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Durham University

School of Modern Languages and Cultures:

Department of Russian

An aesthetics of exclusion:

Vaginov's Kozlinaia pesn'

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

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Abstract

This thesis renegotiates the position of Konstantin Vaginov's novel *Kozlinaia pesn'* within the meta-text of post-Revolutionary culture, challenging the long accepted view that Vaginov maps out a programme of exclusion from Bolshevik reality in an attempt to preserve the classical ideals of pre-Revolutionary Russian culture from ruin. Vaginov's ambivalent treatment of such trends in intellectual culture as the nature of the life culture dualism, the tenability of culture *a priori* and framings of rebirth in projections of cultural history are dialogised with the theories of Viacheslav Ivanov, Viktor Shklovskii, Roman Jakobson, Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev Pumpianskii.

In addition, critical reception centred around the novel's status as *roman-à-clef* is also challenged, particularly the insistence that the novel accurately depicts the reality of intellectual life during the Soviet 1920s and the consequences of the struggle for hegemony over culture.

As an alternative to such readings, the world-view of an all encompassing life is posited as central to Vaginov's aesthetics, marked by the tendencies to lay low and simultaneously affirm and negate any stance taken in the struggle for hegemony over culture.

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Introduction: Konstantin Vaginov - the writer who doesn't fit

The author and poet Konstantin Vaginov (Vagengeim, 1899 – 1934) was the son of proudly cultural parents who instilled an appreciation for the arts in their son, particularly the culture of antiquity and its legacy. At the age of seventeen, Vaginov began to write poetry but did not immediately embark on a literary vocation, heeding the advice of his father and enrolling to study law in August 1917. His studies were curtailed shortly after his enrolment by conscription into the Red Army, in which he served until his demobilization in 1922. During the final year of his army service, Vaginov returned to Petersburg and began to immerse himself in the former imperial capital's literary scene, joining a great many of the literary groups and circles that sprang into being during the immediate post-Revolutionary era of the NEP (New Economic Policy). In her impressive study *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, Katerina Clark suggests that the fervent discussions and disputes that took place both between and within such groups centred around the question of what the nature and role of culture was to be in the then post-Revolutionary modern world. By way of a prefatory remark to her study, Clark declares that such debates took place within a 'particular cultural ecosystem', in which 'ideological formations' and 'frames of reference' were largely inherited and which limited the dialogue on culture.¹ In other words, the groups and circles with which Vaginov was affiliated, and the content of each of these groups' conceptions of artistic

¹ Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. ix.

practice and the role of culture, are a continuation and reformulation of the literary culture that developed in the earlier eras of Russian Symbolism, the Silver Age, or, perhaps more globally, that ambiguous period still referred to as 'modernism'. As we shall see, it was a purported valorisation of the culture of antiquity garnered from his parents that was to influence Vaginov's own contribution to post-Revolutionary culture.

During the 1920s, Vaginov was affiliated with such Petersburg/Leningrad based groups as the *Abbatstvo gaerov* [Brotherhood of Fools], *Tsekh Poetov* [Guild of Poets], *Ostrovitanie* [Islanders], *Zvuchashchaia rakovina* [Sounding Shell] and the *Kol'tso poetov* [Ring of Poets]. It was under the aegis of the latter that he published his first collection of poetry, *Puteshestvie v khaos*. Vaginov shared his interest in antiquity with Mikhail Kuzmin's group the Emotsionalisty [*Emotionalists*], publishing poetry in all three editions of their almanac *Abraksas*, as well as his two early prose works *Monastyr' gospoda nashego Apollona* [Monastery of our Lord Apollo] and *Zvezda Vifleema* [Star of Bethlehem]. From 1923 to 1926, Vaginov studied at the State Institute for the History of Art (GIII), bringing him into contact with the prominent Russian Formalists Boris Eikhenbaum and Iurii Tynianov, along with the Formalist sympathiser Boris Engel'gardt. During the same period, Vaginov would also begin his acquaintance with Mikhail Bakhtin and what is now retrospectively referred to as the Bakhtin School, which included among its members Pavel Medvedev, Maria Iudina and Nikolai Pumpianskii. The last two groups with which Vaginov was affiliated were the Hellenist group ABDEM and, finally, the more renowned *OBERIU* along with Nikolai Zabolotskii, Daniel Kharms, Alexander Vvedenskii, Igor Bakhterev and others. Towards the end of the decade, Vaginov switched his primary focus from poetry to prose, with his first novel *Kozlinaia pesn'*

