

# Russian Postmodernist Metafiction

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Nina Kolesnikoff

Peter Lang

RUSSIAN  
POSTMODERNIST  
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# Introduction

Russian critics and literary scholars began using the label “post-modernist” with regard to Russian literature at the end of the 1980s. Initially they used the term “postmodernism” along with other labels, such as “the new wave literature,” “the post-avant-garde,” “conceptualism” and others.<sup>1</sup> Within the next few years, they settled on the term “postmodernism” and focused their attention on the questions of the origin of postmodernist literature in Russia, its relationship to its Western counterparts, and its most prominent features.

It should not be surprising that the opinions of Russian critics were sharply divided. A generation of older critics, educated during the Soviet period, firmly believed that Russian postmodernism was a weak imitation of Western models and had no chance to establish itself permanently in the Russian context. A strong negative attitude toward postmodernism was overtly expressed in the titles and subtitles of critical articles, such as Vladimir Novikov’s “Zaskok” (A Crazy Idea) and “Prizrak bez priznakov: Sushchestvuet li russkii postmodernizm?” (A Ghost without Features: Does Russian Postmodernism Exist?), Karen Stepanian’s “Postmodernizm: bol’ i trevoga nasha” (Postmodernism: Our Pain and Anxiety), and Evgenii Ermolin’s “Mezhdu kladbishchem i svalkoi: postmodernizm kak paraziticheskaia versiia postmoderna” (Between a Cemetery and a Dump: Postmodernism as a Parasitic Version of the Postmodern).<sup>2</sup>

- 1 See Mikhail Epshtein, “Iskusstvo avangarda i religioznoe soznanie,” *Novyi mir*, no. 12 (1989), pp. 222–235; A. L. Kazin, “Iskusstvo i istina,” *Ibid.*, pp. 235–245; Irina Rodnianskaia, “Zametki k sporu,” *Ibid.*, pp. 245–249.
- 2 Vladimir Novikov, “Zaskok,” *Znamia*, no. 10 (1995), pp. 189–199; “Prizrak bez priznakov: sushchestvuet li russkii postmodernizm?,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 5 June 1997, p. 8; Karen Stepanian, “Postmodernizm: bol’ i trevoga nasha,”

Among the earliest negative assessments of Russian postmodernism none was more scornful than Vladimir Slavetskii's "Posle postmodernizma" (After Postmodernism), published in the prestigious literary journal, *Voprosy literatury*. Slavetskii did not hide his contempt for Russian postmodernist literature which he defined as:

[...] omnivorously secondary, esthetically conciliatory, patient to the point of indifference and eclectically ragged. It can feed off scraps of quotations, reminiscences, echo-backs, consciously bared like an armature or building timbers, reconstituting not cultural background and context but discordant noise.<sup>3</sup>

As for the practitioners of this type of literature, Slavetskii characterized them as those "who lost the gift of imagination, active perception and vital creativity, ... and involve themselves not with creativity, but with constructions from components of culture itself."<sup>4</sup>

A positive assessment of postmodernism as a new type of literature expressing an anti-mimetic attitude and searching for new forms of artistic expression was articulated by critics of the younger generation, many of whom came from outside the academic centers of Moscow and Leningrad. That group included Mark Lipovetskii (Ekaterinburg), Viacheslav Kuritsyn (Sverdlovsk), Andrei Levkin (Riga), and many others. Unanimous in their acceptance of postmodernism for its innovative approach to literary and artistic forms of expression, the proponents of the new art offered different opinions as to its most salient features.

Viacheslav Kuritsyn characterized postmodernism as "the new primitive culture," which, instead of reflecting external reality, cycles back on itself and eliminates the difference between subject

*Voprosy literatury*, no. 5 (1998), pp. 32–54; Evgenii Ermolin, "Mezhdu kladbishchem i svalkoi: postmodernizm kak paraziticheskaia versia postmoderna," *Kontinent* no. 89 (1996), pp. 333–349.

