

In the Context of Metafiction: Commentary as a Principal Narrative Structure in Bitov's *Pushkin House*

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In 1996 the Russian periodical *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (Literary Gazette) published an article that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Andrei Bitov's completion of his first novel, *Pushkin House*. In this article critic Viacheslav Kuritsyn rated *Pushkin House* as a classic:

The answer to the question "What is classical literature?" is very simple: it is the literature which one rereads. Naturally, every rereading produces a different impact . . . depending on the spirit of time. Those, who read the *Pushkin House* manuscript, or the Ardis edition, or its publication in *Novyi Mir*, read different books. . . . What's important is that the book remains interesting. ("Otshchepenet's" 4)

The critical and scholarly discussions of diverse aspects of *Pushkin House*, including its narrative structures, also remain interesting and lively. The polylogical levels of Bitov's narrative discourse lend themselves to scrutiny by various narrative theories and invite multiple analytical approaches—formalist, structuralist, deconstructivist, and more—each deserving a lengthy study in its own right. Given the novel's complexity, the researcher attempting to analyze its narrative structures within the limitations of the article length faces a formidable task of having to single out the most significant structures, the ones that hold together and support "the architecture" of *Pushkin House*.

Commenting on the absence of a systematic theory of narrative in *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Wallace Martin wittily observes that "there are many kinds of stories, little agreement about which ones are best, and less agreement about what they mean" (27). Such absence of a comprehensive and all-embracing narrative theory and the fact that the theory of narrative is in constant flux do not facilitate the researcher's task either: "While critics debate about theories, creative writers may produce new literary works that alter the very ground of the debate" (Martin 28).

Bitov did just that, his *Pushkin House* causing a major critical conundrum. For years Bitov's narrative discourse defied various attempts by critics to classify it. All comparisons of Bitov's prose with that of his contemporaries in the Soviet Union led only to the rediscovery of its singularity, its virtually plotless narratives interspersed with numerous passages of literary theory, criticism, philosophical and metaphysical meditations that challenged, to use Genette's phrase, "the traditional equilibrium of novelistic form" (259).

Bitov's discourse contradicted the official guidelines of socialist realism from the very start. In numerous essays Lev Anninskii observed Bitov's preoccupation with thought about thought, while Deming Brown expressed an opinion that "such writers as Bitov . . . seem to represent an extreme reaction against literary practices inherited from the Stalin period; the only trace of socialist realism in their works is clearly parodic" (60). According to Henrietta Mondry, in *Pushkin House* Bitov's "anxiety to dissociate himself from realism" not just socialist realism, became especially visible (5). When in 1964 the Moscow magazine *Inostrannaia literature* (Foreign Literature) published several excerpts from the French antinovels by Natalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet, characterized, among other features, by such qualities as lack of plot, character, or metaphor, their affinity with Bitov's work was immediately noted by some hostile critics (qtd. in Chances 91). It is exactly the revolt against the

“programmatic hostility,” to use Renato Poggioli’s expression (7), of the critics and professors toward genuine art—“art not as a means of addressing social issues of its time and place in a necessarily ‘realistic’ manner but art as a series of unique cultural traditions that pose a challenge of innovation on their own specific terms” (Boyd 2)—that constitutes the primary reason why Bitov conceived and wrote this epitome of metafiction, *Pushkin House*, as an antitextbook to the textbook of Russian literature, as Bitov himself explained his message (5), “I dedicated over a half of my creative work to the struggle with the school Russian literature curriculum. . . . All of *Pushkin House* is constructed as an antitextbook of Russian literature . . . ” (*My prosnulis’* 62).

In his narrative theory survey, Martin points out that

The "death of the (realistic) novel," which attracted so much critical attention in America and France during the 1950s, coincided with the rebirth of narrative. The "new novel" in France (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute), what has been called "fabulation" and "metafiction" in American novel since the 1960s (John Barth, William Gass . . .), and South American writers such as Jorge Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez simply cannot be discussed adequately if one uses the critical apparatus associated with realism. (28)

But neither, of course, can *Pushkin House*, which explains the failure and the reluctance of some critics to deal with this clearly metafictional and antirealistic novel when it finally came out in Russia, seventeen years after its completion. According to Martin, "some of the aforementioned novelists have themselves written penetrating essays challenging traditional attitudes toward fiction; their precepts and examples have shaped both French and American criticism" (28). Bitov also wrote such essays, embedding some of them right inside the text of *Pushkin House*.

