

## The Window to the West in Andrei Bitov's *Pushkin House*

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**Конь – на скале, царь – на коне –  
на месте кажутся оне...  
(Стоит, назначив рандеву  
с Европой [ . . . ])**

(The Horse on the boulder, the tsar on the horse  
it seems they are in their places...)

(He stands, having set a date  
with Europe [ . . . ])

—Andrei Bitov

**«ДВЕНАДЦАТЬ»** (“The Twelve”)

**(Конспект романа «Пушкинский дом»)**

(Synopsis of the novel *Pushkin House*)

Andrei Bitov deconstructs and reconstructs the edifice of Russian culture with a new window to the West in his novel *Pushkin House* (1964-1971). The setting of this “novel-museum” in the “city-museum” of Leningrad (formerly and latterly Saint Petersburg) draws particular attention to the *location* of Russian culture. As in Pushkin’s poem “The Bronze Horseman” (1830), Petersburg represents in Bitov’s novel the “window to the west” established by Peter the Great. It is also Russia’s most artificial city. Bitov as a writer consciously relates to the city’s artfulness. He has referred to Petersburg itself as “some kind of text”:

One receives a literary education simply by walking around the city, from the fact of being enclosed in a type of form, a form that is more than beautiful, it is artful (*iskusstvennaia*). For that reason I would say that Leningrad teaches a writer, by putting him in the situation of a literary hero from his youth. (Bitov, “Sviazan famil’no” 6)

Bitov’s literary hero Lyova in *Pushkin House* becomes aware of the museumlike quality of his city as he begins the process of coming to terms with his position in the contemporary Soviet cultural and historical situation. Through the story of Lyova’s maturation, as well as by means of the openly artful structure of the novel, Bitov confronts the reification and suppression of culture in Soviet Russian society. Just as Lyova replaces the broken window in the Pushkin House museum, so Bitov in the novel *Pushkin House* aims to revive living connections between contemporary Russian culture and the past and between Russian culture and the West.

Studies of Bitov’s novel have often treated the Russian literary allusions and intertextual connections. Less frequently critics have addressed the dialogue with Western sources in the novel. This dialogue includes a number of textual references and, as I contend, significant structural affinities with Western literary models. From early in Bitov’s career, Soviet critics saw connections between his stories and certain Western literary sources. Numerous Soviet critics saw the influence of Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Salinger in Bitov’s prose, writers commonly invoked in discussion of the “Youth Prose” movement with which Bitov was identified (see discussion of this in *Chances* 31). Critic V. Ermilov perceived in Bitov’s story “One Country” a sentimental journey of the Sternian type. More recently, Western critics have drawn connections between *Pushkin House* and works by Dumas (Shaw), Dickens, and Proust (*Chances* 226-27, Baker), and Nabokov (von Hirsch), studies to

be considered in more detail below. Bitov's novel has been compared in passing to Joyce's *Ulysses*, and other allusions remain to be considered.<sup>1</sup> Treatment of the novel in the context of Western postmodernism reflects current comparative interests and elective affinities (Spieker, Hellebust). These studies raise provocative questions about Bitov's innovation from a new perspective. Yet Bitov's artistic vision appears to develop in the first place on the basis of Russian predecessors. Bitov does not emulate Western sources or the most current trends in the West as such; rather, he aims to revive in a new context the Pushkinian model of Russian culture, which draws inspiration from the West to develop as a uniquely Russian entity. The view toward the West from Bitov's *Pushkin House* demonstrates the situation of Russian culture in the contemporary world apart from the West. The historical experience of Bitov's generation in the Soviet Union necessitated a renovation of the house of Russian culture, and the new edifice shows the traces of recent domestic experience.

Contemporary Western culture had a great impact on Bitov and other writers of his generation, of course. Bitov addresses the "small holes" in the Iron Curtain appearing after Stalin's death in his commentary: "We watched the first French, Italian, Polish films, we read the first American, German, Icelandic books." Writers like Remarque and Hemingway were gulped down as fast as they were allowed (Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom* 1996, 369-70).<sup>2</sup> With this new openness came also a painful awareness of Soviet ignorance of Western developments. In a 1990 interview Bitov reflected on the revelation of contemporary art from the West:

But we were ordinary post-war children—with the usual education of that time, the same everyone had. The usual timorous, poorly informed family. Fear was the only information at that time. Then suddenly there was the thaw and the possibility—I remember how I was struck by the very

possibility of contemporary literature, the practical possibility of writing about the life surrounding me. In 1956, I saw Fellini's *La Strada* and I read Laxness's *The Atom Station* in 1955. They appeared as soon as they were created. These were real events in my biography. They proved the possibility of contemporary art, but what struck me even more was that this art was real for us, too. (Bitov, "Sviazan famil'no" 4)

The Italian film and the Icelandic novel blew in on breezes from the West, fostering Bitov's initial creative growth.<sup>3</sup>