serialised in the journal *Zvezda* in 1927, before being published in book form by the Leningrad publishing house Priboi in 1928. Two more novels were published before Vaginov's early death in 1934 from tuberculosis, *Trudy i dni Svistonova* (1929) and *Bambochada* (1931). A fourth novel, *Garpagoniada*, was published posthumously. Vaginov's work often met with criticism, particularly in the later years of the 1920s and early 1930s during the Cultural Revolution when the militant writers' group RAPP was in the ascendancy. This was a period when assuming a particular position in those discussions and disputes over post-Revolutionary culture carried the risk of harsh critical invective, difficulty in publication and the impossibility of obtaining a secure position within cultural institutions.² In the years prior to his death, Vaginov was made to recant publically his 'errors' and effectively forced into working on a history of the proletariat.³

Critical reception of Vaginov's work has tended to argue that, prior to his capitulation to the narrow, ideologically defined telos demanded of a writer in the Stalinist 1930s, a unified theme runs through his oeuvre: the culture of antiquity, its fate in the modern, post-Revolutionary world, and the city of Petersburg as the privileged heir of the classical tradition, through its architectural forms and the literature of the Petersburg theme. Though his comments were not published until the late 1980s, Nikolai Chukovskii (1905–1965) wrote about Vaginov's thematic preoccupations in his memoirs,

² On RAPP, see Edward J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928 – 1932* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971).

³ For biographical sketches of Vaginov's life, see T.L. Nikol'skaia, 'K.K. Vaginov (Kanva biografii i tvorchestva)' in *Materialy XXII nauchnoi studencheskoi konferentsii. Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Lingvistika*, I (Tartu: Tartusskii Gos. Universitat), pp. 67 – 8; and her introductory essay 'Konstantin Vaginov: ego vremia i knigi' in Konstantin Vaginov, *Kozlinaia pesn': romany* (Moskva: Sovremenik, 1991), pp. 3–6; G.V. Filippov, 'Vaginov, Konstantin Konstantinovich' in *Russkie pisateli: XX vek*, vol. 1, ed. by N. N. Skatova (Moskva: Prosveshchenie, 1998), pp. 247–50; and A. Gerasimova, 'Trudy i dni Konstantina Vaginova' in *Voprosy literatury*, 12, 1989, pp. 131–161.

effectively anticipating much of the criticism that would be written about Vaginov from the late 1960s onwards. According to Chukovskii, Vaginov was informed by a mythologised, cyclical interpretation of cultural history, during which culture undergoes a continuous process of death and rebirth. Thus the elevated, classical culture of the Roman Empire flourished and then declined through the dark ages before its rebirth in the Renaissance. In this paradigm of cultural history, where the classical is the authentic, *a priori* truth in culture, the Bolshevik Revolution is symptomatic of a period of decline and death, during which the prevalence of classical harmony declines in a debased, lower culture. However, it falls to the individual artist or writer to preserve the *a priori* truths in culture by self-imposed isolation from the rest of society, keeping watch over culture until the time is right for its rebirth and re-blossoming. Chukovskii views the repetition of certain figures and tropes in Vaginov's oeuvre as indicative of Vaginov's belief in such a historical schema. Thus the Phoenix is a metaphor for culture, constantly regenerating itself out of its own ashes. The figure of the poet withdraws from modernity, retreating to a tower to preserve culture from ruin. The analogy is often made between the poet and the figure of Philostratus, who often appears as the intermediary between the ancient and modern worlds, allowing the culture of antiquity to be reborn and perpetuated in his literary creations. The Greek Flavius Philostratus, the historical figure from the third century AD, was a celebrated defender of pagan culture against the then advancing Christianity. Philostratus perpetuates the traditions of antiquity in the face of a lesser culture, which, as part of this cyclical understanding of cultural history, will triumph over the values of old; with the implicit parallel being that the values and culture of pre-Revolutionary Russia will be lost as the culture of the new order advances. The city of

