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On not starting with a blank page: Russian classics as a palimpsest for writers 1980-2020*

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> Every author has the right to start anew, as if nothing existed before him. (Genis, 24)
>
> What is genuinely new is always a development of the tradition. In order to understand the tradition, you need to … seek out the living DNA spiral along which you can trace where all this came from. (Shishkin, 163)

Between 1980 and 2020 Russia's writers experienced profound changes in their personal and professional lives, as history presented yet another *tabula rasa*, but when sitting down to write (and despite the advice of Alexander Genis), writers did *not* see a blank page, but one covered with existing titles, characters, plots, settings, fixed expressions (*krylatye vyrazheniia*) and the reflections and shadows, literal and figurative, of earlier works.[1] Unlike what Vladimir Kantor describes as Soviet-era *erzatsliteratura* (15) the classics offered high drama and low farce, the deepest as well as the most charmingly superficial protagonists, unforgettable flights of language, and urgent topics of the day presented against a backdrop of eternal spiritual and moral questions. For those writers wishing to circumvent the *klassiki*, while still linking themselves to Russia's past, there were pre-modern religious and folk narratives, lengthening the canon's timeline while appearing to free it from western influences or imperial ambitions.[2]

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[1] This essay considers prose fiction, not drama or poetry. Some of the writers discussed also contributed to scholarly, pedagogical, and popular venues, while Dmitry Bykov hosted "News in the Classics" on the radio, and "Citizen Poet" online. The post-Napoleonic era has also been described as a "literary tabula rasa in need of filling" (Hellebust 173).

[2] Klassiki can refer to a texts or writers still attracting readers, commentators, and other writers, and factoring in discussions of culture and identity. Hellebust replaces the term klassiki with "the Tradition" and "Tradition writers." Poaching from writers like Bely and Nabokov may involve picking up on the traces of

After tracing how the reputation of Russia's *klassiki* and their desirability as a model changed over time, this paper will offer a descriptive survey of how specific characteristics of predecessors' works reappeared during this four-decade stretch, with a special focus on the profound reaction to Nabokov. Our aim is to go beyond the concept of *tvorcheskaia preemstvennost'* (creative continuity), which allows for broad observations, for example, about the "Gogolian" or "Chekhovian" atmosphere of a given work. Seeing how much material was creatively redeployed, we will consider what contemporary readers need to know about *ur*-texts (or *pre*-texts) – beyond what can be found on a quick internet search – in order to appreciate works bearing the influence of past writers. Finally, we ask whether the term "Great Russian Literature" still refers to an inherited literary culture appreciated far beyond Russia's borders, or whether now, in the 2020s, it is more closely associated with the aggressive nationalism emanating from Moscow.

On the classics as a proud and problematic legacy

Authors and works now considered classics have been suspected of a harmful influence on readers – and other writers – from the Decembrist uprising until the present. Griboyedov's protagonist Chatsky was considered so toxic that the full version of *Woe from Wit* appeared only decades after its composition. Where Belinsky and his followers found hope between the lines in literature of the thirties and forties, conservative opponents saw danger. By 1862, the younger protagonists of *Fathers and Sons* thought Pushkin's poetry irrelevant to Russia's problems, while conservative readers of the novel believed these characters, and their author, were implicated in politically-motivated arson in St. Petersburg. The nihilist critic Dmitry Pisarev insisted in 1865 that people no longer read Pushkin, but were afraid to admit it.[3] Decades later, essays in the famous *Vekhi* (Landmarks, 1909) anthology pushed back against progressive writers in favor of a spiritually-based national identity, in remarks that were amplified in the 1918 *Iz glubiny* (Out of the Depths) volume (Nethercott, 49-68).

Despite the fact that pro-Bolshevik Futurists advocated throwing the classics "overboard," the new regime took a more moderate approach, nationalizing classics in 1918 as a way to control republication, assuming that "the new nation would, in time, 'outgrow' the classics with their dubious ideology" (Friedberg, 81-3). That same year Vasily Rozanov described the *Apocalypse of Our Time*, implicating literary figures in tsarism's collapse, singling out Turgenev (on the family), Ostrovsky (on merchants), Shchedrin (on bureaucrats), and Leskov (on the clergy). Thanks to these writers, at a certain point nothing was left of Russia, and the Revolution took place.[4] Bunin's 1919 diary is replete with scorn for Griboyedov, Herzen, and others who had opposed every existing institution, and thus bore some responsibility for the regime's demise.

Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky in their work. Our thanks to both of the essay's anonymous readers for their excellent questions and suggestions.

[3] Marcus Levitt, 7-8, 28-30. Levitt also mentions an 1860 Slavophile attack on Pushkin by Viktor Askochensky, who objected to the poet's atheism, egotism, and European values (29).

[4] This is also discussed by Kataev 2002, 54-8.

By the 1930s, Soviet authorities decided to recognize a number of writers as "spiritual ancestors," and the state supported reprintings, scholarly editions, and *iubilei* celebrations with "hagiographic" overtones, most famously for Pushkin in 1937 and 1949 (Friedberg, 89, 115). At a dark time, although on an almost light note, Daniil Kharms wrote in December 1936 about the "greatness" of Pushkin and Gogol (compared to emperors or chancellors). Because these writers were so great, Kharms felt he could add nothing to what they had written (235). While many of those fleeing Russia hoped to preserve its classical traditions, Nikolai Berdyaev wrote from Europe that this rich literary heritage had been unable to solve a key problem, that of the tension between freedom and centralized state power (309-43).

Between 1941 and 1945, Soviet authorities deployed legacy works to boost morale, although the exiled Ivan Solonevich wrote in *The People's Monarchy* that Russian literature's weak and conflicted characters helped convince German leaders that an attack would succeed.[5] After the Soviet victory, Solonevich admitted that the classics' bleak assessment of Russian resilience had been disproven (Kataev 2002, 132-6). Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, published the same year (1951) as Solonevich's opus, made an important distinction: "the history of Russia could be considered from two points of view . . . first, as the evolution of the police (a curiously impersonal and detached force, sometimes working in a kind of void, sometimes, helpless, and at other times outdoing the government in brutal persecution); and second, as the development of a marvelous culture" (263).

Soviet-era writers crafted humorous takes on *klassiki*, some available only in samizdat. In Sinyavsky's 1960 "Graphomaniacs," an unpublished writer envies famous authors whose works, created in privilege and comfort, presented insurmountable barriers to those who followed. Before the protagonist was born, "they stole the vacant places and I was faced with their competition without possessing one hundredth part of their inflated authority" (Tertz, 210). During nighttime walks through Moscow, the predecessors' names – Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov - taunt him from every street corner. *Strolls with Pushkin*, Sinyavsky's highly irreverent attempt to reclaim the father of all classics from idol worshipers, only caused outrage among readers at home and abroad.

Vladimir Voinovich created another frustrated *grafoman* in his 1972 "Skurlatsky, Man of Letters," who, in search of fame, insisted during the days following the tsar's 1881 assassination, that his writing was connected to that brazen act. A decade later, Voinovich made fun of the very word *klassik* in *Moscow 2042*, where an exiled writer is transported to a future Moscow, rehabilitated, celebrated, made an officer in the "literary service," and given the name Classic (nickname: Clashenka). In this society, only summaries of past works are available to readers. Pro-state writers collaborate on a new, unified text, while opponents are given keyboards, but neither screens nor printers.

During 'the long 1970s' leading up to the Gorbachev era, classics were seen as a stabilizing social force by Party leaders and Village Prose writers, while dissidents found

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[5] Ewa Thompson seems unwilling to acknowledge any positive, inspirational role for Russian literature during World War II (30-1).

in them a 'secret freedom' (Razuvalova, 183-4). In December 1977, the Central House of Writers (TsDL) hosted "Klassika i my" (The Classics and Us: Artistic Values of the Past in Contemporary Scholarship and Culture) as an experiment in open discussion. A partial transcript appeared in samizdat, while a fuller record, based on audiotapes, was made available in a 1990 issue of *Moskva*, with additional analysis published in 2016. Speakers espousing a nationalist form of communism denounced the lack of Russianness in certain texts, and in plays directed by Jews, and recommended an end to parodies that dance "on the graves of our great predecessors" (96-8). Post-debate comments from the late 1970s mentioned fears of an empty space opening up between the classics and the present that could only be bridged by new, truth-telling works. If this did not happen, Russia would advance not on the shoulders of literary predecessors, but "on their corpses" (263). Another set of reactions after 1991 saw the classics as what remained after a failed political experiment. For some, this was not a rich tradition but a crushing moral burden that could stifle post-Soviet consciousness (294).