The roots of Bitov's prose, however different it is from that of his contemporaries in Russia, can be traced to the Russian-Soviet avant-garde of the late 1920s and early 1930s and, earlier, to the early nineteenth-century fiction of Pushkin and Gogol. When in his 1996 essay on Bitov, Volkov places Bitov's writings within "The City of Petersburg Text," the notion introduced by Victor Toporov that denotes a set of works establishing the city's mythology and its image in history, *Pushkin House* deservedly occupies the most prominent position in his contemporary hierarchy of texts:

Ask any well-read Russian to give you a list of these works. He will certainly start with Pushkin's "Bronze Horseman," then he will continue to enumerate well-known works of Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Blok. The further depends on how knowledgeable people are, but many people will mention Bely's Petersburg, Vaginov's novels, Mandelstam's and Akhmatova's works. Bitov's *Pushkin House* will be mentioned in the row of modern literature. Probably, this is the only significant edition to the Petersburg Text during more than fifty years as far as fiction is concerned. (87)

Notably this City of Petersburg text almost entirely consists of metafiction. When the Soviet structuralist Dmitrii Segal undertook what David Shepherd considers to be "the most sustained attempt to-date to map out the development of metafictional writing in Russian," he proceeded from *Eugene Onegin* and *Dead Souls* to *Diary of a Writer* in the nineteenth century (Shepherd 7). According to Segal, in the prerevolutionary period the tradition of "literature about literature" culminated in Rozanov's *Solitaria* (1912) and *Fallen Leaves* (1913-1915) and then continued and developed after the revolution "in a whole series of works, beginning with Osip Mandelstam's *The Egyptian Stamp* (1927) and culminating in Andrei Bitov's *Pushkin House* (1970)" (qtd. in Shepherd 7). Segal's emphasis on *Pushkin House* rather than on other works of the same period is justified. Due to

his talent, erudition, awareness of his predecessors, artfulness, and daring, Bitov succeeded in creating a masterpiece that has been unprecedented when contrasted with anything written in Russian by Russian, Soviet, or émigré writers between the 1930s and the 1960s with the exception, perhaps, of Nabokov's *The Gift* (1937), which explores the same theme as *Pushkin House*—that of Russian literature.

Looking beyond the fruitful literary beginning of the twentieth century in Russia, one can see that in spirit Bitov's writings also belong to the Russian classical tradition of the nineteenth century insofar as metafiction has long been a mode of writing commonly found in Russian literature. Bitov's prose undoubtedly belongs to the great Russian classical tradition, sharing with Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, and Dostoyevsky a self-referential and self-conscious style of narration interspersed with numerous commentaries and other authorial intrusions within the narratives, all of which serve to lay bare the very structure of their multigeneric works.

Bitov has repeatedly stated in his essays and interviews that he does not see himself as a writer who adheres exclusively to avant-garde, postmodernism, or modernism. In the 1987 interview "Konflikty i kontakty" (Conflicts and Contacts) he claims that he sees himself in the classical tradition rather than the avant-garde, saying, ". . . I always look to Pushkin and Gogol . . ." (qtd. in *Chances* 260). At the same time, Bitov speaks of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1831) as a postmodern and metafictional work in Russian literature. It is clear from his pronouncements that he prefers to regard Russian literature from the eighteenth century to the contemporary period as a continuous and undivided process, as he identifies features now called modernist and postmodernist in the works of Russian nineteenth-century realists Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy.

In her afterword to *Pushkin House* translator Susan Brownsberger notes, on the other hand, that ". . . Bitov's literary

stance is as much a response to Joyce and Nabokov as it is to the traditional Russian classics . . .” (360), although Bitov’s primary concerns are with these classics. His consistent involvement with intertextuality, which had begun before this term came into being and is manifested in the numerous encyclopedic allusions and references scattered in his works, places him alongside the most referential writers of this century—Joyce, Beckett, Nabokov. As the Canadian scholar Rolf Hellebust observes,

the first impression of an informed Western reader exposed to *Pushkin House* is that the author seems to have used the subversive literary devices of every postmodern writer he has read as well as some he has not. These include the essayism of Musil . . . , the paratextual apparatus of Borges . . . , Nabokov’s exposure of fictional artifice . . . , Eco’s concern with intertextuality . . . , and the repetition and narrative multiplicity of Robbe-Grillet. . . .(265)

Not only were the critical investigations of Bitov’s prose in Russia impeded by the obstacles of a political and ideological nature, but in the West, before the translations began to appear in the late eighties, his work was accessible exclusively to specialists with excellent command of the Russian language. Thus the development of Bitov studies was hindered by obstacles of a linguistic nature as well. This is observed by Shepherd, who argues that although metafiction is an international phenomenon, Russian texts are excluded from most Western studies for linguistic reasons. The only twentieth-century Russian writer whose metafiction has been subjected to a comprehensive research is Vladimir Nabokov. But his metafictional works have been investigated primarily in the context of American rather than Russian literature.

Yet if there is a writer who can represent Russian contemporary metafiction on the international level, it is undoubtedly Bitov, whose works, singular in the national context, should be explored within a wider Western literary

context. Only this approach sheds light on Bitov's innovative and complex metafictional techniques, for which no Russian contemporary literary parallels exist. It would be only fair for Bitov's name to appear next to Nabokov's and alongside the names of the authors of metafictional works whose "lists," according to Shepherd, "are usually long." Bitov has said on different occasions that he sees everything that he has written as a continuous and indivisible text. This text certainly deserves a place of honor in the Western tradition of metafiction.

This paper focuses therefore on the metafictional mode of writing and the technique of metaliterary commentary that shape Bitov's narrative strategies in general and are central to the narrative structures of *Pushkin House* in particular.