Petersburg, with its classical architecture and tradition of being a centre of cultural activity, is seen as the location where culture's eventual rebirth is destined to take place.⁴

Critics have consistently argued that this thematic preoccupation is a constant in Vaginov's work, regardless of which artistic group he happened to be affiliated to at the time of writing any one particular text. In the early prose work 'Zvezda Wifleema', Vaginov depicts the pagan figure of Philostratus flitting across time and space, establishing a cultural tradition between Caesar in ancient Rome and the then contemporary Petersburg.⁵ Similarly, in a poem written in November 1922, Vaginov wrote that:

Шумит Родос, не спит Александрия,
И в черноте распущенных зрачков
Встает звезда, и легкий запах море
Горстями кинуло. И снова рыжий день.
Поэт, ты должен быть изменчивым, как море,—
Не заковать его в ущелья гулких скал.
Мне вручены цветущий финский берег
И римский воздух северной страны.⁶

Rhodes is noisy, Alexandria awakens,
And in the darkness of dissolute pupils
The star rises, and with cupped hands the sea
Tosses its light vapours. And again it is red-headed day.
Poet, you must be mutable, as the sea,-
Don't shackle him in the ravine of echoing cliff faces.

⁴ See Nikolai Chukovskii, 'Iz vospominanii' in *Weiner Slawistischer Almanach*, 24 (1989), pp. 97–114, and Anthony Anemone and Ivan Martynov, 'Nikolai Chukovskii and Konstantin Vaginov' in *Weiner Slawistischer Almanach*, 24 (1989), p. 92. For a discussion of the figure of Philostratus in Vaginov's work, see Anthony Anemone, 'Konstantin Vaginov and the Leningrad Avant-Garde: 1921–1934', Ph.D thesis (Berkeley: University of California, 1985); and Anemone's 'Konstantin Vaginov and the Death of Nikolai Gumilev' in *Slavic Review*, 48, 4 (1989), pp. 631–6; David Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction: Self-consciousness in Soviet Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 109; and Gerasimova's 'Trudy i dni Konstantina Vagina', p. 141.

⁵ K. Vaginov, 'Pomniu ia Aleksandriiskii svon...', *Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 1 (1989), pp. 107–109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

I am taken to the flowering Finnish coast
And the Roman air of the northern country.

According to Anthony Anemone, the artistic groups in which Vaginov participated 'span the history of post-Symbolist literature in St Petersburg, from Ego-Futurism to Acmeism, expressionism to imagism, absurdism to the literature of fact and social demand'.⁷ That Vaginov should hold fast to such themes throughout his affiliations with such diverse literary groups hints at the widely accepted reading that he was fundamentally an individual writer who never made more than a nominal commitment to whichever group he happened to be affiliated to at a given time. As early as 1922, Vaginov wrote in a private letter that: 'Я проходил через все поэтические кружки и организации; теперь мне давно не надо... Я хочу работать один.' [I've passed through all the poetic circles and organisations; I haven't needed to for a long time now... I want to work alone.] Tatiana Nikol'skaia, one of the very first critics to take Vaginov's work as an object of serious study, has consistently argued the case for both the predominance of the fate of classical culture theme and Vaginov's resulting isolation from the cultural context in which he wrote. In one brief biographical sketch, she describes how, such was Vaginov's valorisation of the ancient and antiquated, he flatly refused to have electric lighting installed in his apartment, preferring to work by candlelight instead. Only after the interference of an electrician neighbour was Vaginov's apartment wired for electricity and this unwanted manifestation of modernity encroached into his living arrangements. The group of writers and intellectuals depicted in Vaginov's first novel, *Kozlinaia pesn'*, are similarly reluctant to engage with the modern world,