Viktor Erofeev set off another heated debate in 1990 with his "Memorial Service for Soviet Literature," in which he spoke of classical traditions kidnapped by Soviet literary authorities, who silenced talented successors. He believed that *both* Socialist Realism and works that only dispensed truth "between the lines" would disappear, as Russian literature reconnected to its rich traditions. That same year, critic Viktor Ostretsov complained that 19th century realism was itself the problem, offering frivolous gentry and miserable clerks, while only a more spiritual prose could accurately reflect national life (11-17). Viacheslav Kuritsyn believed there could be no merging of new literature with the "golden nineteenth century," and that to build a new culture, past structures had to be destroyed, rather than having writers live "in a museum" (1992a, 215-16). Such declarations led to Igor Zolotusskii's "Nashi nigilisty" (Our Nihilists) a few months later, in which he lamented that even before August 1991, headlines had declared the death of Russia's literary gods. "After the putsch, the campaign to place the classics before a firing squad only grew." In Zolotusskii's paraphrase, Genis believed that it was time to end the 'tyranny of the classics', announce the demise of everyone from Avvakum to Bunin, and 'begin with a blank page'.

Those alarmed by norm-bending new works hoped the magnetic attraction of classics would restore cultural stability. In 2001, Olga Slavnikova thought that past achievements needed to be forgotten for a decade, after which Russian realism could again rise to the surface "and be our petroleum" (182-7). It is doubtful that she had in mind what Vladimir Sorokin had come up with two years earlier in his scandalous novel *Blue Lard* (Goluboe salo), where cloned *klassiki*, in the process of writing poor imitations of their namesakes' work, excreted a glowing substance that could power a reactor in space. In commenting on this novel in the 1990s, Alexander Genis said that in Sorokin's nightmarish scenario, Russian literature was the last remaining resource of a disintegrating empire, but it is not clear if it would be used for good (80).

In the 2020s, evaluations of the classical tradition have less to with aesthetics and more with the foreign policy of late Putinism. Great Russian Literature is seen by some international commentators as a pillar of neo-imperialism, the "pride" of a nation that

should be ashamed of itself.[6] In the eyes of Ukrainian author Oleksandr Mykhed, Russia uses its literary culture 'as the instrument of hybrid warfare', with Pushkin statues marking Moscow-dominated territory, and Dostoevsky as a perfect example of an empty national soul that commits atrocities, and then demands sympathy for its own suffering (Russell). The *klassiki* are still seen at home as a pantheon that should be the envy of other nations, but there are a growing number of outside observers who have characterized these so-called gods as demons, who, as in Revelation 16:14, inspire earthly monarchs to do battle. Whatever Russians' attitude towards their present government, and however much they acknowledge the damage done to Ukraine and its people, the latest charges against the classics are unlikely to affect what Russians read, and where new writers find inspiration.

Reflections of a Golden Age: how some contemporary writers skated on the surface of Russian Literature, while others plumbed its depths

> Russian writers in the postmodern period ... have no other material for creating new texts than what is stored in their and their readers' memory. (Parts 2002, 315)
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> In literature, if a word is written, it reverberates in all the existing books, regardless of whether you've read them or not. (Shishkin, 163)
>
> If classical literature is something that reposes in the depths of national consciousness, contemporary writing is always a cocktail that everyone mixes according to their own taste. (Genis, 31)
>
> I take a classic, throw in a body, and make a detective story out of it. (Akunin 2003, 29)

Russian writers are often said to work in the tradition of a predecessor, benefitting "from proximity to the works already accepted ... relying on the reader's recognition of the referent text" (Parts 2008, 16). A writer may offer Gogolian humor, one of Turgenev's country settings, Tolstoyan historical breadth, a Dostoevskian clash of the saintly and demonic, or Chekhovian yearning and hopelessness. Is this intertextuality a living link to the *ur-text*, or is it a deformation or eclipsing of the original?[7] Does widespread borrowing

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[6] The 2022 attack on Ukraine led to interest in Ewa Thompson's 2000 book Imperial Knowledge. Russian Literature and Colonialism, which implicates Russian literature in land-grabs over the past two centuries. Accusations of "textual imperialism" (63) leave few 19th or 20th century writers untouched; Thompson recommends Liudmila Petrushevskaia, with her stories of women living miserable lives, as "the first post-colonial Russian writer" (221). See also: Méheut.

[7] A survey of theories of Intertextuality is beyond the scope of this paper. It has been discussed at length by Roland Barthes, Michael Riffaterre, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Laurent Jenny, and many others, and

signal a continuous national identity, or a culture running on fumes, producing only *psevdo-* or *lozhno-klassiki*? (Adamovich; Basinskii, 7). Can a reader or critic even discern how well these writers know the works from which they took their inspiration?

Some writers proceed from a single source, while others, like Pelevin, P'etsukh, Sorokin, Bitov, and Akunin, cast wider nets. Pelevin is said to prefer not the raw matter of Russian life, but already "refracted" material (Ranchin). In *Buddha's Little Finger* (Chapaev i pustota) there is the "refracted" light of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Blok, and Nabokov, and a narrator who casts doubt on the value of the classics by asking himself whether he was any better than a proletarian soldier simply because he had read Gogol and Herzen (75). In their use of early texts, writers act as *tseniteli* (connoisseurs), *prodolzhateli* (taking a predecessor *chut' dal'she*), *epigony* (imitators exaggerating original traits), or legitimate descendants (Kataev 2002, 182). How have writers borrowed, reimagined, parodied, decorated with, and discussed *klassiki*, and how do they signal the presence of a predecessor? Critical theory in Russia and abroad has emphasized postmodernism's parodistic and iconoclastic attitudes (Kataev 2004, 330). A writer can use a *klassik* to produce a work with shock appeal, yet escape criticism for unoriginality because this iconoclasm is said to be his contribution (Mariaskina, 86-90). Pelevin and Sorokin appear to have taken on "the myth of Great Russian Literature" simply as an aesthetic exercise (Parts 2008, 7). Slavnikova suspects that texts are now expected to "game" with readers. Borrowing a folkloric image, she calls the results "soup made from an axe, where the axe is some kind of artistic prose . . . soviet, or even a sacred Russian classic" (182-7). A classic can be mummified, sanctified, kidnapped, or cannibalized for parts.[8] The narrator of *Demons* comes to mind with his comment that "the trashiest people suddenly gained predominance and began loudly criticizing all that's holy" (462).

In contemporary literature and criticism the classics are seen as a *zapovednik* (cultural preserve), *kladovaia/sunduk* (storeroom/storage chest), *reservuar*, *neprikosnovennyi zapas* (emergency supply/survival kit), and an *okhrannaia gramota* (safe-conduct pass). This literary legacy has entered the body and soul of contemporary writing, "taking it captive with countless allusions, direct citations, and hidden reflections" (Zagidullina). Borrowings from past works appeared in both mass-market publications and more serious venues, and "intertextuality" has been discussed in journalism, criticism, dissertations, and handbooks for educators, often applying the work of European theorists to Russian texts.

Palimpsestnost' implies, metaphorically, the reuse of paper that bears traces of earlier writing (Gorbenko, 447-67).[9] *Vtorichnost'* suggests a re-use or echoing of primary material. *Tsitatnost'* involves quotations as epigraphs, or within the work. A *popurri*, *kompiliatsiia*,

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Mikhail Bakhtin famously wrote about dialogues between texts. There are studies of intertextuality in Russian literature by, inter alios, Renate Lachmann, Alexander Zholkovsky, and Lyudmila Parts.

[8] Classics have been used to name restaurants, snack bars, and theme parks. Yuri Mamin's 1990 film Sideburns (Bankenbardy) featured gangs dressed like Pushkin, Lermontov's Pechorin, and yellow-shirted Mayakovskys. Vail wrote of a transitional age in which the remnants of the literary nation showed up in unexpected places. See: Parthé 2004, 216.