The UNESCO conference on the modern novel in August 1963 in Leningrad brought Western writers to Bitov's home city. Discussion of the French nouveau roman provoked especially polarized discussion, with Soviet conservatives attacking the decadence of Western "modernism" and "formalism," with its roots in Proust, Joyce, and Kafka and its contemporary hypostasis in the French new novel.<sup>4</sup> Bitov did not attend the conference, and he does not read French, but the increased exposure to experimental new trends in the West and the clearly drawn battle lines surely influenced his development as a writer during this year before he undertook *Pushkin House*. Bitov recalled friend Gleb Goryshin's comments after reading Bitov's novella *Life in Windy Weather* (written in 1963, but rejected for publication until 1967): "Well, if this were France, they would have published you." Bitov continued, "At that time they were publishing in *Inostranka* [the journal *Inostrannaia Literatura* (*Foreign Literature*)] selection of excerpts from the 'new novel': Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor (that means, I read [them] in 1964). For me it was just a novella, for some—a new novel" (Bitov, *Dachnaia mestnost'* 96). The twin labels of "formalism" and "modernism" marked literary tendencies that were anathema to the conservatives in the Soviet cultural establishment and attractive to many young liberal writers. Such

labels designated what was cutting edge in the Western world as well as the suppressed treasures of Russian modernism.

Writing against the perceived reification and provincialism of Russian culture in the Soviet era, Bitov actively strove to trace anew the lines from present to past and from Russia to the West. In *Pushkin House* Bitov describes the closed cultural world of his hero, a world in which only tenuous connections to the West are preserved. In the opening pages the narrator evokes the “nonsurviving” phials of Grandma’s generation, remembered side by side with the “great novel” by Alexander Dumas, *The Three Musketeers*, and Mama’s kiss on the top of the head (6). Bitov creates the impression of a child’s perception. The few remaining links highlight the severing of more significant cultural links between Russia and the West. Among the items saved for Uncle Dickens, Lyova sees a Gillette razor (26). In the commentary to the Russian edition, the “author” expands on the significance of this foreign item in his own biography:

This device for safe shaving was an idiosyncratic monument to a lost civilization in my childhood. My father shaves with it to this day. While shaving, he would demonstrate exactly which part of the construction Mr. Gillette patented so that half a century or more later no one could improve on it; thus, he raked in millions. Truly, my childhood was characterized by the absence of imported items. . . . And my first shave was with that razor. When I found out that my future father-in-law shaved with a “Gillette” also, I felt that my fiancée had become even closer to me. This ritual of screwing open the razor, the insertion of the blade (“the calling-card of a Martian,” as Mandelstam called it), and then the wiping off and blowing out of the little cylinders made me a man. (*Pushkinskii dom* 1996, 357-58)

The razor remains as an artifact of lost civilization, associated with the author-narrator’s own maturation. The childish

associations of the razor in the novel suggest an infantile relationship to the West. The author implicates himself in his alter-ego's generational experience: Lyova loves to leaf through the monograph on Beardsley, described as “sweet and small as a childish sin,” in Dickens's study, and he borrows the novels *Aphrodite*, *Atlantis*, *The Green Hat*, books that “fill in” his childhood: “When could he have read them, except under the bedcovers by flashlight?” asks the narrator (32). The author of the commentary wryly notes that his grandmother read the books by her contemporaries in the original (unlike him). Only to a person with his limited cultural experience could these novels have seemed like “modernism.”<sup>5</sup>

Bitov alludes to Mandelstam under cover of far less sensitive trappings of “world culture” in the form of the Gillette razor and popular European novels. Bitov expresses indirectly and ironically Mandelstam's “longing for world culture.” While he does not figure prominently as an explicit predecessor in the text of Bitov's novel, Mandelstam apparently exerted a powerful influence on Bitov's conception of the Soviet writer. Bitov recalls reading Mandelstam's “Fourth Prose” in 1963, when he received a samizdat copy of the 1930 text for one night and copied it. Mandelstam wrote angrily, “I alone in Russia work from the voice while all around the bitch pack writes. What the hell kind of writer am I?!” (Mandelstam 181) Bitov remembered: “Almost on the very back sides of ‘Fourth prose’ began my second prose. . . .” Mandelstam's anger sparked Bitov's own creative impulses. He felt, “the energy of something like an uprising, of hatred for the position we all found ourselves in, and I, was, so successfully, you see, born as a writer” (*Dachnaia mestnost'* 94-95)<sup>6</sup> As part of his rebellion, Bitov reached out toward a world culture of which they had been deprived.