⁷ Anemone, 'Konstantin Konstantinovich Vaginov, 1899-1934' in *The Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. by Neil Cornwell and Nicole Christian (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), p. 861.

preferring to eulogise the tragic collapse of the culture of antiquity. The novel was, at the time of its publication, understood as a *roman-à-clef* depicting representatives of the old guard of the Russian intelligentsia, struggling to adapt to the demands of a Bolshevik reality that threatens to negate their cherished values.⁸

Writing around the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, A. Gerasimova also stresses Vaginov's isolation during the Soviet 1920s. She emphatically rejects the notion of Vaginov having anything in common with such groups as the *Kol'tso poetov*, *Zvuchashchaia rakovina*, *Ostrovitanie* and the *OBERIU*, arguing that in his writings Vaginov strove to articulate a state that was outside time and space, life and art. Gerasimova suggests that Vaginov himself was effectively outside and isolated from the time in which he wrote; and that the characters, like those depicted in *Kozlinaia pesn'*, are similarly extra-temporal and extra-spatial, in that they fall between the two cultures of antiquity and modernity, the pre- and post- Revolutionary worlds. There is one sense, however, in which Gerasimova's contribution to the small corpus of Vaginov-focused literature is unusual. She insists that Vaginov rejected the idea that Christianity represents a fall from the idealised forms of antiquity and argues that Vaginov was a profoundly Christian writer, in that his treatment of his characters reveals his compassion for human suffering through irony. Gerasimova then proceeds to suggest an analogy between the compassionate Vaginov's life and that of Christ. Like Christ, Vaginov was persecuted and died relatively young. At the time of her writing in the climate of *glasnost'*, Vaginov's works were becoming accessible to a readership to which they had long been

⁸ Nikol'skaia, 'Konstantin Vaginov: ego vremia i knigi', pp. 6-7; and her 'K. K. Vaginov (Kanva biografii i tvorchestva)', pp. 67-74. Vaginov's remarks about wishing to work alone are quoted by Nikol'skaia in 'Konstantin Vaginov: ego vremia i knigi', p. 6.

denied, and he was therefore undergoing something of a resurrection, elevated to a plane of cultural veneration by a reading public.⁹

What unites Nikol'skaia and Gerasimova's reading of Vaginov's work is their insistence that he was a figure who was excluded from the time in which he wrote, deliberately holding fast to his values and thematic preoccupations (and their real-life embodiments) as other artistic groups and the artistic policy of the state moved away from him. Almost all critical readings of Vaginov's work are agreed on this point. Indeed, in the introduction to her study of post-Revolutionary Petrograd/Leningrad, Katerina Clark feels moved to state that Vaginov, along with post-Revolutionary 'giants' Mikhail Bakhtin, Velimir Khlebnikov and Osip Mandel'shtam, will *not* feature in her study, as their status makes them less rewarding subjects of general trends. In Vaginov's case, it is what Clark regards as a failed agenda towards a high culture that 'presupposed a classical or higher education' that sees him consigned to the periphery, despite what she terms his 'intrinsic merits'.¹⁰

Whilst the tendency to exclude Vaginov to the periphery of culture, or even outside culture itself, has predominated in critical readings of his work, it is not universal. More recently, Graham Roberts has sought to establish Vaginov as a central figure in the *OBERIU*, which had its origins in the *Radiks* theatre group founded by Bakhterev when he was a student at the Leningrad Institute of Art History. Vaginov, along with Daniel Kharms, Alexander Vvedenskii and Nikolai Zabolotskii all attended the *Radiks* rehearsals. After it disbanded, the four members decided to form a new a group and Bakhterev asked Vaginov to join. After existing under various names,

⁹ Gerasimova, A., pp. 131–161.