[9] See also: Gérard Genette, Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree.

or *kollazh* makes use of several classics, while a *daidzhest* selects from a single work.[10] *Tsentonnost'* is borrowed from Latin, where *cento* refers to a poem composed of familiar lines. In Sorokin's story "Jubilee," for instance, actors perform a medley of Chekhov's lines, with no attempt at coherence.[11] *Rimeiki* and *sikvely*, *parodies*, *pastiches*, and *upgrades* claim to have saved past writers from the remainder pile. The literary scholar Kataev felt that most *klassiki* could be declared unfinished (2002, 171). Sequels to *War and Peace*, *Master and Magarita*, and "The Lady with a Dog" seemed to write themselves (even before current advances in AI).

In the early 2000s, the Zakharov publishing house introduced a series called "The New Russian Novel." Volumes sported well-known titles and familiar-sounding authors: Ivan Sergeevich's *Fathers and Sons*, Fedor Mikhailov's *The Idiot*, and Lev Nikolaev's *Anna Karenina* (Zagidullina). The new versions added computer jargon, foul language, and sex scenes, with the result a recognizable body with a new blood type coursing through its veins. One can ask whether such a remake sends interested readers back to reread the original version (or to read it for the first time)?

Evgeny Popov's *Nakanune nakanune* (On the Eve of On the Eve) is described by Robert Porter as "a transparent reworking and updating of" Turgenev, in which "the author in his deployment of parody, is rescuing Russian literature from the ideologists who kidnapped it for 74 years." Popov, Voinovich, P'etsukh, Venedikt and Viktor Erofeev, Tolstaya, and Petrushevskaya are credited with "restoring Russian literature to its rightful owners, the Russian reading public," with the 19th century legacy sufficiently strong to withstand mimicry (267-83). In an afterword to Akunin's *Special Assignments*, Lev Danilkin calls the author a Decorator (the title of one of the volume's stories). Akunin uses well-known material *not* to test readers' memories, but to establish a comfortable rhythm for detective stories. "In the boring, dusty house, whose name is Russian Literature, a new room has been discovered, one filled with various clever devices" (Danilkin, 313-18).

In the many decades since the classics were written, Russia experienced multiple upheavals - wars, Communism, a semi-open society with a ruined, corruption-ridden economy, followed by an aggressive neo-totalitarian regime. Writers have had to think about the reader they wished to attract. P'etsukh followed a playful path during *glasnost'*, bringing Saltykov's *Story of a Town* (and not the somber *Golovëv Family*) up to the present. His revision is so good-humored as to fall outside the postmodernist frame; as he titles one book, his interest is *The Russian Theme*. Recent works involve serious discussions of the power of literature; in Sharov's *Return to Egypt*, Gogol's descendants plan a nation-saving sequel to *Dead Souls*, but that book is never written, and, by inference, Russia will not be saved.

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[10] Anatolii Korolëv identifies two of his stories, "Dama pik" and "Nosy," as *kollazhi*. The former, for example, borrows elements of "Queen of Spades" and "Tales of Belkin."

[11] Kataev 2002 devoted a chapter to "Vtorichnost', tsitatnost', tsentonnost'"; the remainder of this paragraph is based on his chapter "Rimeiki, sikvely…", 163-71. On Sorokin, see: Parts 2008, 170-1.

New works can be both "parody and homage," amusing for general readers and "satisfyingly literary for the educated" (Parts 2016, 44). The relationship to the past could be signaled by a **title** that may "overcode" everything that follows, or, the borrowed title could just demonstrate that the work is both familiar *and* new (Carrer, 122-34; Cherniak). P'etsukh's *Plagiat* (Plagiarism) offers imaginative takes on Lev Nikolaevich (with chapters called "Childhood," "Boyhood," "Youth, etc."), with a similar approach to Nikolai Vasilevich, Anton Pavlovich, and Mikhail Evgrafovich. Other classic-inspired titles include Ulitskaya's "Queen of Spades," Korolev's "Gogol's Head" and "Noses," and Alexander Lavrin's "The Death of Egor Ilich." In Akunin's novel *Extracurricular Reading*, chapter titles refer to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Bunin, although the narrative is split between 18th century Petersburg and contemporary Moscow, and not during the century when these works were written. Assuming a reader for whom classic authors are like distant relatives or long-time neighbors, P'etsukh, in *Plagiat*, omits last names, and the first name and patronymic are in the dative, making these dedications, or tributes. Igor Klekh's "Incident with a Classic" plays on Chekhov's story about a failed Greek exam, changing the original's *sluchai* to *intsident*, and the "classic" from Greek to Russian. Dmitry Bykov's 2006 *ZhD. Poema* is translated as *Living Souls* for English-language readers who would not understand the *mërtvye/zhivye dushi* (dead/living souls) switch from Gogol.[12]

Epigraphs, like titles, occupy "privileged and hierarchical slots in texts" (Carrer, 123). Familiar from *The Captain's Daughter* and *Anna Karenina*, the practice was taken up by contemporary writers, including Andrei Bitov. Vladimir Makanin's *Underground, or a Hero of Our Time* begins a quote from Lermontov about Pechorin representing an entire generation. *The Hero of Another Time* (by Brusnikin/Chkhartishvili) includes epigraphs from Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Lermontov, and Polezhaev. **Quotes** from earlier works, and *krylatye vyrazheniia*, present the work as no cultural outlier, but part of a tradition. Griboyedov has long been a source for colorful expressions, and fortunately for today's readers, only one Griboyedov text is involved, the immortal *Woe from Wit* (Khagi 2021, 53-4; Epstein, 62). When Shishkin's narrator in "The Blind Musician" declares the date to be "the tenth of Martober," Gogol's "Notes of a Madman" comes to mind, with the protagonist's decoupling from temporal reality. As Shishkin's story progresses, we come across roses probably stolen from "a statue of Gogol on the boulevard" (66, 79).

Characters – downtrodden, demonic, superfluous, and saintly – look and sound like people readers have met elsewhere (Khagi 2021, 161-81). Superfluous men appear in Sergei Dovlatov's fiction, and one section of his "Compromise" was published separately as "Superfluous People" to strengthen its links to the past (Ar'ev, 5-14). For Alexander Genis, the earlier superfluous men were signs of an insoluble social tragedy, while the modern version in Dovlatov is suffering from a long-term "personal drama" (56-8). Shishkin's "Calligraphy Lesson" draws on female characters from Griboyedov, Pushkin,

[12] Bitov's *Monkey Link* makes a number of references to a potential masterpiece called *Live Souls* (320, 329).

Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Pasternak, identified for English-language readers, with a translator's note that "Russians will pick them up instantly" (46). In Sharov's *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*, an embedded manuscript includes similar or derived protagonists from different works in dialogue, e.g., Kirilov from *Demons*, and Podsekalnikov from Erdman's *The Suicide* (Gabrielova, 600). *Klassiki* appear in stories and novels under their own names, as in Bakhit Kenzheev's *Ivan Bezuglov*, or, in altered, but recognizable, ways, like Anton Pavlovich Nekhov in Nikolai Psurstev's *Hungry Ghosts: War and Peace according to Nekhov* (Kataev 2002, 173-4).

A familiar **plot line** is a vaguer kind of borrowing, but readers encountering stories of humiliation leading to an untimely demise, feuds between neighbors, and provincial corruption, will think of Gogol. This is "not a direct allusion, but a selection of situations, motifs, materials with a literary hue that can be recognized" (Ranchin). Favorite literary **settings** - Petersburg, Crimea, the Caucasus, the provincial estate, and the Optyna Monastery – act in the same way. Trains and stations, familiar from Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Pasternak resurface in Venedikt Erofeev's *Moscow to the End of the Line*, Yuri Buida's *Zero Train*, Pelevin's *Yellow Arrow* and *T*, and Vodolazkin's *Solovyov and Larionov*. Porter describes Evgeny Popov's train journeys as "often short, localized and unfinished . . . a parody of the epic impulse," and goes on to quote D. M. Thomas, who "likened Russian literature to a train, in which all the writers could pass along the corridor and communicate with each other . . . . Western literature, by contrast, was like a motorway, with all the writers speeding along in their individual cars, paying scant attention to one another" (278-80). Russian culture seems to be hardwired for intertextuality.