Bitov makes obvious reference in the novel to popular writers likely to be familiar to his hero Lyova at early stages of his education, and alludes through them to more abstruse subtexts

not available to all Soviet readers. Like Mandelstam in his poem “Dombey and Son,” Bitov (who knows English well and professes a long-standing love for English literature) takes liberties with Dickens as an intertextual referent. In Bitov’s novel Uncle Mitya bears the sobriquet *Dickens*, “merely because he was very fond of him and reread him all his life, and because of something else that hadn’t been put into words . . .” (1996, 25). The uncensored character of the story of Uncle Dickens comes first of all from his experience in the camps (which is masked under long military service in the version of this section published in *Zvezda* in 1973). Uncle’s Russian name, Dmitrii Ivanovich Iuvashev, also hints at the repressed Russian writer Daniil Kharms (Daniil Ivanovich Iuvachev, 1895-1942), who lost his life in the Soviet prison system. Kharms was, according to Bitov, one of the few Russian “dandies,” a phenomenon more associated with English culture than Russian.<sup>7</sup> Bitov remarked in an interview, “In general, organic eccentricity (like that of D. Kharms or V. Goliavkin,<sup>8</sup> is not, it seems, characteristic in Russia of her readers or her writers” (“Pokhval’noe” 5). Uncle Dickens recalls another eccentric Uncle who bears wounds from military service, Uncle Toby in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>9</sup>

Lyova instinctively likes Uncle Dickens, the odd and crusty alcoholic who begins his drinking every evening at the Hotel Europe. Lyova responds to Dickens’s elegance, his individuality and his taste. Uncle Dickens speaks more plainly than anyone Lyova has yet encountered, and, listening to him, Lyova senses the regeneration of meaning in words and history. Yet Lyova approaches Dickens egotistically, as a child would, expecting Dickens to solve his problems for him. When his dramatic hopes for finding his true father in Dickens are dashed, Lyova has a revelation. He sees Dickens as another human being existing apart from his own needs and expectations, and he understands Dickens’s position with a flash of surprising empathy: “And now, distinctly, in a way that had never happened to him in his life, not

with anybody, he pictured Uncle Mitya as existing *individually*, apart from him. . . . Uncle Mitya stood before him in the doorway, an old, unhappy, destroyed man . . .” (42). This marks the beginning of moral consciousness for Lyova. Yet the narrator hastens to note that Lyova’s arrogance and self-satisfaction annul his apparent progress:

It seemed to Lyova that he had stepped over Uncle Mitya, too.

But there he exaggerated.

Was he incapable of imagining that Uncle Mitya’s shame or disgust might have been . . . not for himself?” (43)

A more profound moral revelation for Lyova takes place against the backdrop of references to French literature. In the section entitled “Madame Bonacieux” (a section preceding the third part of the novel but following it chronologically), Lyova imagines Faina as Madame Bonacieux and himself as d’Artagnan in a dramatic scene from Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers*, racing to catch her as she falls from the convent window to breathe her last in his arms. This reliance on preconceived dramatic roles in Lyova’s imagination encapsulates the immaturity of his relationship to Faina. Lyova builds the scene out of the book he read as a child, sitting with “his father’s skullcap jammed on his head,” sipping his “oversweet tea” (216). The reference to Dumas’s novel evokes Lyova’s childish conceptions of himself and his relationship to other people. Kurt Shaw outlines broad parodic connections between Bitov’s and Dumas’s novels: Lyova mistakenly assumes that Faina speaks French, and the ring passes between Faina and Lyova as an instrument of power and deception. Thus Faina possesses evil qualities associated with Milady and represents a debased Bonacieux, while Lyova serves as a mock d’Artagnan.<sup>10</sup> Lyova’s imagination plausibly reflects the imprint of Dumas’s exceedingly popular novel.<sup>11</sup>



The scene contains parallels to Proust's *Swann's Way* that are less explicit, but nonetheless significant.<sup>12</sup> Lyova opens the window to see Faina truly for the first time since their relationship began, experiencing a profound sense of love and sympathy for her. Harold Baker writes of the symbolism of the window:

The window signifies the difference between values and identities enclosed within a system or institution, pertaining, if you will, to the museum-world so much at issue in this novel, and those outside it, of an unconditional and intractable reality. Lyova throws the window open to see Faina in her otherness. If Bitov is as close a reader of Proust as my argument presumes, this is a definitive statement of his hero's distance from that of the earlier writer, the distance between love trapped in narcissism versus love capable of growth and transformation. (621-22)

Baker notes the parallel between demimondaine Odette and vulgar Faina, the male protagonist's descent into consuming jealousy in both novels, and the name of Albina's cat, Gilberte. He points out that Proust's mediation of desire by artistic representation (Odette's resemblance to Botticelli's Zipporah) appears also in Bitov's novel, where Uncle Dickens alerts Lyova to Albina's resemblance to a portrait by Botticelli's contemporary Ghirlandaio (Baker 610). Baker relates this motif to the dialectic of subject and object, self and other in Bitov's novel. The significance of opening the window in this scene recalls the commonplace that in Proust windows are never opened, except once by Albertine before her flight.