¹⁰ Clark, *Petersburg*, p. 24.

the group settled upon *OBERIU*, issuing a manifesto in 1928 after their famous 'Three Left Hours' performance.¹¹

Roberts states that two of the principal aims of his study of the *OBERIU*, *The Last Soviet Avant-garde*, are to identify the features of a common *OBERIU* aesthetic, and, contrary to the previous accounts of Nikol'skaia and Gerasimova, establish Vaginov at the very centre of that aesthetic. In doing so, he resists the overly dogmatic temptation to establish how the various writers, poets and playwrights' oeuvres conform to the tenets of *OBERIU* production laid down in the manifesto. Instead, Roberts consistently locates the manifesto and the various individual authors against the background of the intellectual culture of the Soviet 1920s, considering the contributions of the Acmeists, Futurists, Formalists, the Left Art movements, Malevich, Party ideologues, and the Serapion Brotherhood, constantly stressing how these various manifestations of the Soviet Avant-garde represent a decisive break with the 'Romantic' and individualistic understanding of culture perpetuated by the Russian Symbolists. Roberts implies that the *OBERIU* are effectively a weaving together of those contrasting and overlapping currents that distinguish post-Revolutionary intellectual culture and constitute, so Roberts claims, the ultimate expression of the dynamics of Russian modernism before the Stalinist onslaught signalled its demise. The extent to which Roberts argues for Vaginov's inclusion in the *OBERIU* is shown by his repeated conviction that Zabolotskii, long regarded as being central to the group, cannot be regarded as a core member. In his discussion of why Zabolotskii does not fit within the group and Vaginov does, Roberts reiterates the critical reception of Vaginov's novels initiated by David Shepherd's *Beyond Metafiction*, in which Shepherd nimbly uses the critical concept of

¹¹ Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avant-garde: OBERIU – Fact, Fiction, Metafiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 4–7.

metafiction to explore the thematization of complex epistemological and ontological questions in Vaginov's novels and other examples of early Soviet (meta-)fiction. According to Roberts, the reason for removing Zabolotskii is that his poetry implies an author who believed the role of culture was essentially a cognitive one, allowing the human subject a means of understanding the world. In contrast, Kharms, Vvedensky and Vaginov are seen as being more typical of the avant-garde of the Futurists, Malevich and the Serapion Brotherhood, in that, in one form or another, they insisted on art being granted an equal ontological status to reality.¹²

In the case of Vaginov, this attitude to art and reality is signified by three consistent strategies in his writing: first, by challenging the authority of the author as the sole creator and unifying force of meaning in a text; second, and concomitant to the first point, the insistence upon the co-creating role of reading and readers in the generation of meaning; and third, the exploration of 'the ontological relation between words and the world'.¹³ Therefore, in Vaginov's later fiction we encounter the thematization of how an author creates a text, and how that text simultaneously creates its author; characters sitting down and having conversations with their authors; authors reading another text which they 'create' into a new text; and a general blurring of the boundaries between the aesthetic and the real. However, in order to locate Vaginov firmly within the *OBERIU* fold, Roberts insists that his oeuvre be divided into two stages, the first lasting until the mid 1920s when Vaginov was still in thrall to 'Romantic' and Symbolist notions of the isolated and individual creating artist who is the privileged bearer of a great tradition for a (culturally lower) audience, or, in other words, the Vaginov critiqued by Gerasimova and

¹² Roberts, p. 17, pp. 57–74, pp. 105–119, pp. 157–172; Shepherd, pp. 1–28, pp. 90–121.

¹³ Roberts, p. 172.

Nikol'skaia. The second stage is signalled by what Roberts sees as Vaginov's abandoning of such values found in the poem 'Shumit Roda, ne spit Aleksandriia' and the early prose work 'Zvezda Vifleema', adopting an artistic method that Roberts terms cultural materialism, where art ceases to be transcendent and has become just one of many different social discourses.¹⁴