Does understanding new literature require a deep knowledge of klassiki?

> Intertextuality .. relies on readers, as carriers of cultural memory, to recognize the referent texts. (Parts 2002, 301-17)[13]

> Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. As canon writers they matter not as authors of actual works that we read … New texts congregated around them and created a productive field between texts, allowing for interaction among writers of different epochs. (Parts 2008, 7)

Along with writers' use of the nation's literary heritage, readers' continuing familiarity with the *klassiki* has to be considered, an issue linked to discussions about curricula and national identity. In 1999, Turgenev's "Mumu" was the subject of mock contest in *Ogonek*, with readers asked to design a monument for the Moscow River embankment dedicated

[13] Parts also said that "the success of intertextual practice depends on the recognition of previous texts" (2008, 38).

to the dog who symbolized the long-suffering Russian people.[14] Two years later, the dean of Moscow University's journalism faculty questioned whether being educated required reading this story in school. 'How can you even be Russian without having read "Mumu"?' (Zasurskii). An article in *Novy Mir* by a veteran teacher observed that if young people did not read Dostoevsky or other classics in school, they would never read them, and would miss out on the "spiritual heritage" and *tochki opory* (stability) such works provide (Aizerman, 161-2, 169). A dozen years later, a group of prominent writers cooperated on an educational anthology called *The Literary Matrix* (*Literaturnaia matritsa*), described as a collective protest against the diminished place for Russian literature in high schools. Contributors included: Andrei Bitov (on Lermontov), Valery Popov (Tolstoy), Dmitry Bykov (Gorky), and Vladimir Sharov (Platonov).

Which classics do readers need to be familiar with in order to appreciate writers working under their influence? P'etsukh asked his fellow citizens to imagine a generation "who haven't read Chekhov, have hardly heard of Pushkin" and do not know Lermontov's most famous lines by heart, warning that "without his native literature to keep him in check, a Russian is capable of anything" (2005, 38-47). Fortunately, P'etsukh's own writing supplies "appropriate amounts of information about the referent work, [and] he rarely employs literary works that are out of the average reader's reach" (Parts 2008, 85). Boris Akunin's embedded allusions are designed to afford pleasure to the well-read Russian (Baraban, 396).

The appreciation of intertexts requires recognition, and the list of older authors incorporated into newer works presents few surprises (Parts 2002, 303). Postmodernist parodies meant to deflate literary reputations can only succeed if readers are aware of the target, meaning that only better-known parts of the canon will do, allowing the reader to identify the *ur*-text. The ubiquitous on-line lists of Russia's "must-reads" are, however, not linked to their "descendants," so while some of what a reader needs to know about older texts can be found on a search engine, recognition has to come first.

Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin is so central to national identity that his reappearance is tied less to specific titles and more to his life story and overall style. Rolf Hellebust mentions Bitov ("Pushkin's Photograph," 1987) and Tatiana Tolstaya ("Plot," 1991). Both writers' premise is that Pushkin's life was spared, in the first case by a time traveler with antibiotics, and in the second by chance, and Bitov's late-Soviet era *Pushkin House* re-creates "the whole Tradition as a single intertext" (177, 213-14). In Tolstaya's "Limpopo," a new Pushkin is the hoped-for progeny of the marriage between a Russian poet and a female African student.[15] The hero of Sergei Dovlatov's *Pushkin Hills* escapes a failing career and marriage to work in the museum complex near Pskov, where

[14] V. Melik-Karamov, "Vernite Mumu narodu!!!," Oktiabr' 1999:31; that issue and 1999:35 offered possible designs. Even the interview with Zasurskii featured a drawing of Mumu about to hit the water. The dean insisted that new textbooks should not confine themselves to a few representative works.
[15] Written between 1964 and 1971, Pushkinskii dom appeared abroad in 1978, and in Russia in 1987. In comments to the first book edition in the USSR, Bitov said that influences on the novel include Proust, Dostoevsky, and Nabokov. Bitov also compiled a book of essays with a Pushkin-inspired title, Prisoner of the Caucasus.

'everything lives and breathes Pushkin' (1993, v. 1, 333-47).[16] With overuse of Pushkin, the brilliant specificity of his writing was soon "lost in the ideological battle between myth and anti-myth," fueled by Sinyavsky's *Strolls with Pushkin*, which roiled Russia when excerpts from the book appeared in 1989 (Parts 2008, 32).

Mikhail Lermontov's literary afterlife makes familiarity with *A Hero of Our Time* essential. Brusnikin's *A Hero of Another Time* is set in the Caucasus soon after the publication of Lermontov's novel and his death in a duel, and the epigraphs include lines from Lermontov's poem "Ismail-Bei." Characters claim inside knowledge of the fatal contest, debating the book's meaning and whether mutual acquaintances resemble Pechorin or Grushnitsky.[17] Vladimir Makanin incorporated both Lermontov and Dostoevsky into his *Underground, or, A Hero of Our Time*.[18]

More than other 19th century writers, **Nikolai Gogol** has influenced contemporary literature with echoes of "Old World Landowners," "The Nose," "The Overcoat," "Notes of a Madman," *The Inspector General*, *Dead Souls*, and even *Selected Passages from a Correspondence With Friends*. The appeal of Gogol includes his laughter, empathy, the evocation of terrifyingly empty spaces, and intimations of spiritual torment. Writers borrow from him both for fictional works and for essays like P'etsukh's "The Nose," which begins with a description of Gogol's face, and proceeds to call writers apostles, whose work is not based on external observation but on something inside (2005, 26-38).

Vladimir Voinovich's *Fur Hat* was an "Overcoat"-like saga of adventure novelist Efim Rakhlin. When free hats were awarded by the Writers' Union, some received fox and rabbit, while Efim was allotted 'domestic tomcat, medium fluffy'. He vigorously protested the humiliation, even sending a satirical sketch "in a Gogolian vein" to *Pravda*, but like Akaky Akakievich, his protest quickly ended in death (18, 46, 93-4).

The poet in Igor Klekh's "Incident with a Classic" seeks to solve the mystery of Gogol by traveling to Mirgorod to absorb the powerful dreams that had seeped into the very blood of this genius two hundred years earlier. Instead of completing this noble quest, he drops his keys in a toilet, borrows a magnet to retrieve them, and, when wedding guests are about to attack him - in a scene straight out of "How Ivan Ivanovich quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich" - he hops a train for home, wondering why fate mocks his love for Great Russian Literature.[19]

Anatolii Korolev's story "Gogol's Head" has been called "a typical intertextual narrative, woven out of citations from Gogol and Hoffmann" (Koblenkova), and "the essence of

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[16] The narrator cannot follow his wife and child abroad because 'my language, my people, my crazy country' and potential readers are only in Russia (381). Dovlatov worked at the Pushkin museum complex in 1976. He began the story in 1977; it was published abroad in 1983, and at home in 1990.

[17] Anatolii Brusnikin is one of Grigori Chkhartishvili's pen names. There is an embedded book, supposedly written by G. F. Mangarov in 1905, called "Zapiski starogo kavkaztsa" (Notes of an old fighter in the Caucasus).

[18] Christiane Schuchart devoted a monograph to these intertexts. Unfortunately, it is based on the first edition, while Makanin subsequently published a heavily revised version.

