

With Pushkin in the Background: An Invitation to Andrei Bitov's *Pushkin House*

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Kak obaiatel'ny (dlia tekh, kto ponimaet)

Vse nashi gluposti i melkie zlodejstva

Na fone Pushkina . . .

How charming (for those in the know)

Is all our nonsense and petty mischief

With Pushkin in the background

—B. Okudzhava

Pushkin? Ochen' ispugali!

Pushkin? Nothing to be feared!

—M. Tsvetaeva

Pushkin House, a multilayered, unpredictable, and challenging work has something of a Petersburgian fantom about it—which means, among other things, that it is here to stay. Indeed, the fate of the novel is rather unusual: finished in 1971 after some seven years of work (and some glimpses of it in various journals) and first published by Ardis in Russian in 1978, it was considered “must” reading in the inevitably “narrow circles” in Russia long before an official edition in book format saw the light in 1989. Perestroika temporarily sparked the public taste for all literary works suddenly allowed by the magnanimous Soviet government; it is hard to judge, however, whether the circles in which Bitov is read and fought over have really widened as a result. I am told that a clerk in a major bookstore in St. Petersburg recently tried to search for the book under “Travel Guides.” An English

translation appeared only in 1987, after the Swedish and German ones; other major and minor European languages followed later. The novel's translator, Susan Brownsberger, mentions that the book was once mistakenly shelved under criticism instead of fiction (360); she does not specify what country this shelf was in. While the difficulties with publishing the novel in the Soviet Union hardly deserve explanation, the delayed reaction time on the part of Western publishers is more perplexing.

One reviewer has defined *Pushkin House* as “relentlessly opaque” (Savitsky 468), another as “very Russian” (*Complete Review* on-line). These remarks go hand in hand, it seems, but the latter is perhaps more damaging: it means a kiss of death as far as the nonspecialist reader is concerned. The image conjures up novels where characters are referred to by half a dozen different names, most of them unpronounceable, nannies call their charges “my little dove,” and most people get drunk in order to have an excuse to speak of life and death. All of this accompanied by a mix of “The Waltz of the Sugar Plum Fairies” and “Lara’s Theme.”

Why does the reading public need another Russian novel, and why would it be of interest to anyone but inveterate Slavacists? First of all, perhaps this casebook may convince you that there are sufficient grounds to justify Marina von Hirsch’s statement that, “if there is a writer who can represent Russian contemporary metafiction on the international level, it is undoubtedly Andrei Bitov.”

In addition, the parochial notion that literature (real literature, that is, not propaganda skits) exists in order to serve the interests of a particular exclusive group of people—be it social or even linguistic groups—begs to be reconsidered. The danger of confining works of art to the categories of domestic and import product is becoming especially apparent now, with the number of publishers accepting works in translation steadily decreasing. In his *Lectures on Russian Literature* Nabokov remembers, “The

Russian reader in old cultured Russia was certainly proud of Pushkin and of Gogol, but he was just as proud of Shakespeare or Dante, of Baudelaire or of Edgar Allan Poe, of Flaubert or of Homer, and this was the Russian reader's strength" (11). This was an achievement of Russian modernism and also the foundation on which *Pushkin House* is built. Readers who possess this strength will always be found. So will writers.

Nietzsche once said that anyone wishing to know what's in store for Europe has to look at St. Petersburg. Looking back at twentieth-century history, this seems to have been a dire prediction; nevertheless, Petersburg and its text(s) still make a good case study in modernity (Put a check mark next to courses on twentieth-century literature and on the development of the novel!). Russian modern literature and language are commonly considered to begin with Pushkin, whose heritage was a crash course in Western European civilization for the emerging Russian secular literature. St. Petersburg, older than its first poet only by a hundred years, became at once the setting and a leading character of the new Russian literature. "Pushkin House" is an informal title for the State Institute for Russian Literature in St. Petersburg. *Pushkin House* is an edifice of Russian modernism—Bitov attempts to take stock of modern Russian literary history in the widest application of the term. One of the books Bitov clearly keeps within reach on his desk is Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the first Russian novel in verse, a book full of irreverence toward conventions both social and literary and one that some have found to anticipate modernism (or even postmodernism, according to the critic's persuasion). Generations of Soviet schoolchildren learned that *Eugene Onegin* is an encyclopedia of Russian life. By the same token, *Pushkin House* may fairly be called an encyclopedia of Soviet life. It could be incorporated into an Urban Studies course (for the section on St. Petersburg) or into a course on Russian History and Thought, not to mention any course encompassing Russian literature of the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. And yet the novel is not just for Ph.D. candidates in Russian literature—although Slavic Departments in English-speaking countries ought to compete with each other in bestowing doctorates *honoris causa* to the translator, Susan Brownsberger, since all the difficulties in translating *Eugene Onegin* that Nabokov enumerated apply equally to translating *Pushkin House*.