Although metafiction is an old literary phenomenon, the term itself emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, around 1970, and since then the critical discussion of metafiction has never ceased. What its numerous existing definitions have in common can be summarized as follows: it is fiction "whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making" (Christensen 11). Margaret Rose also argues to this effect, explaining that those works belong to metafiction, "which—by analyzing the act of communication between author and reader from within fiction—have set up meta-fictional 'mirrors' to the process of writing which tell us much about the aims and character of fiction, while also challenging the use of art to 'mirror' the outer world" (13). According to Stanley Fogel, "metafiction entails exploration of the theory of fiction through fiction itself. Writers of metafiction . . . scrutinize all facets of the literary construct—language, the conventions of plot and character, the relation of the artist to his art and to his reader" (qtd. in Christensen 10). Seen in the light of the aforementioned definitions, the significance of commentary for metafiction becomes obvious: no other device can better satisfy the need of

the narrator to comment "on his composition during the very act of writing" (Christensen 11).

Christensen asserts that "before one enters into a closer discussion of metafiction, it is necessary first to question the fundamentals of fiction"(13). According to her, while every fictional narrative encompasses a relation of author-narrator-story-fictional reader (audience)-actual reader, fiction regards the author and the actual reader as external elements. Metafiction differs from fiction in that it regards these elements as integral parts. When the author "places himself inside the fictional world and figures as a structural element in the novel," he or she functions as a fictional or implied author, while "the historical author will of course always exist outside and apart from the work itself" (Christensen 13). The fictional author-hero thus becomes a character endowed by the historical or biographical author with the power not only to convey his message but to directly comment on the artistic process whereby the reader also plays an active role, being an essential part of the act of communication.

Unlike realistic literature, whose major concern is mimesis, metafiction focuses on the distance between art and reality, displaying its acute consciousness of this distance, instead of attempting to achieve an objective imitation. To formulate this distance verbally, works of metafiction "defamiliarize the conventions of literature itself," as they self-consciously defamiliarize "the methods of defamiliarization" (Morson 53). In this context intratextual commentary becomes an indispensable technique that permits the metafictionist to express—or rather to expose—the difference between fiction and the external world. Yet, "metafiction is still fiction," as Hutcheon posits, "despite the shift in focus of narration from the product it presents to the process it is" (39).

The concepts of metafiction and metaliterary commentary are very closely related, but they are not the same. While metafiction is a method by means of which, "true art creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived

by the communal eye," as commentator Kinbote claims in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (130), the metaliterary commentary constitutes but one of metafiction's major instruments. This mode of commentary encompasses primarily those intratextual digressions that serve to attract attention to the fictional status of the novel and its compositional procedures from within the fictional text. What Hutcheon terms as "the level of narration" when she differentiates between "fiction (what is said)" level and "narration (how it is said)" level, corresponds closely to the concept of metafictional commentary, which, similarly to the level of narration, operates verbally and structurally. Hutcheon defines this mode of narration as "thematization of overt diegetic narcissism" (55).

Bitov's works of fiction abound in examples of how he implements metaliterary commentary: he constantly makes use of self-referential devices, such as, for example, *mise en abyme* or a book within a book, and performs as, to use Nabokov's expression, "anthropomorphic deity," unexpectedly stopping the narration to retell the situation differently or suggesting other versions and variants of the plot; in other words, he deliberately reveals the fact that his fiction has its own codes and rules and reminds the reader that he/she is dealing not with real life but with artifice.

Metafictional narratives cannot function without a commentary, in which a quasi-fictional author-hero or a novelist-narrator employs his authorial voice to comment on the creative process or utilizes his sometimes obvious or at times masked presence to intrude with a message that can be in some cases understood as a commentary to the entire novel.

To build his multidimensional worlds, Bitov often resorts to narration level *mises en abyme*. In her discussion of this technique Hutcheon points out that "often the *mise en abyme* contains a critique of the text itself"; she supports her claim with a quotation from Borges's "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius": "A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete"

(55). Given this assertion, *Pushkin House* is more than complete, inasmuch as in this novel: 1) the author-hero meets the fictional protagonist, who gives him essays on linguistics written presumably by his grandfather, which are included in the novel; 2) the novel includes the critical essay authored by the protagonist; 3) the narrative incorporates the novellas written by one of the characters, Uncle Dickens, which are being read by the hero; and furthermore, 4) a piece from a real newspaper is inserted in the narrative. When Chances writes that "Bitov's comments about his Russian literature scholar, Leva, vis-à-vis his article about Russian literature . . . apply equally well to Bitov vis-à-vis his novel about Russian literature . . ." (223), she underscores precisely the multiplicity of *mise en abyme* levels in the novel.

To select an example or two from Bitov's works in order to demonstrate how he implements metafictional commentary presents a task of great difficulty, because, in a sense, all the fiction he has written is a metafictional commentary. With respect to this assertion, Beckett's observation concerning Joyce comes to mind: in Bitov's commentary form is inseparable from content, like in Joyce's texts, wherein "form is content, content is form" (117). Because one theme that is of major interest to Bitov is writing as a profession, throughout all his works he constantly comments on the nature of the literary process. In this respect *Pushkin House* alone offers a myriad of examples of metafictional commentary, so many that the word *digression* becomes inappropriate with regard to the role of commentary. Indeed, we observe here what Genette calls the "invasion of narrative by its own discourse" (259).