[19] Klekh's title plays on Chekhov's "Sluchai s klassikom," although that concerns a failed Greek exam. For Kataev (13-14) this shows that postmodernists are not afraid to add a little bad taste to their use of the classics, with Klekh descending to a level of poshlost' not seen in Gogol.

postmodernism" as it preserves "one's love for Gogol without any faith in him" (Paramonov 1997, 12).[20] That approach does not apply to Sharov's *Return to Egypt*, featuring letters by people descended from one of Gogol's sisters: they stage "The Inspector General" in their native Ukraine, believing only blood relations can understand him.[21] The epistolary discussion Sharov lays out, Talmudic in its leveling of space and time, concerns how to finish *Dead Souls*. The main character, also called Nikolai Vasilevich Gogol, is expected to complete a second – perhaps even a third - volume. In the prospectus for the new narrative, Chichikov has become an Old Believer bishop wandering between communities in Russia and abroad. He leaves his fortune to Alyosha Karamazov, an act that unites the grand narratives left unfinished by Gogol and Dostoevsky.[22]

Fedor Dostoevsky has inspired recent writers with "Poor Folk," "White Nights," "The Insulted and the Injured," *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Eternal Husband*, *Demons*, "Bobok," and *Brothers Karamazov*. In 1986, Astafiev published "A Sad Detective," in which a retired policeman models himself on Dostoevsky, hoping, like his idol, to write crime novels that can battle the "demons" corroding Russia's soul. In "A New Moscow Philosophy" P'etsukh's narrator says that Russians have deep faith in literary characters as role models, although "behavior in the last quarter of the 20th century offers some correctives to the classics." Literature, he says, is the *chistovik* (clean copy) of the rough material life provides (194-5).[23] The setting is a soviet-era communal apartment where Alexandra Sergeevna, descendant of the original occupants, goes missing, launching a battle over possession of her room. The Dostoevskyan theme involves the hunt for a murderer, and the realization that the current generation lacks a moral orientation because they no longer read *Crime and Punishment*. The protagonist Belotsvetov writes about literature's significance for personal and social maturity: "along with the blood of one's ancestors, something is transmitted from one generation to the next only by means of books" (286). One reviewer called P'etsukh's story "a monument to a transitional era" (Stroev, 10).

In the early 1980s, Leonid Tsypkin completed work on *Summer in Baden-Baden*, a unique tribute to Dostoevsky. First published abroad, it appeared in Russia in 2003. The book alternates between the narrator's journey from Moscow to Leningrad, with Anna Dostoevsky's diary in hand, and a reimagining of the Dostoevskys' trip to Germany in 1867. Flashbacks from prison life and pre-1867 works suffuse the novel, along with intimations of future writing. Dostoevsky interacts with Russian writers abroad, and

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[20] Pelevin's post-modernist use of Gogol has been studied by, among others: Khagi 2021, 3, 9, 187, 213; and Vicks, 127-58.

[21] For an example of a post-Soviet reading of Gogol as a spiritual writer and religious thinker, see: Monakhova, 7.

[22] Without mentioning Sharov, Hellebust's passages (in Chapter 4) on Gogol and the Tradition's prophetic-redemptive mission in Dead Souls and Selected Passages shed light on the arc of Sharov's narrative.

[23] According to Dechka Chavdarova, the povest' is full of comments on "the literariness of the Russian consciousness" even as the modern version of Dostoevsky's characters are diminished versions of their predecessors (221-6).

muses on his beloved Pushkin. At novel's end, the narrator walks around the Dostoevsky-saturated city that he can never call anything but Petersburg.

Akunin's *Turkish Gambit* opens with a Great Writer (*Velikii Pisatel'*) dictating a new work to a stenographer whom he forcibly embraces, a transparent, if somewhat twisted, reference to Dostoevsky (Ranchin). In the same author's two-volume *F.M*, set in contemporary Moscow, Erast Fandorin's grandson is hired to locate an early version of *Crime and Punishment*. Sections of the found manuscript appear in the book, containing additional material on Porfiry Petrovich, letters from Raskolnikov's mother, and musings on Russia's backwardness. The fourth installment ends with Dostoevsky's notation that he has written nonsense, and must start over, after which Akunin quotes the beginning of the novel as we know it. Dostoevsky's characters, settings, and plots, especially from *Demons* and *Brothers Karamazov* show up in the *Sister Pelagiya* trilogy and other Fandorin *detektivy*.[24] Bitov's *Monkey Link* asks whether Dostoevsky created his *Demons* "or the demons created us," and whether the Revolution occurred because Russian literature had described everything, leaving nothing about Russia unexposed (290).

Turgenev resurfaces in works inspired by "Asya," *On the Eve*, *Fathers and Sons*, and, of course, "Mumu."[25] The charms of a provincial summer are evoked in Sorokin's *Roman*, as a Moscow lawyer and amateur artist returns to his relatives – retired theater folk - in the countryside. Lest the reader relax in its Turgenevan atmosphere of hunting, hay-gathering, leisurely meals, and debates about Russia, the idyll is literally chopped to bits, with an end as violent as anything in Sorokin's work, causing one reader to call it an "apoplectic fit" (Timopheus). Viacheslav Kuritsyn channels "Asya" in "Dry Thunderstorms. Twilight Zone," which takes place on a Moscow boulevard where a quarter-century old event is recounted. Although Kataev describes Turgenev as having been "dissolved into the very blood of Russian literature," he judges Kuritsyn's efforts unsuccessful, "with grandiose pretensions and pitiful results" (2002, 194-201; Gimranova, 174-81). That same year (1993), Evgeny Popov's *On the Eve of on the Eve* was set in an émigré residence near Munich c. 1991, with familiar descriptions of tree-lined lanes and the arrival of a Turgenev descendant from America. The novel ends in Helsinki with a dramatization of *On the Eve*. Kataev called this rewrite a lame attempt to liven up the 19th century author for today's readers (2002, 191-4).

Leo Tolstoy is present in contemporary fiction through "Childhood. Boyhood. Youth," *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, "Family Happiness," "The Kreutzer Sonata," and "The Death of Ivan Ilich," although perhaps not to the extent one might expect, given A. N. Wilson's assertion in a 2012 interview that 'everyone writes in Tolstoy's shadow'.

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[24] *Pelagiia i belyi bul'dog*, *Pelagiia i chernyi monakh*, *Pelagiia i krasnyi petukh*, all published by AST in 2001-2003. In *Azazel'*, Akunin's first Fandorin mystery, the year is 1876; aside from a nod to Karamzin's doomed lovers, Erast and Liza, the Moscow setting features atheism, nihilism, terrorism, and suicides, and Fandorin is asked whether he has read *Demons*, published four years earlier. See: *Azazel'*, 82-3, 225, 259.

[25] In Poliakov's interview with Zasurskii, the rector complains that in 2001, Russian students were assigned only *Fathers and Sons*, not *Sportsman's Sketches* or "Mumu." In Dovlatov's "Inaia zhizn'," the philologist hero, on his way to Paris to study the Bunin archive, sees a Russian stewardness reading "Mumu" in the Stockholm airport. "Inaia zhizn'" appeared abroad in 1984, and in *Zvezda* and a volume of collected works a decade later.

P'etsukh's *Plagiarism* offers essays with Tolstoyan titles, e. g. the "Childhood" trilogy and "Morning of a Landowner." In *Extracurricular Reading*, Akunin spares Ivan Ilich a slow death, sending him off a roof instead, but includes Tolstoy's words about the final moments of consciousness. In a Petrushevskaya paper on satire and fantasy, she imagines herself in the afterlife, stuck at a table with a very unwelcoming Tolstoy and Chekhov (60-3).

Bykov's "Tolstoyan Meat Patties" is one of the short pieces he was commissioned to write for travelers (5-6). A passenger named Korobov finds himself not on the "Red Arrow," but the "Lev Nikolaevich," decorated like the train in *Anna Karenina.* He thinks it idiotic to use the name of a writer whose misadventures involved trains: the death of his heroine, Pozdnyshev's trip in "The Kreutzer Sonata," and the author's final journey to Astapovo. The décor is tasteless, and the count's face on a locomotive recalls revolutionary agit-prop. The dining car offers an appetizer called "Family Happiness" and "Tolstoyan" meat patties, although the count is known for his militant vegetarianism.

Pelevin's novel *T.* features numerous allusions to Tolstoy, who, along with Dostoevsky "are not the real flesh-and-blood nineteenth-century classic authors but their contemporary avatars" (Khagi 2021, 181, 186, 195-7). A character named Ariel tells Count T that the Great Writer set in motion "a tremendous circle of shadows (*khorovod tenei*) and joined them after his death. Like Andrei Bolkonsky, Count T lies in a field staring at the sky and travels to the Optyna Pustyn monastery as part of a project to rewrite his namesake's work for a modern audience. Alexander Lavrin took things a step further with 1989 story "The Death of Egor Ilich." While readers expect "a present-day Tolstoyan character searching for the meaning of his life as it comes to a painful end," the title actually refers to a beautiful old bookcase that preserves and protects Russian classics (Parts 2008, 18-19).