Yes, Bitov has endless modernist tricks up his sleeve. Some of these tricks seem to have actually managed to confuse editors both in Russia and in the U.S.—as Ellen Chances points out, there have been many editions where Bitov’s “Commentaries” have been left out, perhaps considered to be part of the optional scholarly apparatus rather than an integral part of the work. Hidden and open allusions to literary works abound. With three generations of literary scholars represented, literature inevitably permeates the novel. If Pasternak added to *Doctor Zhivago* some poems ascribed to the protagonist, Bitov goes one step further: he incorporates within the text a critical article purportedly written by L. Odoevtsev. There is no denying that knowing at least some of the works referred to in the novel, both Russian and non-Russian, allows the reader to explore different layers in the novel and to engage in a deeper dialogue with the text. The four essays in this casebook present a thoughtful and absorbing analysis of the manifold links that connect this metafictional novel to different traditions, archetypes, and topoi, and of the new meanings that are constantly generated through these contacts. “A quotation is like a cicada: going on and on” (Mandelstam 2:218). Bitov’s text functions as a semiotic structure working at full speed.

Nevertheless, it needs to be said that previous familiarity with Russian literary history is not a prerequisite for the appreciation of the novel. Can *Pushkin House* truly be more opaque than some of the venerated classics traditionally offered in the Great Books curricula? Yet a sufficient number of readers

continue to benefit from the “nourishing elements necessary for the spirit,” to use an expression of Borges’s, which are contained in literary works outside of many a reader’s expertise. This is what makes literature possible, for, sad as this may seem at times, it does not exist for philologists’ sake. Literature may be the building blocks of the *Pushkin House*, but is not its *raison d’être*. As a prominent critic has put it, “What I look for in literature is not entertainment, but breaking through literature, overcoming literature. In this regard, *Pushkin House* is an event for me” (Savitsky 468).

Pushkin House is a great intellectual playground that grows with the reader and where the reader is made to grow very fast, as in *Eugene Onegin*. At the core of work, also as in *Eugene Onegin*, is a portrayal of the modern man “. . . With something of his true complexion—/ With his immoral soul disclosed,/ His arid vanity exposed,/ His endless bent for deep reflection,/ His cold, embittered mind that seems/ To waste himself in empty schemes” (Pushkin 176).

The protagonist’s last name, Odoevtsev, sounds almost like that of a Pushkin contemporary, a minor poet and a Decembrist (member of a movement formed by a group of Russian aristocrats and advocating radical political changes, such as adoption of a constitution in Russia and abolition of serfdom). On the day that will prove fatal for him, Odoevtsev walks over to the very square where the Decembrists’ uprising was crushed in 1825. It is just another nonevent in the series of many in this novel. The day being a holiday, Odoevtsev, like many people around him, is drunk, and the city appears to him unreal, like a theater decoration. He sees no faces, just a throng that does not know what to do with itself once the official part of the festivities is over.

This almost-but-not-quite quality becomes definitive for Odoevtsev, who shares his name and patronymic (Lev Nikolaevich) with Leo Tolstoy. Bitov actually endows his

protagonist with a hereditary link to Russian nobility, making him entitled to the rank of a prince. This seems to be a metaphor making Odoevtsev a legitimate heir to the Russian literary tradition. The fact certainly has no more political significance than the “royal blood” of Bulgakov’s Margarita. Unfortunately, Odoevtsev is in the situation of an heir who “bitterly smiles at his father, who’d squandered the family estate,” as in Lermontov’s poem.