The principal mechanism of metafictional commentary is the narrator who comments on the structure of the narrative; therefore establishing to which character belongs the commentator's voice becomes an issue of priority in commentary analysis. Speaking of Nabokov's *The Gift*, Dolinin points out that "the authorial persona builds an ambivalent relationship with the protagonist, at times merging with him into a brotherly 'we,' at others

emphasizing a clear-cut line of demarcation" (165). This brotherly "we" also often occurs in *Pushkin House*. In this novel it includes the voices of the author and the fictional author-hero, but the voice of the novel's protagonist Leva Odoevtsev never merges with anybody's. On the contrary, in the appendix to section 3 of the novel the fictional author admits to having "forced the hero into an unnatural confrontation" with himself, emphasizing thus the "unbrotherly" nature of this relationship (350). The subtitle of this appendix, "The Relationship between Hero and Author," underscores the importance of the issue.

In *Pushkin House* Bitov's narrator incessantly shares with his hypothetical reader, whom he often addresses directly, the joys and difficulties he encounters in composing the novel. Thus in the midst of introducing into the novel a new character, Uncle Dickens, and describing his apartment, the first-person narrator suddenly interrupts the flow of the third-person narrative with the following remark in the first person plural: "Even to list the really very few things standing along one of the study walls . . . seems a challenge, because we could easily and involuntarily become absorbed in each of these few objects"(33); he or feels the need to provide the narrative with the following parenthetical explanation: (In concluding our coverage of this gathering, we must confess that we've been somewhat carried away, somewhat too literal about our task, too ready to rise to the bait. This is all vaudeville, and not worth the trouble. Now it's too late. We have trampled this stretch of prose—the grass will no longer grow on it. . . .) (212); or happily declares, "We have glad news for the reader—Uncle Dickens is still alive! At least, he'll come back to life again and die again, for the sake of the novel" (325).

Paradoxically, no matter how exhaustively Bitov "tramples" every "stretch of prose" he creates, "the grass" keeps growing even wilder, this "grass" being a perfect metaphor for the appendices, commentaries, versions, variants, epilogues, and the like, which he ingeniously uses to extend the novel and in so doing to accomplish what he claims to be an impossible task (319).

Bitov's infatuation with metafictional commentary in *Pushkin House* is overwhelming. The commentary overrides the plot, the story, and the characters. To prove this statement one need only glance briefly at the table of contents, which by itself represents a metafictional minicommentary on the structure of the novel, as do the title and the epigraphs. What follows inside the text affirms the first impression. Suffice it to say that apart from constant authorial intrusions into the flow of the narrative, each section of *Pushkin House* is supplied with a subdivision, designated "*Italics Mine.—A.B.*," wherein A.B. provides lengthy commentaries on such subjects as "re-creating the hero's contemporary nonexistence" (5), "inevitable collaboration and coauthorship of time and environment" (7), "the experience of author and reader" (7), and the like.

Because "this novel deals in various ways with general problems of textual unity, fictional authenticity, and the literary status of nonfictional elements," as Hellebust has observed, the ontological status of Bitov's fictional world, which is constantly and explicitly "called into question," is characterized by unclear boundaries, especially the one between the world of the characters and "that of Bitov's fictional author-narrator" (265). In his analysis of the complex "hierarchy of worlds involved in reading *Pushkin House* as fiction," Hellebust suggests the following scheme:

The text describes, besides the primary fictional world of Bitov's hero Lyova Odoevtsev (W_{Lo}), a parallel world inhabited by an author/ narrator (W_{AB}). The latter is, in the manner of an editor or academic commentator, identified as "A.B." in the recurring phrase "*Italics mine.—A.B.*" Both worlds are fictional with respect to the actual world (W_A). The total world of the text (W_{Text}) is an association of W_{Lo} and W_{AB} plus the fictional proposition that W_{Lo} is identical to the world of the novel being written by A.B. (268)

Having applied this scheme to the structure of *Pushkin House* and considered such factors as "the portion of the text devoted to its construction, the position of this text within the narrative, its relation to the title of the work as a whole, and so on" in order to determine the primacy of one of these worlds over another, Hellebust comes to a conclusion that "the case of *Pushkin House* is fairly straightforward: A.B.'s world clearly invokes the convention of authorial commentary on a text" (268).

In the first chapter entitled "Father," which largely consists of the impersonal account of the hero's family background, almost every passage begins with a reminder that it is not a real story but a fictional construct: "Since the chapter is titled 'Father,' we should mention this: . . ." (15), or "Now a drunk appears on the scene, an old man we have mentioned in passing. We wouldn't need to tell about him, except that all the participants were mirrored in him in their own ways"(23), or "It was in this historic time, to which we have alluded by means of the narrow trousers . . ." (22). Not only is the third-person narration constantly interspersed with the first-person plural, but there is an insert where suddenly the author shifts to calling himself "I": "Why haven't I seen them, even once, in all these hectic years? And where have *I* been?" (21). Moreover, all these "stage directions" (59), as Bitov calls his metaliterary devices, are followed by a critical discussion of the shifts of the point of view in the narrative and the nature of realism in literature, as well as by the alternative variants of the story: "The author very much wants to present here a second variant of Lyova Odoevtsev's family . . ." (44).