Bitov draws attention to windows at several key moments in his novel. Windows let in light and (occasionally violent) winds of change. Bitov characterizes the era of cultural thaw in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death as a time when people in movies open windows (23). Lyova and his mother are half-done washing

windows when Lyova sees his father and fixes an image tinged with jealousy and distrust in his mind (15-16). Lyova overcomes his childish illusions in the “Madame Bonacieux” passage, appreciating Faina’s autonomous otherness when he sees her through the window. Following the duel in the museum, Dickens helps Lyova replace the window broken in his fight with Mitishatyev (325-26). At the end, the author-narrator last glimpses his hero Lyova through the window of Pushkin House. He decides, like Lyova, that he does not have the right to intrude on another’s life, even that of his hero, who has passed from being a literary character into “real life” (351). The window is the aperture between inside and outside,<sup>13</sup> between life and fiction, between stasis and change, between one person and another. It is the interface that must be seen through clearly in order to permit creative recognition of and relationship to others: other people and other cultures.

The intense psychology of Bitov’s novel likely owes much to the Proustian influence. As Baker notes, beyond the erotic drama, very little “happens” in Bitov’s novel, as little happens in Proust’s. The connection between Bitov’s novel and Proust’s modern classic has further motivation in Bitov’s close acquaintance with Lydia Ginzburg. The author-narrator acknowledges Ginzburg in the commentaries as the source of ideas juxtaposing L. N. Tolstoy and Proust (*Pushkin House* 222; *Pushkinskii dom*, 1996, 374). Ginzburg spoke of reading Proust in the original in the 1920s: “Proust in many ways defined my understanding of the contemporary novel.” In this interview she described Bitov as one of her young protégés, the one she felt became a “real prosaicist” (Ginzburg 7). Bitov recalled of himself, the poet Aleksandr Kushner (the other young writer singled out by Ginzburg), their wives and friends, “We were all ‘proustians’ at that time,” under the influence of Ginzburg, their friend and teacher (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1999, 94).

Ginzburg provided Bitov and other young writers with a connection to an era of greater openness. She taught them about modern classics, the Silver Age and the formalists. The pronounced accent on form in Bitov's novel, rather than on a plot told through the transparent conventions of realism, constituted his brand of formalism. Iurii Trifonov used the term "sharp vision" (*ostrovidenie*) in 1964 to describe Bitov's collection of stories *The Big Balloon* (*Bol'shoi shar*). Wolf Schmid recalled Trifonov's designation and linked Bitov's device to that of the formalists. Schmid said, "From 'sharp vision' (*ostrovidenie*) it is not far to 'estrangement' (*ostranenie*). And in fact our author never did hide his sympathy for this device and the school that made it the center of its esthetics, an esthetics opposed to mimesis, one of constant innovation." Bitov's narrator in *Life in Windy Weather*, an author, alter ego of Bitov, advocates the search for new forms in art and the attempt to shed ossified convention and come closer to "living truth," calling this search "formalism" (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1999, 13-14; Schmid 376). Schmid explores Bitov's travel literature and other "sentimental journeys" in Bitov's prose as one way in which "sharp vision" developed (Schmid 377). In *Pushkin House* the sharp vision needed to see clearly through windows serves as a metaphor for the creative and fresh sight needed to engage meaningfully with others.

The emphasis on form in Bitov's novel constitutes a reaction against the mandated aesthetics of socialist realism and the forging of new links to Russia's own modernist heritage and continuing modernism in the West. The pronounced metafictional character of Bitov's novel and its reflection on Russia's literary heritage resonates strongly, of course, with Nabokov's *The Gift*, a connection explored in von Hirsch's "The Presence of Nabokov in Bitov's Fiction and Nonfiction." Bitov says he read *The Gift* in December 1970 when his own novel was two-thirds finished, and the shock of recognition interrupted and altered his further work.<sup>14</sup> Bitov wrote later that Nabokov represented a branch of

that hypothetical Russian literature growing out of culture and civilization and continuing in contact with it (Introduction 8). He playfully juxtaposed Nabokov and Pushkin, musing on celebrations of Pushkin's bicentennial and Nabokov's centennial in 1999 as the marks of a new age (Introduction 4-5). Von Hirsch explores the connection of Bitov and Nabokov to Pushkin on the basis of their attention to literary form. They are writers who chose a Pushkinian tradition of aesthetic freedom over the social utilitarian trend dominant in nineteenth-century realism and socialist realism ("Presence of Nabokov" 57-58). Dmitrii Segal's study has relevance here, as von Hirsch notes: Segal identified both *The Gift* and *Pushkin House* as later examples of the "literature about literature" developed particularly in works of the late 1920s and 1930s. These works possessed roots in those potentials in Pushkin and Gogol's works that were not developed in the dominant schools of the Russian tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Segal contextualizes the metaliterary texts he talks about in terms of the European novelistic tradition, as described by Shklovskii and Bakhtin and exemplified by *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* (153). Indeed, the idea of a European literary tradition inspiring Russian writers seems the best framework for understanding how Bitov places an open window to the West within the structure of the novel. Edward Brown remarked in his review of *Pushkin House* that Bitov's novel calls to mind both *Tristram Shandy* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, a novel that "owed much to the Shandyian model."<sup>16</sup> In his article "*Eugene Onegin* (Pushkin and Sterne)" Shklovskii described what *Eugene Onegin* owes to *Tristram Shandy* (a novel he called elsewhere the "most typical novel of world literature" (204). Shklovskii designated both works parodic novels, works that parody not only the mores and typical characters of an epoch, but the very techniques and construction of the novel (206). Bakhtin also argued in his studies of the novel that self-reflexive parody has been characteristic of the novel genre since its inception.