Anton Chekhov is an inescapable presence in recent prose and some drama, e.g. Akunin's *Seagull*, published in a volume together with the original play. Chekhov is said to inspire those seeking to write pseudo-classics because of his "disrupted chronotope" pointing to "the approaching chaos" (Adamovich). Chekhov's influence, the subject of numerous studies, shows up in plots, characters (provincial doctors, introverts, the lovelorn), settings (provincial towns, psych wards, Crimea), and overall atmosphere - the waning of a life, a romance, or a century (Parts 2002, 301-17). In Vodolazkin's *Solovyov and Larionov*, a graduate student travels south to discover how tsarist General Larionov survived in Soviet Russia and wrote memoirs. In Crimea (the novel appeared five years before the 2014 annexation), everything is suffused with Chekhov's life and works. The interior of the house museum "reflected something invigorating, some sort of wellspring source of the country's literature" (81-2). "My Native Land," a lyrical essay by writer and cardiologist Maxim Osipov refers to several authors and characters, but focuses on Chekhov, whose observations on medicine in Russia seem as fresh as when first written. Like Chekhov, the doctor-narrator sees not evil but emptiness, and offers the Chekhovian observation that "in a single decade Russia changes a lot, but in two centuries – not at all" (*Kilometer 101*, 199).

P'etsukh's "Our Man in a Case" juxtaposes Chekhov's Greek teacher Belikov to Serpeev, instructor of Russian language and literature who, a century after Belikov, succumbs to a

fear of almost everything (*Plagiat*, 78-82). "D.B.S." (*deistvitel'no bezzashchitnoe sushchestvo*, a truly defenseless creature) features Granny Sofya, whose life went downhill after 1917. In 1984, a small inheritance requires her to journey from Kherson to Berdnyansk, but procuring tickets proves impossible. She weeps by the seashore as the narrator says that God cannot help her, because "for a long time, he has been unable to do anything with this country and its people" (82-5). "Koldun'ia" (The Sorceress) begins with an epigraph from Chekhov's "Ved'ma" (The Witch) about a man who is certain that his wife, a folk healer, is conspiring with evil spirits and the post office (85-8). "The Gooseberry Bush" concerns Komsomol member Sasha Petushkov, an employee of the Bakunin Button Factory, who is sent on a *komandirovka* to Magadan. There he gets drunk, is robbed, and finds himself among a group of released prisoners. He makes his way back to Moscow, where, after further misadventures, he decides to devote himself to gooseberry production (89-110).

Tolstaya's "The Poet and the Muse" pits "Pushkin and Chekhov intertexts against each other," with the latter becoming "the main addressee in the contemporary literary dialogue with the classics" (Parts 2008, 38-9, 51). The cover of Galina Shcherbakova's collection *Yashka's Children* announces that "Chekhov's heroes are alive in the 21st century!" Her stories draw on Chekhov titles, and include quotes and paraphrases of the *ur*-texts. Time may have passed. but human behavior has evolved very little, with *poshlost'* (mediocrity) changing least of all. A reader must be familiar with the specific Chekhov story in question to be able to judge whether Shcherbakova's heavy use of intertextual material as a point of orientation gives her works the lasting value she seeks.

Alexander Blok resurfaces in contemporary prose through "The Twelve," "Scythians," and the "Beautiful Lady" cycle. In Petrushevskaya's "Labirinth," the female narrator "D." travels to the cottage of her recently deceased aunt. Neighbors say that the aunt insisted that she did not live alone: 'I have Alexander Blok with me' (*Gde ia byla*, 8). While cleaning the house, the niece finds a pre-Soviet edition of Blok with old orthography and recalls her aunt reading poetry to her as a child (11). A stranger arrives, asking to see the aunt. D. refers to him as Alexander Alexandrovich but loses sight of him in a maze of lanes. "One could walk parallel paths here for months at a time" although the parallelism seems more temporal than physical (17). Reading the "The Unknown Lady" at night, D. realizes that the notebooks she destroyed might have helped explain her aunt's connection to Blok. In the end, the stranger returns, drawn to the table with "an oft read little book of his verse" (15-20). Vodolazkin's hero Platonov in *The Aviator* is not so much a time traveler as someone who lay in a frozen state for decades. Having been alive during the Silver Age, he is asked whether he knew Blok; the poet was not acquaintance, but he did see Blok at a "poetry soirée." In a diary entry after a press conference, Platonov says that he wanted to speak to Blok, having memorized the poem "Aviator," but never called the poet, despite having this phone number (119-20).

A writer in exile whose works made an early return, **Ivan Bunin** began to influence Russian literature, especially Village Prose, in the mid-1950s. In the period under discussion, Dovlatov's "Another Life. A Sentimental Story" features the scholar Krasnoperov, who travels to France to examine Bunin's archives. One mini-sketch is

called "A Speech about Bunin," in which a Monsieur Triumo claims to have known Bunin in Grasse. The goal of Krasnoperov's thesis is Bunin's "spiritual repatriation," proving that although the writer died in Grasse "morally he belongs to Russia" (41-2). Ludmila Ulitskaya's "Sonechka," whose soul grazed "the expanses of the great literature of nineteenth-century Russia," returned to "the shady avenues of Bunin" or Turgenev's "torrents of spring" every evening (5, 71). In 1992, the same year "Sonechka" appeared, Pelevin's story "Nika" featured a narrator who, after his beloved cat's death, found that a volume of Bunin "lies here on my knees like a heavy brick"(90).

Yevgeny Zamyatin, like Nabokov, favored geometric forms, the shadow of wings, and similar images, along with utopian and dystopian passages attractive to contemporary writers. In his essay on H. G. Wells, Zamyatin described seeing an airplane for the first time c. 1910. When the plane landed "the flying man climbed out of his canvas wings and took off his strange, goggled mask, I was somehow disappointed. The flying man . . . turned out to be exactly like the rest of us" (*A Soviet Heretic*, 271). In Vodolazkin's *Aviator*, the narrator, cryogenically frozen in Solovki, remembers a similar scene from his pre-revolutionary Russian boyhood, a memory so vivid that his doctor calls him "Aviator Platonov" (47,81). Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* has been read as a rewrite of *We* for today's Russia, "where Big Byz appears as an allegory of the One State, and Urkaina represents the space beyond the Great Wall ... The appropriation of Zamiatin's *We* takes on the cultural memory surrounding the novel" (Trotman, 193-8).[26]

Other 20th century *klassiki* like Zoshchenko, Olesha, Bulgakov, and Platonov, have inspired contemporary literature, but none of them to the extent of Vladimir Nabokov.

Nabokov's Long Shadow

> Nabokov was what we did not become because of the Bolsheviks. (Kirgizov)[27]
>
> Everyone will have their own god now . ... All that we can hope is that one in a hundred will choose the "Nabokovian" ideal of beauty (Kuritsyn 1992a, 219).
>
> Our theorist of postmodernism has awarded himself a very attractive family tree: Nabokov, Mandelstam, Bitov. (Nosov, 239).[28]

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[26] Although outside the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that the narrator of Giuliano da Empoli's best-selling 2022 novel The Wizard of the Kremlin goes to Moscow to do research on Zamyatin, who turns out to be a favorite author of the mysterious Baranov.

[27] According to Genis (40), Bitov commented similarly that "Nabokov is the image of what Russian literature would have been, if not for the October Revolution."

[28] The reference is to Kuritsyn.

Is Vladimir Nabokov's influence on contemporary writers a sign of vibrant continuity, or an indication of what was lost? A "known unknown" in his birthplace since the 1926 émigré edition of *Mary*, his works proved a revelation when they were published in the USSR sixty years later, the sweetest of recently forbidden fruit.[29] The official return to Russia began with a few pages from *Speak, Memory* on chess, then *Zashchita Luzhina* (The Defense), a sure sign of "tectonic shifts" that would lead to "climate change" (Golubkov, 194). Mikhail Epstein spoke of feeling "past shock" in encountering, for example, Nabokov and writings of the Gnostic fathers in a journal's single issue (295-6). Boris Paramonov described the Nabokov effect as a *deus ex machina*, presenting readers with the illusion of a very different kind of Russia ("Pisatel' kak prestupnik").