Although many of Bitov's heroes are either professional or amateur writers, like, for example, Uncle Dickens in *Pushkin House*, it is not their intrusions but the author-hero's that pervade the fictional narratives. Bitov leaves the metafictional commentary to his implied author or even to his quasi-fictional "Bitov," who, albeit not exactly the historical author himself, still appears to be less fictional than his other heroes. In contrast

with Nabokov, "a book within a book" that Bitov inserts in *Pushkin House* turns out to be not a professional work of criticism, like the nonfictional critical biography "Life of Chernyshevskii" in *The Gift*, but purely fictional novellas authored by Uncle Dickens, not even a professional writer. In the framework of an otherwise extremely sophisticated context, laden with literary theory and criticism, these traditional novellas, treated as "naive" by Bitov's snobbish hero, stand out as strikingly authentic. Yet not only is one of these novellas entitled "The Mirror" (the word that in the context of metafiction acquires a specific connotation, related to the *mise-en-abyme* device), but they also provide an occasion for the narrator to attach to the first part of the novel an appendix with a metacritical commentary on issues of style, entitled "Two Prose Styles." Bitov's author-hero comments also on the issues pertaining to literary theory and criticism while narrating what Leva, the literary scholar and philologist, thinks about the quality of Uncle Dickens's writing:

(With prose, the problem of evaluation is more complex. Prose is harder than poetry to evaluate categorically. . . .)

He cannot judge objectively because, for him, reading Dickens—the uncle's prose is more of an immediate, personal experience, rather than one that is mediated, readerly. (115)

In this manner Bitov explicates to his reader the rules and codes of his prose but does it indirectly, through the agency of his character.

Rodnianskaia, comparing *Pushkin House* and *The Monkey Link* in her insightful essay "Preodoleniie opyta, ili dvadstat' let stranstvii" (Overcoming Experience, or Twenty Years of Wondering), suggests that because for Bitov writing is not only a professional occupation but an existential purpose; because only by remaining a writer can he cope with life and deal with such questions as "Why do I exist? What is my purpose?"; and because

as a writer and a human being he has never been able to squeeze himself into the image of a nonwriter protagonist, who precisely for the lack of this most important constant—the ability to write creatively—could not serve him as an adequate instrument of self-knowledge, Bitov has long experienced a problem in finding an adequate hero. Lipovetskii's analysis of *Pushkin House* expresses basically the same idea, but in a different way. Lipovetskii argues that the merging of the objective author with the subjective narrator blurs the boundaries between literature and life and in so doing produces an effect of simulacrum between the context of the novelist, which is literary culture, and the context of the hero, which is life.

Rodnianskaia sees the solution to Bitov's lifelong search for the right hero in *The Monkey Link*, this hybrid of a travelogue and a novel, which consists of two parallel planes: a real journey through the real locales—Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia—and the novelistic account of that journey. Notably, the culmination occurs when the two planes, or two novels, created by the author right in front of us, intersect. In the "*Italics Mine*—A.B." section of *Pushkin House* the author expresses uncertainty about his omniscience and claims that "We have always wondered, since our earliest, most spontaneous childhood, where the author was hiding when he spied on the scene that he describes. Where did he so inconspicuously put himself?" (56). But *The Monkey Link*, due to its mixed genre, permits the author to come out of hiding. As a result, what can be seen as a metafictional literary game—the presence of the author, depicted at his typewriter, right within the narrative; his complaints about his writing; his digressions to describe what he sees outside his window; the pretexts he uses to avoid looking at the blank sheet of paper, on which some other parallel life, a life dependent on his will, has yet to be born—is not at all a game or a device but rather a genuine and sincere attempt to make peace with one's own soul. Aware of the risk of boring the reader by his exposure of this writer's "laboratory," he nevertheless takes it, because for him it

is vital. If previously, in *Pushkin House*, Bitov tried (albeit reluctantly) to abide by the novelistic convention that insists on the presence of a fictional hero in a novel, he finally rejects that convention in *The Monkey Link* by way of placing "The Living Hero" inside himself, "The Writing Author." "The Writing Author" employs the category of voice, defined by Bakhtin as an instrument of the "speaking consciousness," for meditating on the themes that appear to obsess him: "the compulsion to write," and "the inability to write."

Having resolved one problem by getting rid of a conventional protagonist, Bitov, according to Rodnianskaia, immediately creates a new complication, which is the psychological bifurcation of the author, the split of his personality into the superego "I" and the double "He." Whereas "I" is a disciplined professional writer whose professional ethics and moral imperatives do not permit him to be promiscuous, to lie, and to drink, but guide him to produce the text (which in fact we are reading), "He" is a sinner. He is always eager to escape from the typewriter and the desk to get drunk at a party. At times he appears to be one of the "soldiers of the Empire," a detachment of talented misfits, of which the author claims to be the leader (*The Monkey Link* 298). However, it is to "He," as Rodnianskaia observes, that we should be grateful for the wonderful and vital humor that saturates the book. The ability to produce this humor—not parody and not irony, which have always been the hallmarks of Bitov's style—does not abandon the author even under the most extreme situations of persecution and marginality, in which he finds himself throughout the book (Rodnianskaia 182-89).