Odoevtsev’s father has made his academic career by denouncing the scholarly work of his own father and Odoevtsev’s grandfather, Modest Platonovich, who spent twenty-seven years in Stalinist camps. The reward for this betrayal was the “still warm” chair at the university department previously headed by Modest Platonovich. Odoevtsev’s father thus belongs to the category of people whom Mandelstam had classified as deliberately writing permitted works:

I want to spit in the faces of writers who deliberately write permitted works. I want to hit them on the head with a stick. . . . I would prohibit such writers to marry and have children. . . . [A]fter all, our children are supposed to finish our work, to say the most important things we did not finish saying—and those fathers are sold to the devil for three generations in advance. (2:92)

Odoevtsev is exactly one of those children sold to the devil at birth. He reminds us of those tormented souls from Dante’s Purgatory who have been neither cold nor hot, just tepid. Yet the reality of Soviet life constantly presses one to choose one’s camp. Odoevtsev’s main crimes consist precisely in trying to avoid a choice—conveniently disappearing from the university with a myriad excuses at a time when he needs to come to the defense of his friend and failing to speak up when he hears blatant anti-Semitic remarks being made in a Jewish colleague’s presence.

Most people, including the narrator, address the protagonist by his informal nickname that would normally not be used in a professional setting, Lyova, or even Lyovushka (a diminutive that, for anyone past the kindergarten age, would normally be used only by the closest family members in the absence of strangers). This underlines that the new protagonist is only a desk-size version of his illustrious ancestors. Only old Blank, who continues to believe in Odoevtsev until the final scene, insists on addressing his much younger colleague by the courteous form: “Why are you silent, Lev Nikolaevich!” (333). (This may be evoking Tolstoy’s famous 1908 article attacking the death penalty: “I can’t be silent.” Its title has become proverbial, almost a Russian “J’accuse”; Bitov wrote his novel before this expression had been trivialized during perestroika battles.) The message is clear: Odoevtsev has to assume the responsibilities of a grown man and to stand up for his convictions. He spends most of the novel’s 363 pages trying to do just that, without convincing success.

Lyova had learned at an early age “to cope within maximum (optimum) but permissible (permitted) limits: to fill the available space” (22). He internalizes the social prejudice against intelligentsia and, seemingly searching for a strong cause, ends up searching for a strong leader, oscillating between extremes: now it’s his grandfather the former political prisoner whose thinking has been affected by many years in the labor camp and by heavy drinking; now it’s Mitishatyev, Lyova’s archenemy and a cynical ladder-climber; now it’s the shallow Faina who has no trace of respect, much less affection, for him. Lyova is a perfect child of a political system that only acknowledges one very narrowly defined answer to every question. Reading is a one-time, finite process of deciphering rather than a dialogue meant to activate new meanings. His dialogic capacities are limited, be it in literary criticism or in his personal life.

The name of the woman he is hopelessly in love with (does she, in conjunction with the two other female characters, comprise his ideal beloved?), Faina, is too rare in Russian not to be seen as a hint: Faina happens to be the name of a temptress in an ultraromantic play in verse by Blok. While Blok's Faina creates a myth around herself (rather too artfully for a traveling show performer that she is, but then it's not social realism Blok was after), Bitov's Faina is incapable of even concocting a halfway believable excuse.

Blok's Faina, whose career aspiration is probably to become Venus-in-furs someday, says, "I'm hitting you for your words. What else can you do but words?" The main role of Bitov's Faina may consist in reminding the reader of just this quotation, although this modern-day Faina not so much despises words as is oblivious to their real use. Lyova has an uneasy relationship to the word, feeling his deficiency as an intellectual in the "state of workers and peasants," where "working intelligentsia" is declared to be merely a "layer" ("prosloika") between the other two officially recognized classes. Not that the much glorified workers and peasants actually derived any benefits for it (Lyova, with his relatively privileged, read spoiled, background, may not have survived for long in a remote Soviet village), but the perpetual suspicion of disloyalty to the state was firmly associated with the intellectuals. The question of relevance of intellectual work is hardly a Russian invention; it has been raised at least since the Mary and Martha parable (Luke 10:39-42). The Russian intelligentsia, however, had added considerably to developing a postscriptum to the biblical story, namely about Mary's own guilt feeling. While this guilt may not be an exclusively Soviet affliction, it acquired particularly odd forms during the height of the Soviet regime.