Shklovskii outlines the “Sternian” techniques common to *Tristram Shandy* and *Eugene Onegin*, techniques that figure prominently also in *Pushkin House*. These include a rearrangement of chronology in a demonstratively nonlinear plot. All three novels open with a glimpse into events whose order and meaning are explained only later: Shklovskii compares the initially mysterious exclamation opening *Shandy*, “Pray, my Dear . . . have you not forgot to wind up the clock?” to Onegin’s anticipation of bedside scenes with his uncle. The scenes will not take place, since the uncle is already dead at the beginning of *Eugene Onegin*. This literary “uncle” resonates with Bitov’s Uncle Dickens, too. Bitov’s novel opens with its own teaser for the reader: a corpse lying on the floor, an explanation for which is not forthcoming for hundreds of pages. All three authors disturb the narrative flow in a variety of ways. Sterne’s narrator comments on missing chapters (e.g. IV.25), and in *Onegin* headers indicate stanzas omitted or simply not written. Bitov gives us “versions and variants” of his plot, altering plot information, confusing chronology, and narrating events elliptically (such as, for example, Modest Platonovich’s end). Found or inserted texts figure prominently in all three novels: Sterne provides Yorick’s sermons, Pushkin presents Tat’iana’s and Onegin’s letters, and Bitov includes a scrap of newspaper, stories by Uncle Dickens, writings by Modest Platonovich, and Lyova’s critical article. Sterne’s text features graphic embellishments, such as the black page and the marble page. Likewise, Bitov’s text presents Lyova’s drawings—his schemes of the characters as molecules.<sup>17</sup> All three novels feature abundant digressions of various types by a garrulous author/narrator. Frequently these digressions treat metaliterary themes. Sterne’s narrator says, “I have a strong propensity in me to begin this chapter very nonsensically, and I will not baulk my fancy” (I.23). Pushkin’s narrator ends chapter 1, for example, reflecting on the plan for his novel, his hero’s name, and the abundant

contradictions. Bitov's sections under the heading "Italics Mine" provide space for extended reflections on literary technique and the construction of the novel at hand. Pushkin develops a complex relationship of author-narrator to hero echoed in Bitov's detailed consideration of the authorial relationship to his hero Lyova. Finally, the ends of novels by Bitov's predecessors famously confound readers' expectations of closure, and in Bitov's novel, Lyova thinks, "This is the end . . . not believing it" (315), "*The novel is ended—life continues . . .*" the author/narrator says (318). Subsequently, however, Bitov's novel keeps going, or at least its heterogeneous parts continue for a couple of epilogues, an afterword, and a commentary.

All of these structural elements serve in Bitov's novel, along with his parodic allusions to classic Russian literature, to question the relationship of literature to life, of author to hero, and of writer and reader to literature and culture. Bitov's technique seems at once radically innovative and grounded in the classic novelistic tradition.<sup>18</sup> Formalists theorize parody as the impulse to develop a new literary language and new literary forms. Certainly, Bitov seeks through his playful metafictional structure an alternative to socialist realism. He also, in formalist fashion, reaches back past the socialist-realist fathers to revive connections with his Russian forefather and his English "uncle." In this way Bitov exemplifies the connections between present and past and Russia and the West made through artistic form. His novel serves as homage to the individual creative geniuses reflected in Sterne's and Pushkin's novels, just as it highlights the power of artistic form to preserve their spirit for generations to come. In his own highly individual response to these authors (and the larger Russian and European literary tradition they represent), Bitov enacts the living continuation of an organically connected tradition. In part he aims to revive the "lively apprehension of Pushkin" Shklovskii feared was being lost in 1923 (Shklovskii 205). Clearly, Bitov rejects the official Soviet criticism of

formalism as art removed from life. His formal parody emphasizes connections and exemplifies the creative response necessary for a meaningful relationship to any sphere, be it literature, people, or “real life” as a whole.