The doppelgänger motif and the theme of psychological bifurcation can be regarded as common features within Bitov's works. Bitov's old devices were already thoroughly explored in *Pushkin House*, whose hero, Leva Odoevtsev, experiences a split into Leva the hereditary aristocrat and Leva the plebeian and product of contemporary reality, with another character,

Mitishatiev, featured as his double. However, what distinguishes "Awaiting Monkey" is the fact that it is not the fictional protagonist who experiences the split, but the author-hero himself.

Another link between the two novels surfaces in the following passage of authorial commentary from *Pushkin House*:

After the hero's entry into the present time coinciding with the author's, all we can do is lackadaisically follow the hero, stupidly spy on him (which is impossible to accomplish in practice, by the way), and describe the sequence of his movements. . . . This would still be possible, somehow, if the author himself were the hero of his own work and kept a kind of diary. But the author wishes to live his own life, and he doesn't feel very comfortable pursuing the hero so importunately. . . . No, the author is not enticed by such a prospect, we decide at this point. The novel is finished. (318)

As we have seen, what the author was not ready to do at "that point," he accomplishes in *The Monkey Link*, namely, he becomes the fictional hero of his own metafiction in order to fight his own "duel with reality," to use Rodnianskaia's expression. Rodnianskaia is correct when she concludes that in "Awaiting Monkeys," "Bitov has written a uniquely thorough and temperamental report of the writer's duel with reality" (190).

Given Bitov's special affection for Nabokov's novel *Glory*, which he expressed in the essay "Zhizn' bez nas" (Life without Us), the following observation by Pekka Tammi about the structure of *Glory* also seems very relevant to the discussion of the narrative structure of *Pushkin House*:

in terms of narrative structure, *Glory* constitutes a characteristically Nabokovian instance of play with narrative embedding and links hidden between the embedded levels of fiction. Put briefly, the essence of this

play is in the transference of the motifs belonging to the embedded fictions (dreams, fairy tales, books within books) to the level of the narrative reality, until an impression is created that the fictions may somehow exert control over the reality within which they are contained. . . . (173)

This device is clearly discernible not just in Pushkin House, but in every Bitov novel, perhaps with a difference that he prefers embedding literary criticism to fairy tales.

From the word *report* there is but one step to the word *commentary*, which, according to Webster, has the following definitions that should be added to the aforementioned ones: "Commentary—a record of a set of events usually written by a participant and marked by less formality and elaborateness than a history," and "Commentary—an observation or interpretation conveyed by suggestion, implication, analogy, or other indirect means."

Hutcheon, in her analysis of the place of literary criticism in the contemporary literary process, has observed that "since many modern novels seem intent on identifying themselves with their own theorizing, perhaps descriptive research into these self-informing theories is the only possible form of novel criticism left" (15). "The extreme of this view," according to Hutcheon, is "Jameson's idea of 'metacommentary,' which would be a self-conscious commentary on the very conditions of any given critical problem; it would be the need for interpretation, not the nature of it, that would be discussed . . ." (15). Does it mean then that Bitov's engagement with self-metacommentary renders all extrinsic commentaries, performed by others, totally redundant?

That metafictional commentary can function as a link between fiction and criticism has been observed by a number of scholars. While Lodge has pointed out that passages of metafictional commentary "disarm criticism by anticipating it" (207), Raymond Federman's neologism "critifiction," which he

invented for the title of his article on metafiction, speaks for itself. Hutcheon also argues to this effect: "Metafiction . . . is fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). Assuming that "with metafiction the distinction between literary and critical texts begins to fade," one can see how visible this process is in Bitov's texts.

Leva's article "Three Prophets," which is located within the frame of the principal text, is a proper example. Disguised as a commentary on Leva Odoevtsev's critical writing, the article is a work of criticism in its own right. When it was taken out of the context and appeared in the July 1976 issue of the specialized journal *Voprosy literatury* (Issues in Literature), it was treated by many literary experts as an authentic if controversial scholarly study by critic Odoevtsev. Furthermore, it gave rise to a heated discussion that resulted in numerous favorable as well as unfavorable reviews. On the other hand, analyzed within the context of the novel, the article can be understood as Bitov's commentary on his own work. As Chances has observed,

the narrator's commentary to the article by Leva Odoevtsev, of *Pushkin House*, revealed that Leva's article about Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tiutchev told us more about Leva than about those poets. The commentator's commentary on Leva's commentary on the nineteenth century poets can be read as a signal to look at Leva's article as commentary on his past works and on *Pushkin House*. (246)

In sum, *Pushkin House* has all the attributes of scholarly literary criticism: it is divided into sections; equipped with appendices and footnotes; the chapter titles and epigraphs are taken from the classical works of Russian writers; the hero is a specialist on Pushkin who works at Pushkin House, the institute of Russian literature of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad, which is the oldest literary-research institute of its kind in the country, and also a museum. As Volkov points out in his *St.*

Petersburg: A Cultural History, Bitov made the hero of *Pushkin House* a professional philologist in order to “decorate his static plot with a garland of essays about great Russian writers” (524).