As a boy, Lyova never wanted to be a philologist, he preferred the "purer" science of biology (12). Although Uncle Dickens later explains to Lyova that in their society even botany

is not free from political pressures (28), Lyova's distrust of the "permitted" word seems to spread to the distrust of the word as such. Pushkin was the first in Russian literature to say that a poet's words are already his deeds; for Lyova, who seems to have forgotten the words of his idol, words and deeds are still present in a painful juxtaposition. Lyova's own grandfather wrote, "Lord, give me words! I am night-blind to the word. Let me finish speaking!" (125). If Lyova knew how to pray, he would probably pray to be spared the words instead. In the scene preceding his (suspended) death, Lyova is haunted by nightmares of "retribution as a fused, dark mass of perished words. . . . Blasted, wasted, tasted words" (273). "Words, words, words?" He fails to see the word as a powerful force that enables one to resist totalitarian thinking and to preserve individuality; instead, he allows the word to lose its function—i.e., to die—and to become a dead and deadly mass.

Not daring to believe in himself or in his profession, Lyova unconsciously seeks release in Faina's nonverbal universe. It is Lyova who imagines himself to live a torrid relationship with Faina; she herself cannot see what the "fuss" is all about, just as she is puzzled when Lyova, far along in the relationship, admits to his shyness at their first date. Faina's ring, which Lyova steals out of jealousy and then returns, has only a purely monetary value for her, the only one that really matters in her universe. At times, it is given even to Lyova to perceive this, which is why Faina is not so much his greatest love as his idea of love. Surprisingly, Bitov speaks of Faina, who is always off somewhere with a new admirer, as having "no one around her" (178). Faina creates no relationships and no meanings. (One might suppose that, in a misplaced gesture of a literary scholar who isn't allowed to write the way he would like to, Lyova imagines Faina to be a semantically rich text whose potentials he can actualize. He makes the very mistake of which the past French Minister of Culture accused all representatives of the structuralist school:

failing to distinguish between a page of Proust and a vacuum cleaner manual. Well, now I can almost hear my readers respond, “You’ve muddled us with your allegories,” as Bitov imagines his readers to say in the beginning of chapter 3).

Faina does not think, and, given her rather meager emotional range, she hardly feels, either; she just *is*. Lyova is attracted to her just as in his childhood he was attracted by the smell of soup at the caretaker’s apartment, where, for the first time, he discovers that someone’s existence can be filled with a concern for household articles, for the material side of life. Faina is not weighted down by the existential burden; Lyova’s longing for her is, to an extent, a desire to be free of this burden himself—which, of course, is never going to be granted to him, given his job as the protagonist of a Russian novel.

What is given to Lyova instead is his “foolishly unloved” Albina, a fellow scholar who could have become his true partner and whom he uses instead as a consolation prize whenever Faina eludes him. Albina is “a graceful, extremely cultured woman with a wise and mocking face” (349). The narrator, toward the end of the novel, even admits falling slightly in love with her. Albina’s name clearly suggests an exception, someone unlike the rest of the flock: even Lyova has the sense of telling her, “You are not *an other*” (“Ty – ne drugaia”). She is a bit “not of this world” as she calmly acknowledges herself at the funeral of Uncle Dickens, a character who is marked by his attempts to keep his dignity in spite of the all: “It may be better there for him. . . . More of us are there” (178).