Bitov’s text takes on these concerns within the narrative. Modest Platonovich’s background and scholarly work recall the formalists and scholars associated with them. He is a linguist like Jakobson. Bitov identifies Bakhtin as one of Modest Platonovich’s prototypes (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1996, 364). The “flashy and formal” colleague of grandfather’s could be Shklovskii (46). Lyova’s article “Three Prophets” reproduces an idea of Tynianov’s. The novel’s themes of primacy and evolution from generation to generation suggest a parody of formalist theories of literary evolution. In section 1, Bitov has his hero subscribe (wittingly or no) to the formalist theories of kinship in his own life, as he looks for a replacement for his father, first in Uncle Dickens and then in his grandfather.<sup>19</sup> However, Lyova’s preconceived notions and egocentric expectations make him unable to appreciate fully the individuality and authenticity of Dickens’s personality and Modest Platonovich’s thought.

Modest Platonovich warns Lyova about the dangers of a progressive ideology and a consumer attitude to spiritual concepts, values, and culture. He forecasts for Lyova’s generation, “Now you’re going through Tsvetaeva and Pushkin, next you’ll go through Lermontov and somebody else, and then you’ll stumble on Tyutchev and Fet . . .” (65). Lyova brings the same type of egocentric blindness and preconceived notions to literary works and to the people in his life. Modest Platonovich wonders at Lyova’s rigid way of thinking: “The present-day system of education must be a more serious business than I thought. . . . Neither facts nor conditions nor reality exists for you—only concepts of them. You simply have no suspicion that life exists!” (76). Lyova has been trained to think himself very smart and very good, the reward for accepting preformed

opinions and for taking without protest or question what is handed to him. In many cases the promise of the “real thing” conceals poor substitutes. At the anniversary party in the Café Molecule, everyone present has been admitted in place of the famous guests invited, including Lyova in place of Shklovskii. Sprats are served instead of caviar, and in place of the promised Hitchcock or Fellini film something wretched is shown (207-08).<sup>20</sup> Here and throughout Lyova’s story Bitov treats the tendency of his generation to accept the substitute for the original, the doled-out concept of something in place of the thing itself. Bitov leads Lyova, and urges his readers, toward a transcendence of this mentality, toward an awareness of the otherness of fellow human beings and the mystery of the product of human genius, the work of literary art.

Hampered as they are by the legacy of the Bolshevik revolution and Stalinist regime, this generation of Soviet Russian youths can transcend a limited mentality, Bitov suggests. Lyova begins to approach literature individually and creatively in his article “Three Prophets,” which, despite many shortcomings, does, the narrator insists, express something of Lyova himself, and this is valuable (224). It serves a purpose: it spurs him (the narrator, reader of the article) to go home and check his volumes of the poets discussed (240). Lyova suggests the possibility of brave and perspicacious creative individuals capable of shedding canonical preconceptions and transcending the anxiety engendered by “legends” about progressive continuity and theories about the great “relay race” of thought. Such individuals could regenerate canonical authors, inspire a fresh look at the originals, and illumine, perhaps, something of their secret.

Russian culture has not been destroyed, Modest Platonovich asserts. The impression that it has been destroyed, that all is lost, can be traced in the novel to Blok’s final writings. Bitov takes a stanza from Blok’s last poem, “To Pushkin House” (1921) as the epigraph to his novel. Another stanza, including Blok’s quotation



of Pushkin's words "*secret freedom*" appears at the end (353). In his speech at the House of Writers (*Dom Literatov*), "On the Poet's Calling," read in 1921, close to the time of the writing of the last poem, Blok laments the loss of peace and freedom, that "*secret freedom*" necessary to the poet: "And the poet is dying, because he already has no air to breathe; life has lost its meaning." Shklovskii quotes this line in his article on Pushkin and Sterne, adding, "Soon after this we buried A. Blok" (203). But Bitov's Modest Platonovich, writing shortly after the appearance of Blok's last poem, claims *secret freedom* is not lost. Modest Platonovich rejects the vulgar apprehension of his colleague N. of Blok's "*secret freedom*," which Modest Platonovich knows he does not grasp. Yet there is a true "*secret freedom*" that endures, Modest Platonovich insists (353-54). The revolution, ignorance, and violence cannot destroy it. On the contrary, they preserve it. Modest Platonovich rants at Lyova in their meeting, "you think that '17 [the Bolshevik revolution in 1917] destroyed, devastated our previous culture. But it didn't; it canned and preserved it. What matters is the break, not the destruction. The authorities froze there untoppled, unmoving: they're all in their places, from Derzhavin to Blok . . ." (64). At the end of the novel the reader witnesses the formation of this conclusion in Modest Platonovich's consciousness: "The Revolution won't destroy the past, she'll stop it at her back. All has perished—and in this very hour the great Russian culture has been born, this time forever, because it will not develop in its sequel" (353). Culture has been frozen into a Sphinx. But it has not been destroyed. And Pushkin's *secret freedom* endures: Modest Platonovich experiences acutely a sense of this freedom as something as ubiquitous as the sky above. Perhaps, he thinks, these very conditions oppressing him have been that which was necessary for him to look up and learn that he is *free*. So long as culture is preserved and *secret freedom* awaits the person who

will look up to find it, there exists the hope—not the certainty, but the hope—for the rebirth of culture’s “Phoenix sense” (355).