In Bitov's "Commentary" to *Pushkin House*, written later than the novel, page-by-page annotations are scattered throughout the text. The "Commentary" also comments on miscellaneous issues pertaining to culture, literature, history, politics, philosophy, and criticism. It is Bitov's cultural self-consciousness and nostalgia that compel him to translate the signs of the past epoch into the language of the present, and even future, and stimulate his detailed interpretations of the notions, as well as the long lists of the no-longer-existing objects that he incorporates in his commentaries. Bitov's semiological sensitivity was underscored by Kuritsyn, who wrote: “Bitov's commentaries provide a penetrating view into the disappearing objects of an age that will never return, and an illustration of a well-known thesis about the heightened interest of the postmodern time to the boundary genres (diaries, commentaries, annotations, epistolary novels)” (“Postmodernistskaia” 4). However, when Bitov treats the notion of translation, in the sense of translating from one time period into another, there appear “statements concerning the translation” in his texts. Thus in the introductory section of “The Commentary,” which precedes the annotations proper, he explains that the contemporary “items of common knowledge” such as “prices, champions, popular songs,” which always appear mysterious to the foreign reader, before long become foreign to the domestic reader as well, so they require a translation. Hence his argument that “from a national standpoint, perception in translation is already perception in the future time” (*Pushkin House* 374). Of course, what urges the writer to provide this “translation,” or commentary, is his major concern for the preservation of culture, not particular prices or songs, as he ironically claims.

The appendix to “The Commentary,” “Scrap Paper” (“Obrezki”) and published in the second volume of entitled

Imperiia v chetyriokh izmereniakh (Empire in Four Dimensions), is only about five pages long, but it provides exhaustive personal and bibliographic information. The author tells us here that "the novel did not take long to write—only three months and seven years" (391); that at first the novel was conceived as a long story titled "Aut" (Out); and that at the time of writing the novel he preferred titles composed of short words, such as *Dom*, which in Russian means *house*. Then follows a detailed story of the search for the title, which ends successfully with Pushkin House. It is worth citing here a footnote from the principal text of the novel itself to emphasize, if only in passing, that *Pushkin House* is a rare case of a fictional text that contains footnotes:

* The novel has changed title several times, reflecting successive authorial encroachments. Last came *Pushkin House*. It will undoubtedly be criticized, but it's final. I had never been to Pushkin House, the institute, and for that reason (if only that) what I have written here is not about the institute. But I could not disavow the name, the symbol. I am guilty of this "allusion," as it is stylishly called now, and helpless against it. I can only broaden it: both Russian literature and Petersburg (Leningrad) and Russia are all, in one way or another, Pushkin's house, without its curly-haired lodger . . . The academic institute bearing this name is only the latest in the series. (345)

Returning to the appendix to "The Commentary," one will see that the story of the title is continued with a hilarious account of how the author tried to come up with headings which would identify and adequately indicate the genre of the novel: "a philological novel," or "a novel-museum," or "a Leningrad novel," and so on (*Empire*, 2: 392-93). The author finally admits that he rejected the idea of headings, because "the novel is written in the only form and according to the only method: I did what I could, and I think it cannot be different . . ." (393). Thus it is not only in the principal text of the novel but also in the appendix to

"The Commentary" that Bitov satisfies his passion for intergeneric experimentation. The elliptical commentary on the plot is included in the appendix to "The Commentary" in the form of a poem, entitled "The Twelve" ("A Summary of the Novel *Pushkin House*"). The appendix itself is written in the genre of a mock confession, ascertained by a sudden remark, addressed to the readers, "Now what? What else can I reveal?" (393). It ends with a bibliography of subsequent publications of his semicritical works, thematically related to *Pushkin House*:

From time to time the author finds himself finishing the articles that were not finished by Leva, such as: "In the Middle of the Contrast" (see "The Proposition to Live" in the collection *Articles from the Novel*, Moscow 1986) or "Pushkin Abroad" (*Syntaksis*, Paris, 1989), or his thought takes him into the far future (2099), where the poor descendants of authorial imagination (Leva's great grandson) have to transcend the future, created for them by us (see *Subtracting the Hare*, Moscow 1990). (396)

It should be underscored that the fact of this appendix's existence transforms the whole idea of "The Commentary": the text, which by definition cannot be anything but marginal with regard to the principal text of the novel, turns into the principal text to which the appendix appears to be marginal.

Yet Bitov never viewed "The Commentary" as a marginal text. When in April 1989 it was published for the first time by the literary monthly *Novyi mir* (New World) as an autonomous text, entitled "Blizkoe retro, ili kommentarii k obsheizvestnomu" (Close Retro, or Commentary to What Everyone Knows), Bitov emphasized its autonomy by saying:

What a strange experience! . . . Commenting now on this, now on that the author was struck by the realization of how disparate and marginal was life. . . . However, when the author reread the whole commentary from beginning to

end—he saw the picture, the unexpectedly logical narrative evolved. The author would not even want the reader to interrupt his reading the novel by consulting the Commentary. This Commentary is a self-sufficient mode of reading for those, who have not read the novel; and it is the mode of rereading—for those who have read it once upon a time. (137)