Once they were available to a broader public, Nabokov's texts – some in the original Russian, others translated from the original English – proved irresistible to writers, despite some concern on the 20th anniversary of his death that Nabokov "had not left behind a school, a genre, or any more or less decent imitator" (Kirgizov). Among neo-Nabokovs, there are real *successors* who developed his ideas and expanded his postmodernist techniques, *quoters* who used Nabokov and his words as symbols of their attitude to surrounding reality, and numerous *epigones*. Nabokov's own intertextuality made borrowing from him seem natural, as new works embraced a world of shadows, reflections, prisms, geometrical lines and figures, translucence, opaqueness, lurking danger, mysterious appearances and disappearances, blurred lines between life and death, time shifts, doubles, and a palpable nostalgia. So much of Nabokov pollenated other works that his legacy was in danger of losing its specificity, becoming a ghostly intertextual echo, or worse, a cliché, another writer-turned-adjective. It has been said that Nabokov himself is diffuse, existing only as a vague sensation, lacking historical perspective. "There is no development, no cause and effect," and an esthetic distance, "a dry fog," cuts his texts off from the world, because for him, retreating from history and politics was an attractive option (Kirgizov).[30]

For readers with access to samizdat and foreign editions, Nabokov was not a complete stranger in Russia before 1986, but the authors he inspired reached a limited domestic audience until the Nabokov ban itself was lifted. Genuinely in dialogue with their older colleague, Sasha Sokolov and Andrei Bitov may have served as intermediaries between generations: the 1970s brought Sokolov's *School for Fools*, which Nabokov famously praised, and Bitov's *Pushkin House*. First published abroad, these novels appeared in Russia in 1989 and 1987, respectively.[31] Bitov absorbed Nabokov's style and further

[29] For an account of Nabokov's "return" and reception as of 1995, see Zverev. He points out that even before Nabokov's works could be published at home, some Soviet critics said he was not "organically linked to the Russian tradition" (291, 296), a preemptive dismissal. This charge did not prevent Nabokov from becoming the father of a new tradition.

[30] Aleksandr Dolinin said in a 1997 interview that readers were used to realistically drawn characters, but Nabokov demanded that they overcome such habits. For an early response to Nabokov's tsitatnost', see: Kuritsyn 1992b, 225-32.

[31] Kuritsyn describes Bitov's intersections of reality and 19th century literature in a way that could apply to Nabokov (1992b, 228). After reading The Gift, Bitov put Pushkin House aside for a half-year (von Hirsch, 57-74). On Sokolov, see: Orobii, 18-41.

developed his techniques, while sharing an attraction to Pushkin and the Symbolists, as seen in *Pushkin House*, with its intertextuality, commentary, "plotlessness," and ambiguous finale that might involve death by Pushkin's pistols, *or* a drunken debauch. *The Symmetry Teacher*, which Bitov calls an 'echo-novel' and a palimpsest, is in dialogue with Nabokov.[32] It begins by claiming this as the author's translation of an obscure English novel by A. Tired Boffin (an anagram of Andrei Bitov); a primary focus is the elusive Urbino Vanoski (anagram of Sirin-Nabokov), who thinks that the country's vast expanses have made plotlessness 'uniquely Russian' (102-5, 136). There are faded photographs, mirrors, shadows, radiance, multiple dimensions, riddles and puzzles, literary commentary, absurd linguistic combinations, and interchangeable narrative elements. *The Monkey Link* offers less conventional narrative in favor of shadows, gambits, dimensions, meta-literary comments, and a note that Freud was an author "disliked by Nabokov" (von Hirsch, 69).

Another talented successor is Dmitry Danilov, whose *Sasha, Hello* appeared in 2022. From the first pages, a thread leads to Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* as the State sentences Sergei to death for sex with a woman under twenty-one. Like Cincinnatus, he is not told the day of his death, but is cruelly reminded of it on his daily jail yard walks. In an upgraded version of Nabokov's fortress, Sergei has internet access and continues teaching on ZOOM. Like Nabokov and Bitov, the narrator lets readers decide whether the story ends with execution or an escape, as Sergei passes by a montage of familiar faces superimposed on a long list of names. For Shishkin in *Pis'movnik* (A Novel in Letters), Nabokov and Sokolov have "become not only targets for imitation but also benchmarks for the continuation of Russian literary traditions" (Orobii, 38).

P'etsukh falls somewhere between follower and borrower, making clever use of Nabokov narrative techniques. In "A New Moscow Philosophy" he turns a familiar text inside out and presents his characters' in an ironic light. The old woman dies from the cold, the Raskolnikov double projects an old photo onto a wall to frighten neighbors, and a young man promises to read more Russian novels. Good and evil are in contention, but the results are the opposite of what was intended.[33] In a nod to *The Gift*, Chernyshevsky, Olga Sokratovna, and Saratov are mentioned. In *The General and His Family*, appearing in 2005, Timur Kibirov includes several Nabokov novels as part of the Brezhnev-era secret reading matter of a military man's rebellious, pregnant daughter. The father cannot understand the world changing around him and the part being played by forbidden literature. In "Nabokov's Inkblot," Mikhail Shishkin, working as a tour guide for a Russian businessman, finds himself in Nabokov's former hotel suite in Montreux. The banned - but secretly present - Nabokov of his youth had "marked the dividing line

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[32] For an online review of the translation, see: Jones. The Symmetry Teacher was published in Russia the same year as Pushkin House. On "plotlessness" and other ties between Nabokov and Bitov, see: von Hirsch, 58.

[33] P'etsukh described Nabokov as having left behind a sense of what makes a writer Russian: mortal fear, and suffering for his homeland, becominga writer "voobshche" (in general) for whom Russia was a "geographical abstraction" (P'etsukh 2005, 164-5).

between Us and Them" (97-112). He thought that seeing the inkblot inside the master's desk drawer would be life changing, but it is the earlier experience of reading that left the greater impression.

Tolstaya and Vodolazkin fall into the category of Nabokov epigones, whose works demonstrate extensive reading and some sense of style, yet lack the original's emotional impact, more "pale" than "fire." Tolstaya's short stories are full of clouds, fog, radiant moonlight, mirrors, shadows, translucence, space slipping away, time collapsing sideways, nocturnal guests, magic lanterns, and memories of a privileged childhood at the dacha – a skillful compendium of tropes from Nabokov's stories, novels, and memoir. A 2005 guide for university students describes her *poetika* as a transplant from Nabokov, especially scenes of childhood (*Sovremennaia russkaia literatura*, 257). Her shadowy, hallucinatory *Slynx* borrows from *Mary*, *Invitation to a Beheading* and other examples of Nabokov's prose (Desiativ, 224-32).

Vodolazkin's *Solovyov and Larionov*, while focusing on a revolutionary-era memoir, features multiple perspectives, light, reflections, Freud, and objects with a life of their own. Although somewhat anchored in the 15th century, the characters in his novel *Laurus* cannot always tell "what time ought to be considered the present," and Coca-Cola bottles show up in a medieval forest (5). Shadows of the plague's dead warn the living, light flickers, clouds race, rivers sparkle, and cities are spectral. The medieval material is an obvious link to Vodolazkin's mentor Likhachev, but the Nabokov borrowings make this livelier than it might have been without them. *The Aviator*'s protagonist shares Nabokov's childhood years, and, by the time he is thawed, Nabokov has also "returned" to Russia. There are built-in time shifts, tricks with light and mirrors, an enfilade of rooms, deep ties to a father, the outskirts of Petersburg, including Oredezh, and a distant, unknown Moscow.