- 3 Vladimir Slavetskii, "Posle postmodernizma," *Voprosy literatury*, nos. 11–12 (1991), pp. 37–47; translated as "After Postmodernism," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–94), pp. 40–52.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

and object.<sup>5</sup> Kuritsyn outlined several tendencies common to postmodernism and primitive culture, such as a tendency towards syncretism and the merging of diverse artistic and generic conventions, the elimination of the category of authorship and the use of palimpsests, the concern with ritual, and the importance of the device of enumeration. As for literary postmodernism, Kuritsyn noticed several outstanding features, such as the abundant use of quotations, the preoccupation with commentary and self-reflection, hybridization of different generic conventions, radical irony and carnivalization, and the obliteration of semantic structures. Kuritsyn acknowledged a low quality in Russian postmodernist literature which resulted from the rejection of originality and the preoccupation with the recycling of cultural patterns free of any hierarchy or value. Despite his low assessment of the overall quality of postmodernist fiction, Kuritsyn was convinced that postmodernism was “the most vital, most esthetically relevant aspect of modern culture, whose best examples included some excellent literature.”<sup>6</sup>

Mikhail Epshtein placed Russian postmodernism in the context of simulacra which substitute signs of the real for the real itself and threaten the difference between real and imaginary, true and false.<sup>7</sup> Epshtein distinguished three stages of Russian postmodernism: a pre-Soviet period, characterized by simulations and deconstruction of some aspects of Western culture, a Soviet period which subjugated all aspects of life to Communist ideology

5 Viacheslav Kuritsyn, “Postmodernizm-novaia pervobytnaia kul’tura,” *Novyi mir*, no. 2 (1992), pp. 225–231; translated as “Postmodernism: The New Primitive Culture,” *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–1994), pp. 52–66; “Nederzhanie imidzha,” *Vestnik novoi literatury*, no. 7 (1994), pp. 199–213; “Velikie mify i skromnye dekonstruktsii,” *Oktiabr’*, no. 8 (1996), pp. 171–187; “Vremia mnozhit’ pristavki. K poniatiiu postmodernizma,” *Oktiabr’*, no. 7 (1997), pp. 178–183.

6 Kuritsyn, “Postmodernizm,” p. 66.

7 Mikhail Epshtein, “O novom soznanii v literature,” *Znamia*, no. 1 (1991), pp. 217–232.

and created an all-encompassing hyperreality (simulacrum), and a post-Soviet period which recognized the simulated nature of hyperreality and foregrounded it with the use of irony, parody and play. In a highly controversial fashion, Epshtein considered Russian postmodernism as a mature and more advanced stage of Socialist Realism and pointed to their remarkable similarity in the production of simulacra, based on determinism and reductionism, ideological and aesthetic eclecticism, and the elimination of the boundaries between elitist and mass cultures. He also acknowledged some crucial differences between the two methods, with Socialist Realism maintaining faith in reason, progress and objective laws of reality in its attempts to construct a utopian vision of the future, and postmodernism rejecting both the past and the future in favour of the never-ending present and creating its own conventions by ironically subverting traditional models and following the patterns of mass culture.

The most comprehensive and insightful analysis of Russian postmodernism was offered by Mark Lipovetskii, a young scholar from the Ural Pedagogical University in Ekaterinburg. Lipovetskii articulated his views in a series of articles published in *Novyi mir*, *Voprosy literatury* and *Znamia*, in his doctoral dissertation and in a book-length study *Russkii postmodernizm: Ocherki istoricheskoi poetiki* (*Russian Postmodernism: Essays on Historical Poetics*).<sup>8</sup> Lipovetskii placed the development of Russian postmodernism in the framework of chaos theory which recognizes the chaos of existence and a sense of disappearing reality, and conveys them through

8 Mark Lipovetskii, "Zakon krutizny," *Voprosy literatury*, nos. 11–12 (1991), pp. 3–36; translated as "The Law of Steepness," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–1994), pp. 5–39; "Apofeoza chastits ili dialog s khaozom," *Znamia*, no. 8 (1992), pp. 214–224, transl. as "An Apotheosis of Particles, or Dialogue with Chaos: Notes on the Classics, Venedikt Erofeev, the Poem Moscow–Petushki, and Russian Postmodernism," *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1993–1994), pp. 67–90; *Russkii postmodernizm: Ocherki istoricheskoi poetiki*, Ekaterinburg: Izdatel'stvo Ural'skogo universiteta, 1997.

a radical transformation of established cultural signs and codes. The new postmodernist literature, according to Lipovetskii, captures the chaos of social and historical relationships by eliminating the boundaries between literature and reality, between the imaginary and the real, between text and context.

Lipovetskii identified a number of prominent features of Russian postmodernist literature, which included among others the device of polystylistics, based on extensive quotations and paraphrases, stylistic heterogeneity of the narrative fabric, the new relationship between the author and the text, the radical transformation of temporal and spatial relations broken up into autonomous chronotopes, the new type of hero representing simultaneously a life-like character, a metaphor and a sign, the central role of irony and a playful garishness, and a desire to shock the audience with the outrageous subversion of established norms.