Unlike the rest of its entries, the penultimate entry of this "Commentary" is not a brief annotation but a full-length essay. Together with the appendix to "The Commentary," it covers such issues as personal situation, explanation of the title, and miscellaneous comments. Above all, however, this essay is involved with exploring the nature of literary influence. It is here that in contrast to Nabokov, who repeatedly rejected all comparisons and influences, Bitov argues that "it would be foolish to deny influences" (410). What he does reject are the "charges of outright imitation," namely the imitation of Nabokov, Proust, and Dostoyevsky. As for influences, Bitov here formulates his attitude to this issue, and while doing so enters into polemic with Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* introduction:

Literature, thank God, is not a sport and not a science—accomplishments do not take the form of records and formulas. The same subjects raised by different individuals can have value; closely similar forms can arise independently at the same time or at different times—they will be valuable. But even in literature the first, as a rule, is stronger than the independent birth of the second. With the origination and repetition of new forms, the situation is more complicated: geniuses, as a rule, have not invented new things but have synthesized what was accumulated before their time. . . . *The Trial*, for all that, is more powerful than *Invitation to a Beheading*, yet what a pity it would be if Nabokov had "read Kafka in time" and failed to undertake his *Invitation*. (410)

Statements pertaining to "denial of moral purpose and social commentary," as well as "rejection of general ideas," are scattered throughout all the annotations of "The Commentary." Here Bitov really excels in discussing the taboo issues, just for mentioning which he could have gone straight to jail, were this "Commentary" published abroad between 1978, the year when it was completed, and 1985, the beginning of glasnost era. "The Commentary" literally abounds in "antisocial" comments on such utterly forbidden topics as antisemitism, the Stalinist cult, and the prison camps. Wittily ridiculing the method of socialist realism and the absurdity of Soviet life in general, Bitov alternates fleeting, ironic comments with serious declarations. For instance, when on page 278 of the novel Leva tells an ignorant girl, "Unlike Victor Nabutov, my dear . . . Vladimir Nabokov is a writer," the corresponding commentary annotation to this phrase explains: "In the days when we had just one of everything, we also had one soccer announcer. At that time Nabutov's voice was well known to each of our two hundred million *citizens and convicts* [emphasis added]. His voice competed with that of Sinyavsky himself (the sports commentator, not to be confused with the writer) . . ." (402). Clearly, this short but complex annotation requires a commentary in its own right in order to explain that here, as well as in the principal text of the novel, Bitov 1) mentions by name the two then forbidden writers, Nabokov and Andrei Siniavskii; and 2) makes "citizens" and "convicts" sound synonymous and in so doing emphasizes the horror of Stalinist repressions, during which nobody was exempt from the fate of turning from a citizen into a convict overnight.

Discussing the specificity of commentary as an academic genre in the compiler's introduction to his commentary on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Lotman stipulates certain basic principles of organization that should govern any scholarly commentary. He writes that texts that have complex narrative structures stimulate highly varied interpretations; therefore they

require equally complex commentaries that would combine explications of various types (472-73). That Bitov's texts possess complex narrative structures and are supplied with equally complex commentaries has already been demonstrated. Their complexity is reinforced by the fact that most of these texts and commentaries appear to be blends of factual and imaginary elements. The "self-conscious design" of Bitov's books, in addition to parody and allusion, also critiques a society that requires explanations, hence so many footnotes on the Soviet institutions, and, because these institutions are described by the author as absurd, the footnotes are naturally ironic.

Indeed, Bitov's novels are autocommentaries, but, as the word implies, very subjective ones, to say the least. They impose high intellectual demands on the reader, expecting him to be knowledgeable in the most diverse fields of culture and science, ranging from philosophy, art, history, and religion, to the issues pertaining to everyday life.

In the first annotation of "The Commentary" to *Pushkin House* Bitov claims that "a glance at the table of contents should suffice to keep anyone from suspecting him [the author] of 'elitism,' a rebuke now made with great frequency in our literary journals and newspapers (as if we had no other worries)" (374). He adds that "that there is no need at all for the reader to know the literature [Russian literature] well in order to begin this novel . . ." (374). Obviously, it is a tongue-in-cheek statement.

In his book Shepherd argues that Segal's list of Russian metafiction can easily be extended beyond 1970. So can the list of Bitov's metafictional works be extended beyond *Pushkin House*. It will then include *Armenia Lessons*, *Georgian Album*, *The Teacher of Symmetry*, *Subtracting the Hare*, *The Monkey Link*, and practically everything written by Bitov. Indeed since *Pushkin House*, Bitov has established himself as such an outstanding master of metafiction, a self-conscious, self-referential, and at the same time intertextual author of "literature about literature," that the above-mentioned properties of his prose

were qualified by critic Barry Scherr as “Bitov’s usual complex of topics” (165).

One can further argue that to regard Bitov exclusively as a modernist or a postmodernist writer is to invite oversimplification. It is better to accept Bitov's own attitude and perceive his entire output as an interconnected and single text. Regarded as such this text will look very eclectic, very baroque, very experimental, very innovative, very open, and very unlike any other text ever written. Significantly, the most prominent feature of this text is the discourse of literary commentary that serves Bitov as the structural basis for exploration of a narrative technique as well as the medium for his philosophical thought.

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