Reviving the culture of the past is not the sole task, and emulating the West is impossible. Bitov highlights the difference in the historical situation of his contemporary Soviet Russians, who take possession of a renovated edifice of culture. Bitov’s author-narrator slowly and wearily builds his novel-house (245, 340), and Lyova quickly and in agitation reconstructs the museum within it. The museum’s fantastic renovation at the end of section 3 suggests its destruction (like that of Russian culture itself) was merely a bad dream. Repairing the apparent damage, Lyova outfits the museum room with a new window. Bitov’s readers contemplate a restored Pushkin House, one absent its “curly-haired lodger,” but with new residents. The Institute, culture as edifice, Petersburg, Russia, the novel—each is Pushkin’s House.

Bitov’s author-narrator tells us in a footnote that he decided on the title *Pushkin House* only after successive authorial encroachments, “*A la recherche du destin perdu, or Hooligans Wake*” (345). Notwithstanding the irony, Bitov here suggests a conscious possession of Pushkin’s House in light of other possible, Western, cultural constructions. Indeed, the Pushkin House represents the proper dwelling of the contemporary Russian writer—accession to his own patrimony. Originally built with a view to the West, Bitov replaces the window with a new one. The view from it, metafictionally speaking, helps define the location of the distinctive Russian house oriented toward the West, but not in the West. Only Russian writers were forced to confront the radical break in culture occasioned by the Bolshevik revolution. The West enjoyed a continuous cultural tradition in the twentieth century. There is no need to envy Western Europe for this, Bitov contends in another interview:

Incidentally, perhaps internal freedom is itself culture . . . We often understand incorrectly, say, European civilization, either

with envy, with hostility, or as something alluring, and we are never correct. That life we could not live (nor should we), and their wares, their products often please us because we understand: that is the result of the uninterrupted work of several uninterrupted generations—that is culture, even if it was reincarnated from great Dutch painting into apartment design . . . It seems to me that playing catch up is a fruitless game. We need to find our own path. (“Ob otkryvshikhsia” 31-32)

The path of contemporary Russian culture traced by Bitov leads out of the trauma of recent history. Precisely this trauma offered the opportunity to develop the precious sense of secret freedom accessible to Modest Platonovich. Internal freedom cannot be identical to the uninterrupted cultural tradition, but it too represents culture, it is linked to the values and representation of values fashioned by human beings out of their own particular heritage. The residents of Pushkin House look toward the West and perceive their own location. At the same time, the West continues to contemplate with wonder the house that Pushkin built.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A. Iu. Ar’ev compared *Pushkin House* to *Ulysses*, suggesting the importance of one day in Bitov’s novel, 7 Nov. 1967 (in fact, three days figure prominently in the third section), as an analogue to 16 June 1904 in *Ulysses* (Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom* 1999, 459-60). The importance of the respective cityscapes (Petersburg/Dublin) serves as an obvious point of comparison between Bitov’s novel and *Ulysses*, a work Modest Platonovich dangles in front of Lyova, although I have not encountered extended consideration of the parallels. Bitov’s novel contains

also a network of classical sources, from Homer to Zeno's paradox to Virgil and Dante, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See the commentaries to the Russian edition (*Pushkinskii dom* 1996), which have not appeared in English translation, although the Dalkey Archive Press edition, like the 1978 Ardis edition of the novel, includes a specious listing of it in the table of contents. Translations from sources in Russian, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Similar accounts of Bitov's "origins" as a writer appear in earlier sources (see Chances 18). Chances argues for the importance of *La Strada* as a subtext for the story "One Country," (32). Halldor Laxness, an Icelandic writer, won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955.

<sup>4</sup> In the published account of the proceedings, the representatives of the "new novel," characterized as "this modernist movement," "furiously presented their point of view and just as furiously attacked Socialist realist literature." I. Anisimov repeatedly noted that the "spiritual fathers" of the side, who "did not accept the Socialist conception," were Proust, Joyce, and Kafka. ("Roman" 222-23, 247, 249).

<sup>5</sup> The author-narrator of the commentary describes his grandmother as a contemporary of Loti (Pierre Loti, pseudonym of Julien Viaud, 1850–1923) and Pierre Benoit (1886-1962), author of *Atlantis (L'Atlantide, 1919)*. *The Green Hat* (1924) is by Michael Arlen (1895-1956). See Bitov's commentary (*Pushkinskii dom* 1996, 359).

