. Remarkable in this respect is Andrei



Stoliarov's bestselling *The Lark (Zhavoronok)* (1999), which consciously exploits geopolitical anxieties. In this work, a certain provincial maiden named Zhanna, whose name intentionally recalls Joan of Arc, comes to Moscow and engages in the modest labor of street vending until, following "a voice from heaven," she leads an uprising for the reunification of the Crimea with Russia. Zhanna stands at the head of a popular movement that enlists many thousands as it moves towards the Ukrainian border. The national crusade is unstoppable; it does not yield to either international pressure or to underhanded plots by treacherous political elites. It takes only Zhanna's untimely death at the hand of a vengeful murderer to delay changes in the map of the world. The author, however, sees this as only a temporary obstacle, unlikely to change the final outcome of reunification with the formerly Russian territory of the Crimea. Curiously, critical response to the novel did not comment on the imperial claims that Stoliarov's novel makes, instead focusing on the familiar Russian chord that the writer struck, of the "profound authentic yearning of contemporary Russians for a miracle, [and] for a charismatic, spiritual leader."<sup>17</sup>

Another recent success on the contemporary Russian book market has been the works published by the creative tandem known under the pseudonym "Holm van Zaichik." (a well-known fantasy writer Viacheslav Rybakov is rumored to be one of the collaborators). The team's first book, *The Case of a Greedy Barbarian* (2000), narrates the tale of a utopian country named "Ordus" (an acronym made up from the Tatar word for a nomadic tribe, "Orda" ["horde," recalling the historical Golden Horde] and "Rus", or Russia). In describing the social arrangement of this imaginary land, the authors dwell at length

on one characteristic utopian feature – its penal system. Legal provisions of utopian societies often provide a guide to their ideology, and in Ordus' corporeal punishment almost never needs to be applied, since crimes are simply never committed there. However, when it is applied, consider its severity: public shaving of the head and armpits! Fines are not administered due to their unequal significance for citizens with different incomes, making one starve and having no noticeable effect on another. By similar reasoning, rich people are subject to tougher punishments based on the understanding that bad behavior is less forgivable in citizens who have had better opportunities for cultivating their manners.

Flirtation with nomadic Tatar culture here reflects the disillusionment on the part of contemporary Russian intellectuals with western civilization and the notion that it is inadequate for a country whose past is rooted in the eastern or "Eurasian" cultural heritage. The scenario of a Eurasian empire has become common in contemporary Russian literature. In Pavel Krusanov's popular *Angel's Bite (Ukus angela)*, (2000) the empire called Hesperia is initially in a state of decline but is revived and restored, even if at a high cost in human life. Krusanov's narrator optimistically assures the reader that in the empire's fight against rebels, the ratio of losses is seventy-six to one in favor of the imperial soldiers. Ideological support for the success of Hesperia is provided by people like the novel's protagonist, Petr Legkostupov, who writes catchy slogans for the empire's propaganda machine. Petr's goal is to facilitate a new emperor's accession to the throne, which he succeeds in doing by writing a mystery play featuring the future tyrant as savior.

It is not the specific form of imperial rule that seems to appeal to writers, but

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rather such things as its evocations of grandeur, order, stable religious affiliation, and clearly designated authority. While the resurgence of the image of empire may seem unexpected in newly democratic Russia, the treatment accorded this kind of political entity in utopian literature is not at all condescending or critical. This nostalgia for a social arrangement that none of these popular writers actually lived through does not look dramatically out of place given the huge success of Vladimir Putin's emphasis on "dictatorship of the law," the slogan of a powerful political movement,<sup>18</sup> which supports the Russian president's new national platform. Having lived through a realization of utopian ideas in its recent past, however, most of the Russian public remains quite sensitive to social and cultural utopian constructs.

Generally, while utopian writers are concerned with finding a formula for universal salvation from moral and social deficiencies, the authors of anti-utopia inevitably question the very universality of the utopian ideal, by showing what "immediate happiness for all" entails for the individual, whose interests – irrational or creative – can be never fully embraced by a universal formula. It appears that the contradiction between utopian/imperial desires and anti-utopian disillusionment remains unresolved. Moreover, the theme of apocalypse and collapse has been replaced by a style and exposition characterized by irony and subversion. Homo Sovieticus has given way to Homo Ludens.

## Notes



<sup>1</sup> 'Katastroika', p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, translated by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Nora Buhks agrees on the essential banality of the novel, commenting that *Frantsuzskaia sovetskaia sotsialisticheskaia respublika* is 'light reading for the mass consumer'. See her article 'Can You Win at Chess with a Marked Deck of Cards?', in Arnold McMillin (ed.), *Under Eastern Eyes: The West as Reflected in Recent Russian Emigre Writing* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 84-90 (p. 90).

<sup>5</sup> Edith W. Clowes, *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Elena Gessen, 'Konets prekrasnoi epokhi', pp. 204-05. In personal conversation, Kurchatkin refuted Gessen's interpretation. Deming Brown also writes that 'it is tempting to read *Notes of an Extremist* as an allegory of the October revolution and its consequences, and also as a general parable about the dangers of a fanatical, exclusive pursuit of a single social goal' (Deming Brown, *The Last Years of Soviet Russian Literature: Prose Fiction 1975-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Petr Vail', 'Klaustrophobii', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 25 June 1991, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> The use of the name Novocherkassk here is significant. In *Arkhipelag GULag* Alexander Solzhenitsyn describes how in June 1962 the Red Army fired on peaceful demonstrators in the southern Russian city of Novocherkassk. About 70-80 people were killed, many more wounded. The workers of the city had been protesting



about price rises and wage reductions. See Solzhenitsyn's detailed account, based on that of eye-witnesses, in *The Gulag Archipelago 3, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, translated by H. T. Willetts (London: Collins/Fontana, 1978), pp. 507-14. Emel'ian Pugachev (1726-75) led a revolt of Cossacks against the rule of Catherine II in 1773, especially in the Volga region and the Urals. The revolt was suppressed, and he was captured and executed.

<sup>9</sup> Viacheslav P'etsukh, *Rommat* (Moscow: Vsia Moskva, 1990), p. 2. All subsequent references to this work are from this edition, with page numbers incorporated into the text.

<sup>10</sup> The Decembrist Revolt took place on Palace Square in St Petersburg, on 14 December 1825, following the death of Tsar Alexander I. The Decembrists were nobles and army officers who had been in France and Western Europe following the defeat of Napoleon, and who wished to import into Russia Western notions of either a republic or a constitutional monarchy, at the expense

of autocracy. It failed abysmally, and its leaders were either executed or exiled to Siberia.

<sup>11</sup> Viacheslav P'etsukh, *Gosudarstvennoe ditia* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1997), pp. 199-200.

<sup>12</sup> P'etsukh, *Gosudarstvennoe ditia*, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> P'etsukh, *Gosudarstvennoe ditia*, p. 225.

<sup>14</sup> P'etsukh, *Gosudarstvennoe ditia*, p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> Yu. Mal'tsev, *Vol'naia ruskaia literatura* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Posev, 1976), 88.

<sup>16</sup> "Dictatorship of the law is the only kind of dictatorship that we should aspire to." At the same meeting with the officials from the Ministry of Justice, Putin went on to say that "state power and law enforcement agencies are parts of a unified state mechanism" thereby proclaiming "law and order" to be the main guarantor of future Russia, "no less significant in the process of reformation than the program of economic transformation," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, January 1, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> E. Ermolin, "Glazami souchastnika," *Druzhiba narodov* 1 (2001): 212.

<sup>18</sup> The title of the movement "Idushchie vmeste" means "marching together."