The encounter with Albina presents a unique dialogic situation. Bitov imagines Lyova meeting other versions of Faina in his life, and certainly plenty of Mitishatyevs, but “only Albina—his first other woman—will always be unduplicated” (204). Pushkin’s Tatyana Larina in *Eugene Onegin* is presented as “the positive dynamic that promises both to revivify the hero and to preserve this creator from deadly and deadening negativity”

(Peters Hasty 179). Onegin underestimates both Tatyana and his own capacity for revival, and the potential remains unrealized. Still, every Pushkin house needs to have its own Tatyana; this is the role that falls to Albina in Bitov's novel. Albina is made of relationships. Yet Lyova feels "nothing but power" while alone with Albina (175): ". . . Lyova will return to her [Albina] more than once, and every time it will be after he has been hurt. He'll be back to pass on the hurt" (181). His own sense of dignity being impaired, he shows little respect for the dignity of others. The relationship with Albina collapses because Lyova is unable to escape the dichotomy of either suppressing others, emotionally or intellectually, or being suppressed, although Bitov endows his protagonist with the tormenting ability to perceive the limitations of such a life from time to time. Anja Grothe aptly compares Lyova to Narcissus who rejects a lover, preferring his own reflection instead. However, we may perhaps attribute the failure of this relationship not to Albina being an Echo, as Grothe suggests (leaving aside the thorny issue of how much the opposites really attract), but to Lyova's inability to seize an opportunity for establishing a dialogue, no matter how favorable the circumstances. Bitov's merciless formulas ("Father-Father=Lyova", Lyova+Father=Father") reduce his protagonist to zero. Of course, it matters little what number is multiplied by a zero, so it is largely irrelevant who attempts to establish contact with Lyova: "no one is likely to want to suffer any further with Lyova. It's painful and too uncompromising" (341).

Yet just as Tatyana Larina does not forget Onegin, we still cannot forget the hero, nor can we feel triumphantly superior to him. The more merciless the author is toward his protagonist (Bitov admits that in "some fair land . . . one might well find a Society for the Preservation of Literary Heroes from their Authors"), the more shivers are being sent down the reader's spine. The text of the novel seems more and more autobiographical—not so much in the sense of referring to the life

of Bitov Andrei Georgievich, of course, as in the sense of a “confession of the son of his age.” As in Lyova’s dream, he and everybody around him have their watches “set wrong.” His time is quite a bit out of joint.

It is not accidental that our hero gets virtually “locked up” in the Pushkin House exactly on the day when the country celebrates an anniversary of what used to be known as the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917, when ranks and ranks of demonstrators march through the center of the city to witness their loyalty to the regime. It is in no way a free expression of the masses; most participants have been required by their supervisors to attend; some will get a day off later. The slogans with which the Communist Party leadership will greet the people have been published in that day’s newspaper. In any case, the throngs have little to do except respond with a loud “Hourrah!” From his office at the Pushkin House, within walking distance from the tribunes by the Hermitage, Lyova must hear the noise produced by this grandiose show of collective insincerity. Every society, according to Bitov, has a degree of this insincerity built in, but in the society he is describing this insincerity has reached a concentration level incompatible with life.

Ann Komaromi raises some unusual points about the metaphorical meaning of Lyova replacing the window broken, finding in it a parallel to restoring the link to the tradition. Anyone familiar with Soviet reality knows that getting a window installed on the holiday weekend of Nov. 7 (celebration of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution) would have been a miracle nothing short of biblical proportions. For an informed reader such an ending is an exposing of the device par excellence. And yet Komaromi is right: Odoevtsev Junior is trying to get the window replaced. Does Bitov believe in such miracle? Is he just masking his optimism by feigning sarcasm at the happy end of his own making? Is Lyova’s loss of control, then, to the anxiety of influence as much as to alcohol intoxication? Bitov would seem

to think that smashing windows and dethroning canonical figures are both ultimately irrelevant (and therefore dispensable) activities.

Is this a noble fight or just an immature rebellion against established authors? Pushkin's death mask is broken while Lyova tries to get it back from Mitishatyev and return to its proper place, but this mask proves doubly unreal: a mask is already a simulation of a face, and it's not even the original death mask. Albina, in the tone of an experienced administrator, assures Lyova that there are many more in storage. Does she imply that Pushkin is, as it were, unbreakable? Or does she merely mean that these cheap copies are endless? The recent celebration (in 1999) of Pushkin's bicentennial, carried out with much pomp and little taste, seems to have been overflowing with such copies, both physical and symbolical ones.