<sup>6</sup> Bitov claims that his samizdat copy of Mandelstam's "Fourth Prose," with his mistakes, formed the basis of the first publication of that text in Czechoslovakia a year or so later (*Dachnaia mestnost'* 94-95).

<sup>7</sup> Memoirists describe Kharms's strange dress, among other eccentricities. See, for example, Vladimir Glotser's introduction to the memoirs of Kharms's second wife, Marina Malich (Durnovo and Glotser 31, 51-52). Kharms was also a prickly

personality, like Dickens. Kharms claimed to hate children. He wrote in his notebooks, “To poison children is cruel. But, after all, something has to be done with them!” (Ustinov and Kobrinskii 503) On the English character of eccentricity for the Russian consciousness, it might be noted that Clarence Brown describes the trousers with a loud checked pattern favored by the Russian poet Piast (and reportedly once affected by Mandelstam as well). They were known, he says, as “Copperfields” (Brown 200).

<sup>8</sup> Viktor Goliavkin (b. 1929) was a children’s writer and unofficial prosaicist. He was associated with the literary group (*lito*) attached to the publishing house Sovetskii pisatel’ in Leningrad, where Bitov also was active. Goliavkin was known for his absurd miniatures (Savitskii 197).

<sup>9</sup> According to Sterne’s narrator, Uncle Toby represents the corollary to the truism about England’s inconstant climate, which has furnished England with such a variety of odd and whimsical characters (book 1, ch 21).

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Meyer earlier outlined the connections between Bitov’s and Dumas’s novels. There appear to be four explicit mentions of *The Three Musketeers* in *Pushkin House*: at the beginning (6); in the scene “Madame Bonacieux”; in a remark by Mitishatyev (“That’s from Dumas . . . Count de la Fèr-re!” (257)); and in the commentary to the opening pages (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1996, 354).

<sup>11</sup> Bitov plays with notions of “low-brow” and “high-brow” literature. He speaks elsewhere about his intention to write about the “intellectualism” of Dumas when he became a graduate student at IMLI in 1972, at which time he had been reading Dumas’s *Forty-Five* rather than Joyce. Perhaps he is commenting here on what his generation’s experience of foreign literature was really like, as opposed to how it was mythologized. He relates also the incident with the French translator of *Pushkin House* who refused to translate this one line from Bitov’s commentary:

“Dumas is the national genius of France.” The translator explained, “That sounds really stupid.” “That was already censorship,” Bitov indignantly contended (“Tri plus odin” 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Bitov acknowledges that he read Proust’s novel a year before beginning *Pushkin House* and that its influence on “Faina” and “Albina” could be felt (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1996, 387).

<sup>13</sup> See Spieker’s postmodern reading of the inside/outside motif (107).

<sup>14</sup> Bitov claims he needed half a year to recover and return to his own novel (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1996, 388-89). Von Hirsch discusses the effect Bitov’s reading of Nabokov had on the commentary to *Pushkin House* in particular (“Presence of Nabokov” 61).

<sup>15</sup> Segal lists Mandelstam’s “Egyptian Stamp,” Vaginov’s *Works and Days of Svistonov*, Kuzmin’s “The Trout Breaks the Ice,” Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, Nabokov’s *The Gift*, Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, Akhmatov’s *Poem without a Hero*, Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, and Bitov’s *Pushkin House*

<sup>16</sup> In a conversation in spring 2000 Bitov mentioned this review with approval, calling these works two main sources of his novel.

<sup>17</sup> Bitov took pains also with the graphic appearance of the “scrap of newspaper” in the text, as can be seen in the samizdat typescript of the novel. The edge of the scrap imitates a newspaper edge. The “torn out” segment contains only incomplete appearances of Pushkin’s name (Ardis Archives, Box 17, F.150a, page 7).

<sup>18</sup> Compare Bitov’s techniques to those of metafictional works from the 1960s and later. David Shepherd discusses these issues and makes such comparisons in his study of metafiction in Soviet literature of the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>19</sup> Shklovskii asserted that at the time of changing literary schools the heritage passes not from father to son, but from the uncle to the nephew, and Tynianov said that in the struggle

between son and father, the grandson turns out to resemble his grandfather.

<sup>20</sup> Bitov develops further the theme of substitution and what is officially allowed in a commentary to the reference to Howard Fast in discussion among the drinkers at Pushkin House in section 3. He comments that Fast was the representative of American literature in official Soviet discourse at the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s. Hemingway, a much more significant writer working at that time, would be doled out to Soviet citizens later. He would be one of the first two portraits, along with Esenin, available for sale from Soiuzpechat' kiosks (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1996, 355, 378). Later in this discussion Lyova condescendingly explains to his companion (described as Natasha "in the role of Audrey Hepburn" (278)) that, "Unlike Victor Nabotov, my dear . . . Vladimir Nabokov is a writer" (278, and commentary, *Pushkinskii dom*, 1996, 378) Chances expands on the theme of substitution and originality (219-20).

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