In examining the radical experimentation of Russian postmodernist writers, Lipovetskii recognized a close link between postmodernism and the avant-garde. He considered Russian postmodernism both as a continuation of the avant-garde tradition and as a conclusion of that important period in the history of Russian literature. As for the relationship between Russian modernism and postmodernism, Lipovetskii acknowledged some common sensibilities and formal innovations, but stressed the differences in their philosophical and aesthetic approaches. Whereas modernism was governed by epistemological considerations, postmodernism was clearly concerned with ontological questions; the modernist preference for mimetic forms of modeling was replaced by artistic modeling, and the modernist principles of originality and novelty gave way to the postmodernist practice of borrowing and repetition of earlier forms.

Lipovetskii distinguished three phases in the development of Russian postmodernism: the early period which began at the turn of the 1960s and the 1970s, the intermediate period which emerged at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, and the period of

“steep” postmodernism in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.<sup>9</sup> The early period, according to Lipovetskii, was characterized by a highly critical attitude to ideological and cultural models, the rejection of metanarrative, the dissolution of a unified structure and experimentation with new forms of artistic expression. The best examples of this stage of Russian postmodernism, according to Lipovetskii, include Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkinskii dom* (*Pushkin House*) and *Kommentarii k obshcheizvestnomu* (*Commentaries on the Widely Known*), Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moskva – Petushki* (*Moscow to the End of the Line*), the late texts of Vasilii Aksenov, Vladimir Makanin, and others.

The second period was distinguished by a pronounced play with cultural systems and codes, a high degree of irony and absurdity, and a startling narrative and stylistic polyphony. These tendencies were clearly evident in Sasha Sokolov’s *Shkola dlia durakov* (*A School for Fools*) and *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* (*Between Dog and Wolf*), Evgenii Popov’s *Dusha patriota, ili razlichnye poslaniia k Ferfichkinu* (*The Soul of a Patriot, or, Various Epistles to Ferfichkin*) and numerous short stories by Tatiana Tolstaia, Viktor Erofeev, Viacheslav P’etsukh, and others.

The third period of postmodernism, labeled by Lipovetskii as “steep postmodernism,” emerged in Russia in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, and was represented in fiction by such writers as Tatiana Shcherbina, Mikhail Berg, Andrei Levkin, Boris Kudriakov, Ruslan Marsovich, and others. The label “steep postmodernism” captured the notions of bold formal experimentation and an absence of meaning on the levels of logical and stylistic connections between components of the text. Lipovetskii pointed out the apparent contradiction between the verbal refinement of narration and the impossibility to saturate words with meaning and the overall effect of aesthetic silence produced by such texts. In his critical examination of the third period, Lipovetskii

9 Lipovetskii, “Zakon krutizny,” pp. 217–230.

acknowledged a crisis in the overall aesthetics and practice of Russian postmodernism. The scholar was, however, reassured by two circumstances, first by the fact that the crisis was limited largely to fiction, and second, that postmodernism managed to break the monopoly of the prevailing realistic tradition.

Mark Lipovetskii's diagnosis of a postmodernist crisis was essentially correct, but proved to be short-lived. By the mid-1990s there occurred a remarkable upsurge in the publications of new and innovative works of fiction, many of them written by new authors. These works included Anatolii Korolev's *Golova Gogolia* (*Gogol's Head*) and *Eron* (*Eros*), Victor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* (*The Russian Beauty*), Valeriia Narbikova's *Okolo ekolo* (*In the Here and There*), Viktor Pelevin's *Chapaev i Pustota* (*Chapaev and Void*), and many others. The newcomers to Russian postmodernist literature included among others, Iuliia Kisina, Egor Radov, Anastasiia Gosteva and Dmitrii Dobrodeev. The works published in the mid-1990s represent a fourth stage of Russian postmodernism characterized by a strong Menippean orientation and the presentation of serious philosophical issues in a highly comical fashion, a fascination with historiography and the creation of fictional works which offer alternative versions of the past, a dominant role of intertextuality and a merging of divergent cultural codes, including film, television and computer technology, and a highly innovative use of language and typography.

The aim of the present study is to examine the most representative works of Russian postmodernism which have been published in the past thirty years, with a particular focus on the texts which foreground the fictional character of literature and do so with an array of new and innovative techniques. The foregrounding of fiction making became the dominant characteristic of Russian postmodernist fiction, as well as the area of its most daring experimentation. And the innovations have been carried on all narrative levels, including thematic and ideological, structural and compositional, linguistic and typographical.