The damage wrought on the Pushkin House museum by Mitishatyev and Lyova in their drunken stupor may be an immature rebellion against Pushkin, but it may also be, at least on Lyova's part, a rebellion against the establishment mummifying Pushkin and against those whom Mandelstam described as "a tribe of Pushkin scholars" ("So that the great gift of Pushkin would not be wasted on parasites, a tribe of Pushkin scholars in military coats with guns is learning the alphabet" – "*Chtoby Pushkina chudnyj tovar ne poshiol po / Rukam darmoedov, / Gramoteet v shineliakh s naganami plemia / Pushkinovedov*"). Mandelstam must have been thinking about the ranks of "red professors" who were called upon to replace the old school, distrusted by the new Soviet government. In a strange way, this mention of the gun is echoed in a sentence ascribed to Grandfather Odoevtsev: "The People's Artist d'Anthès [the person who mortally wounded Pushkin in a duel] sculpted Pushkin from his bullet. And now, when we no longer have anyone to shoot at, we sculpt our last bullet in the form of a monument" (353). When a person is killed, a myth is created.

Myths tend to be more profitable. The totalitarian regime and the official culture subservient to it kill writers both literally and, especially those outside their temporal space, metaphorically. Afterward, the very same writers are put on a pedestal and their statues are made to serve the regime. In 1937, the year that has come to stand metonymically for Stalinist purges and also the year of Bitov's birth, the Soviet government decided to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Pushkin's death by publishing a lavish edition of so-called *Complete Works* of the national poet. As it turned out later, the edition was not exactly complete: correspondence had been tampered with, etc. Nevertheless, the edition was highly prized in a country where buying even a modest three-volume set of Pushkin's selected works remained problematic all the way until the reforms of late 1980s. The government appropriated Pushkin in the most unflattering sense of the word and made a grand show of it, all the while encouraging the public to read only a limited number of his works, with a rather limited range of acceptable interpretations. "Pushkin—in the role of a mausoleum?" as Tsvetaeva indignantly wrote. These new scholars from Mandelstam's poem have taken off their military coats and put on respectable jackets and ties, but literature remains dead for them, a product to be consumed rather than an entity to engage in dialogue with: "we . . . gobble the same corpse of Russian literature . . .," as Mitishatyev says (306). When Lyova's grandfather dies, after he's been officially rehabilitated, his former colleagues decide to attend his funeral: "they had all come for a man who once had written something, and their grief savored of enthusiasm that he would never write anything more" (86). The novel's characters live in a world where it is so perfectly clear what is allowed and what is not that it does not need to be spelled out. It is a "ready-made, explained world," living in which Bitov imagines as the greatest evil (343). This is why Lyova's early article (about which even the narrator himself speaks not without approbation) remains unpublished, and his

other plans remain unfulfilled, while he obligingly churns out whatever will not derail his academic career. This work is as dull and meaningless as his obligation to remain “on duty” in the Pushkin House during the holidays (an actual Soviet practice of having a scholar “oversee” the empty premises during a holiday). Pushkin House is no longer a sacred source, not even a halfway decent ivory tower—instead, it has deteriorated into a combination of a warehouse with goods that need to be guarded (perhaps from the “parasites” mentioned in Mandelstam’s poem?) and a prison. The new society has created a Pushkin House in which “It’s impossible to live . . .” (246). Lyova’s grandfather said of himself, referring to his years in labor camp, “I was a good construction boss, I knew how to think in terms of the material of life, no matter what kind: the word, or soil and building materials” (72). Without individuals who perceive word as the building material of life, no livable houses can be built. Replacing the window seems a gesture of reconciliation with the system, but could it also turn into a first step toward building Lyova’s own Pushkin house?¹