Voinovich's "Etude" was a commentary on a lifestyle rather than a way of writing. Its drunken narrator thinks that he may be the same Nabokov who fled Petersburg for life abroad, where he played chess and tennis, chased butterflies, and wrote *Lolita* to attract perverse readers (Leving, 200-1). In Dovlatov's 1988 "Life is Short," the eccentric *maestro* Levitsky, on the eve of his 70th birthday, is clearly Nabokov, disparaging the Nobel Committee and treating visitors, especially writers, rudely (Leving, 201-4; *Sovremennaia…*, 251-8). Others who could not resist Nabokov include: Pelevin, Sorokin (in *Blue Lard*), Buida, Klekh, and Slavists Alexander Zholkovsky and Andrey Zorin. The results, according to Yuri Leving, received mixed reviews: "It is precisely the potential shattering force of Nabokov's discourse that stops in their tracks writers who encounter him," as Nabokov turns the new text into "a likeness of his own," or leads the writer either to attack - or distance himself from - the original (204-18). Ever the outlier, and despite the appearance of Nabokovian palindromes, shadows, and shattered mirrors, Sharov's *Return to Egypt* was anything but a game, since the fate of Russia was at stake.

Have the klassiki been weaponized? Are texts that draw on them now fruit of a poisonous tree?

> The Russian literary canon ... has provided
> a politically neutral ground where official

> ideology and popular consciousness coexist in a peaceful compromise. (Parts 2008, 65-6)
>
> Not a single one of the great writers wished to serve solely as a column decorating the imperial façade. (Karp, 272)
>
> Russian literature is ... the non-totalitarian consciousness's form of existence in Russia ... Russian literature ... used words to construct the great Russian wall between the state and the people. (Shishkin, 158-9)

These epigraphs, written between 2008 and 2016, sound confident and principled, separating the best of Russian literature from the worst of Russian policy. The term "Great Russian Literature" (*Velikaia russkaia literatura*, sometimes shortened to VRL) has been used for decades to denote an impressive body of works written in a vast country over a comparatively short period of time, part of a resilient national identity attractive to readers and writers, and a useful source of soft power.[34] *Velikii* is an aggrandizing adjective, implying superiority in size, quality, and significance. It has been used to characterize various aspects of Russian history and culture, including the Great Reforms of the 1860s, and the Great Fatherland War of 1941-5. What can be called a "semantically manipulative" word (Thompson, 18), *velikii* was also employed to sort East Slavs into the central, dominant Russian (*velikorusskii*) people, and the peripheral (in the Russian view) Ukrainian population (*malorossiiskii,* or *malorusskii*, from *mal-* indicating something small).

Genis seemed comfortable with cultural use of this adjective in his essays from the early 1990s, citing Arkady Belinkov's claim that great Russian literature was what the authorities had been unable to destroy – making literature the frequent victim of state power, and not its enabler.[35] The 2024 monograph *How Russian Literature Became Great* examines what Hellebust calls "the Tradition," and how works of high aesthetic quality fulfilled a prophetic and redemptive mission at home. As the book comes to an end, its author cannot quite accept the way that "Greatness" – which he finds "an empty concept" – has become a *sine qua non* of Russia's identity. He cites a 2017 textbook's statement that Russia '*can only be* great – or not be at all', which helps explain the state's continuing need "to fill the empty ideological vessel of its greatness with cultural content" (174-5).

Great Russian Literature can be seen as an element of the "Russian World" (which, for Putin, includes vast swaths of the neighborhood), reflecting a traditional and patriotic worldview and way of life, superior to the cultural products of the collective West. In circles close to Putin the claim was made that Europe had begun to "cancel" the traditional

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[34] P'etsukh used velikii pisatel' (a great writer) as an indicator of quality, but added that to be velikii one must do something to which the government objects, a requirement met by most Russian klassiki because "true literature is the sworn enemy of any kind of state structure" (2016, 299-335; and 2005, 191).

[35] Genis, 23. He appears to be citing Belinkov's 1961 book on Yuri Tynianov.

European writing and Christian belief that originally inspired Russian writers to turn their nation into a great power (*velikaia derzhava*). Preserving these classics, and the values they represent, was now up to Russia. Rather than Russian literature being *non*-European, it was the last, best, European literature (Shestakov).

Decades before Great Russian Literature was linked to Putin's aggression, concerns had been raised by such disparate figures as Berdyaev and Paramonov. *The Russian Idea* claimed that Russian literature could have only arisen in "an enormous country," but the hypertrophied State that made both the empire and its culture possible subsequently sought to crush every independent idea (231-2). A half-century later Paramonov called the Russian people undemocratic for preferring good books to a good life, unable to overcome "an almost religious feeling for the classic products of a repressive culture" (5-20). However dangerous they have seemed at times, the classics – both in themselves, and as an influence on subsequent writers – have, in the end, been an ineffective brake on state power.[36]

Parts believes that myths surrounding Russian literature's "greatness" are the first to be reexamined whenever society experiences an identity crisis (2002, 302). Such a crisis was unleashed in 2022 when besieged Ukrainians and their supporters turned Russia's literary pride into a cause for shame, insisting that the literature-dependent "Russian brand" had suffered a self-inflicted blow. Some outside Russia found support in Ewa Thompson's monograph on Russian literature and colonialism, published two decades before the invasion, which accused the *klassiki* and their descendants of complicity in (or willful blindness towards) the state's aggression, making their heroes "part and partial of the Russian colonial project" (28).[37] Emigré historian Anastasia Edel believes that "whatever Russia emerges after the war, it won't be the Russia of Chekhov and Dostoevsky ... with its perennial quest for meaning and capacity for the sublime. It will be a country of warlords and criminals."[38] Great Russian Literature's reputation abroad has certainly been tarnished as both pro- and anti-Russian commentators link it to Putin's vision of the nation's destiny. Whether this will alter the way the classics function as a resource for Russian writers will only be known as new works emerge.

Some writers have already circumvented the 19th century canon to draw from pre-imperial sources. Vodolazkin set *Laurus* in the 15th century, Sorokin looked to the 16th century in *Day of the Oprichnik*, and Sharov privileged medieval spirituality in *The Rehearsals*, ignoring traditional Russian literary concerns over psychology and the "burning issues" of the day (Etkind, 308). Elizarov's Librarian, confined to a monkish cell, rereads a bizarrely chosen "sacred" text for all eternity. Bykov's Living Souls fight a contemporary war between Varangians and Khazars, while Akunin has frequently chosen

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[36] Russia's Dangerous Texts (Parthé 2004) examines the ways in which writers and works were seen to threaten state power.

[37] Thompson makes virtually no allowances for the fraught writer-state relationship during the same period that she covers, and finds fault with post-World War II literature for reinforcing "the perception of unprecedented victimhood" (31). See: Parthé 2004. For a perceptive review of Thompson's book, see Cassedy.

[38] Edel called her essay "Staring Down the Black Hole of Russia's Future." See also: Bennetts, Yermolenko, and Schmemann.

pre-modern settings. Ironically, writers looking to the distant past seem *less* interested in origin stories and more focused on Second Comings and Last Judgments. That dire focus seems appropriate, as Putin's government has itself embraced earlier times, polishing the résumés of such figures as Ivan Grozny, and seeming to embrace the ancient concept of *volia* (elemental freedom) in accepting (for a while at least) military support from the Wagner Group and Cossacks (Arnold).

The narrator in Dostoevsky's *Demons* lamented: "What our troubled time consisted of, and from what to what our transition was, I do not know, and no one, I think, knows" (462). Will Russia's writers keep finding inspiration in the rear-view mirror, and will Russian readers continue to appreciate both older works and newer ones bearing the classics' imprint? Yuri Slezkine believes that few in the émigré community will take the 'decolonialization' route, with most finding it possible reject the current regime while continuing to admire Chekhov (31). As literature's creators themselves move abroad, criticizing Putin and the war from a distance, and publishers and bookstores are subject to greater scrutiny at home, one can assume there will be attempts to disrupt access to expatriates' texts.[39] For two centuries, the experience of literature in Russia has been one person reading, often the same text as many others, in a silent and powerful collective act.[40] That, at least, should have a future, at a time when so much else about the trajectory of the nation and its literature is impossible to discern through the dry Nabokovian fog that covers Russia.

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[39] By 2024, Boris Akunin was labeled a foreign agent and added to a terrorist list, as distribution and sales of his books in Russia appear to have been halted. He has responded by establishing a website to sell his works, and those of other banned authors, and has included a comic adaption of a Gogol story, saying that 'classical Russian literature is the best way to escape from classical Russian dictatorship' (MacFarquhar).

[40] "Alone with a book, a person becomes an independent entity" (Kantor 2005, 15). See also: Parthé 2004, Chapters 1, 6, and the Afterword.

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