In a ridiculous imitation of the many Russian literary duels (fought by heroes as well as by some authors, including Pushkin himself), Odoevtsev challenges Mitishatyev to a duel. Ostensibly, the cause for this is Pushkin’s broken death mask; in reality, Lyova’s anger is also motivated by other, more personal offenses—although at this point, Lyova probably needs to take an offense against Pushkin’s memory personally, in order to keep any respect for himself. However, it is not the baseness of the outside world in the shape of Mitishatyev’s bullet that kills Lyova, but rather a bookshelf full of manuscripts that slips and injures our hero. “I told you philology would lead to trouble” —Mitishatyev could have remembered Ionesco, but the year is 196..., and, in all likelihood, Mitishatyev has not read Ionesco. Instead, he just says, “Fool . . .” (311). Bitov does not allow us

the respite of a farce ending: instead, we are dragged into the chilly fabric of a Russian realistic novel.

Mitishatyev escapes, much like the clumsy murderers of Dostoyevsky's, whom he supposedly studies, with the only concern being about leaving no evidence. Does he expect the police to take this event for a suicide? In the metaphysical sense, this is, of course, a suicide. After all, Mitishatyev is not only a collective portrait of the most abominable characters of the Russian realistic tradition; he is also Lyova's "double," his shadow version. Had Lyova perished from Mitishatyev's bullet, his might have been the noble death of a hero who fell defending the honor of Russian literature (which in this novel is still considered honorable, in spite of its many flirts with ideology, or at least beyond the level of judgment of Mitishatyevs). While Lyovas break apart in their inner struggle, Mitishatyevs blossom.

The reader is made to look at Lyova lying motionless and wonder whether Lyova's soul is still in his body. When exactly did he lose it? "I am afraid for the human soul"—a phrase added in the Russian translation of *Hamlet* done in Pushkin's time. Lyova's aristocratic background comes in handy again: although the Russian *kniaz'* (*prince*) is a nobility title and not a designation of the member of the royal family, Hamlet-like themes seem to lurk around. In the rare moments when he is able to see himself clearly, Bitov's protagonist acquires some traits of Hamlet in Blok's poem—that Hamlet "whose blood grows cold/As perfidy spreads its net" and whose beloved is taken away by the very "chill of life" that Blok has transplanted into his poem from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

"Faina and Grandfather and Mitishatyev and the time, they all wound me at one and the same point—me! That means I am—an existing point of pain!" (294). Odoevtsev is capable of feeling disgust for the game of "who wins" in a relationship (146), even as he gradually begins to play this game at times. He feels profound shame for his own state of "unwashedness in

principle” (338) after his night at Pushkin House. This sudden trope brings to mind two other characters preoccupied with cleanliness and neatness—Uncle Dickens, with his eccentric ways of not allowing himself to “blend in,” and old Blank, who usually thinks better of people than they are. In spite of the time spent on getting himself ready in the morning, Odoevtsev knows that he has failed to meet the standards of the two people he respected. Of course, this may also be seen as an allusion to a well-known poem by Lermontov in which the poet bids farewell to “unwashed Russia, /The land of slaves, the lands of masters” and laments the people’s all-to-ready obeisance to the authorities. Odoevtsev does have a soul, as the narrator assures us, “beautiful and tender,” but “plumpish . . . (starchy food, no vitamins), slightly pale from lack of light” (98). At present, this sickly soul is too weak to show any resistance to outside influences.

Although Bitov’s prose has been compared to that of many Russian classics, Chekhov does not appear on that honorable list nearly often enough. The narrator’s regard seems to be close to Chekhov’s—it’s a disillusioned view of humanity, entirely free of sentimentality, but not devoid of compassion. When telling us of Lyova’s desperate attempts to remove the signs of his highly questionable vigil, Bitov repeatedly compares Lyova to a slave suppressing his own rebellion, perhaps prompting us to remember a famous quote from Chekhov—that of the necessity to “squeeze out the slave from himself, drop by drop.” The young Prince Odoevtsev needs to stop allowing himself to be enslaved. Joseph Brodsky, who had been about the same age as Bitov’s protagonist at the time described in the novel, later thanked his parents “for failing to bring up their child as a slave” (499). Not all parents managed to do it; even though Lyova’s parents did not keep at home any of those vulgar propaganda books that Soviet children were force-fed at school, they nevertheless assimilated the highly dubious rules of the game and learned how to profit in the process. Lyova and all for whom he speaks need to take care of

this problem on their own. The system cannot possibly be “set right,” but an individual may attempt to be on guard against internalizing it. For starters, this Hamlet has to stop emulating Guildenstern and Rosencrantz.

“I am a Tsar—I am a slave, I am a worm—I am a God,” as the line of Derzhavin, Pushkin’s famous predecessor, goes. These are some of the earliest lines of philosophical poetry in Russian, and yet it is not impossible to visualize Lev Odoevtsev whispering them to himself in 196.... Or, as Dostoyevsky put it, “Human nature is wide, far too wide . . . I would narrow it.” Lev Odoevtsev maintains our interest precisely because Bitov resolutely explores the many dimensions of his character until the end, without squeamishness or sentimentality—and then allows the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Yes, Bitov insists that some of our decisions and deeds can’t be undone any more than Uncle Dickens can “come back to life again and die again, for the sake of the novel” (325). Lest anyone still suspect him of being capable of slipping into a melodramatic mood, Bitov does not spare irony: “Would anyone perhaps prefer that Blank ‘nobly’ notice nothing and return for his bread . . . and the two of them, deeply moved, clasp hands so firmly that their handclasp can never after be broken?” (325).

Nevertheless, if Bitov soberly discourages any illusions of an overly sweet happy end, he just as carefully manages to avoid passing the ultimate judgment on his hero and ending the novel on a moralistic note. The novel is open-ended. At the end of the novel, the reader leaves Lev Odoevtsev at the crossroads: “With this hump on his shoulders, this knapsack of experience, he has returned to his previous place, all stooped and aged, weakened. . . Once upon a time, he remembers, he wanted to establish the point from which all had begun, the point at which all had been interrupted . . .” (339).

The narrator claims that sealing his character’s fate seems to be too big a violence for him, because literature can’t be the same

hackwork as life—“the lack of a right to God” is “the most terrible deprivation of rights we could ever imagine” (343). Bitov shuns playing God—a logical conclusion to a text whose narrator has consistently tried to prove his anti-authoritarian leanings by letting the narrative veer in many directions (in the spirit of Pushkin’s famous exclamation: “Look what trick my Tatyana has played!”)—of course, to the extent to which a democratic relationship between an author and his creation is altogether possible. In addition, not letting Odoevtsev harden in his pride so much that he would believe himself outside redemption may have another explanation: after all, Lyova is too dangerously close to the lyrical hero. Therefore, better to heed Thomas Mann’s warning about where that path would lead.

It would seem, then, that all options are still open to our hero, from going back to his “hackwork of a life” to finding a distant hope of what Pasternak called “*usil’je voskresenija*”, “an effort of resurrection.”

“Returns to the world are excursions” (*Complete Review* online) says the American reviewer with reproach, sounding uncannily similar to some well-behaved critic of the Soviet establishment. (One almost expects him to go on and protest that characters like Lyova Odoevtsev are untypical for our society, however that “our” might be interpreted, and that Bitov besmirches the good name of literary scholars worldwide.) Have we ever left the real world in this novel? *Pushkin House* is neither a reference book nor a guidebook—it belongs to the works that, in Pasternak’s words, “give the impression of true life and not literary creation” (*vpechatlenie zhivoi zhisni, a ne slovesnosti*).

NOTES

¹ A sad comment on the current state of affairs: in early spring 2003 the real Pushkin House, the Institute for Russian

Literature in St. Petersburg, suffered from a fire that destroyed part of the precious nineteenth-century archives. This was not due to any acts of protest, but was simply the result of dire financial troubles Pushkin House has found itself in. The state, having lost much of its interest in literature as an ideological tool, has withdrawn its support, and the impoverished intelligentsia is not able to bring forth private donors. Some of the precious archives were lost only because the institution had no funds to renew its fire-safety contract. (Pushkin's own archive was unscathed since it was moved out of the Pushkin House proper in 2001 into a supposedly better equipped facility). In matters of culture, evidently, no insurrections are necessary when neglect will achieve the same.

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