Thus, the studies by Roberts and Nikol'skaia and Gerasimova conflict with one another in their construction of Vaginov's role in culture. Nikol'skaia and Gerasimova insist on Vaginov's exclusion from the cultural environment of the Soviet 1920s. In contrast, Roberts insists on Vaginov's centrality, arguing that his decentralization of authorship is exemplary of what he regards as the defining trend in Russian modernism, and the ultimate expression of this tendency, which runs consistently through the Russian Futurists, Acmeist poets, Suprematists, Proletkult and the Left Front for the Arts, Serapion Brotherhood, Party ideologues, Russian Formalists, and Brik and Chuzak's *Literatura Fakta* [Literature of Fact]. If we locate the two conflicting approaches dialectically, we might say that Roberts' study reveals the limitations of Nikol'skaia's and Gerasimova's argument, in that his study takes what might be termed an intertextual conception of authorship, where the intellectual and ideological trends of the period are woven together in Vaginov's work and direct authorial speech is filled with words of others, implicitly suggesting that the exclusion of an author from his time and place, as argued by Gerasimova, is effectively impossible. Indeed, it might be argued that Roberts' study understands authorship as it is encountered in Vaginov's novels and does not follow a 'Romantic' paradigm of the isolated creating author that informs Nikol'skaia's and Gerasimova's studies.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 73 – 4.

However, Roberts's study is not without its limitations. Roberts demands that Vaginov's work be regarded as the apotheosis of the cultural context in which it was produced, insisting that this context was the product of a sudden and total break with the norms and traditions of the past. He thereby reiterates the tired and unsustainable aetiology of the phenomena of so-called modernism, and its more 'extreme' manifestation in the form of the avant-garde, steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the attitudes of critics such as Katerina Clark cited earlier. Clark, in our view quite correctly, refutes the possibility of sudden, total changes in a given cultural ecosystem, arguing that the ideological factors present in any one culture effectively limit and determine any direction that culture may follow. Roberts, therefore, does not entertain the possibility of the legacy of the norms and traditions of pre-Revolutionary culture in the post-Revolutionary environment, let alone the (sadly still) controversial opinions of Boris Groys, who persuasively argues that the culture of high Stalinism is a development from precisely that 'avant-garde' culture of the Soviet 1920s.¹⁵ In contrast, Roberts adamantly insists that Vaginov and the rest of the *OBERIU* were a kind of last hurrah for the culture of Russian modernism before the advent of high Stalinist Socialist Realism sounded its death knell. In sum, Roberts articulates a particularly extreme version of

¹⁵ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, trans. by Charles Rougle (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). That Groys's argument is still controversial some twenty odd years after its publication is somewhat baffling. It could be argued that Groys's argument and, say, that of Gerasimova are not as antithetical as we might think, in that both are examples of Russian critical thought which are preoccupied with the question of return and rebirth in Russian culture, traces of which can be found in the context of Russian Symbolism where Christian and Nietzschean themes are intermingled. For a more extensive discussion of the Nietzschean 'return' in Russian/Soviet culture, see Dragan Kujundžić's *The Returns of History: Russian Nietzscheans after Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

diachrony in cultural history, where a given period in that history is marked by clearly delineated and abrupt beginnings and endings.

One of the more significant failings of Roberts's account is his treatment of metafiction, particularly questions of decentralizing authorship, reading and the ontological status of art and reality. Whilst Roberts identifies these characteristics very perceptively, he rarely, if at all, advances his analysis beyond the mere *identification* of the metafictional properties of Vaginov's discourse. Despite his adamant insistence on Vaginov's blurring of the boundaries between art and life, he seems to suggest that the creation of such metafictional texts is effectively the legacy of a Shklovskian laying bare of the device for its own sake, and just another example of the autotelic high Modernist artwork; this is to ignore the question of what is being *said* about the life that is projected in fiction, and what role this implies for culture. The most significant example of this lack in Roberts's analysis is his surprising dismissal of the *roman-à-clef* interpretation of *Kozlinaia pesn'*. Due to his fixation on autotelic modes of authorship and reading which are 'limitless' and 'de-centring' (ironic, given his emphasis on Vaginov's centrality within the *OBERIU* fold), Roberts rejects the *roman-à-clef* interpretation as 'closed' and 'monologic'.¹⁶ That Roberts should dismiss the interpretation of the novel as *roman-à-clef* is particularly surprising, given his contention that Vaginov's fiction explores the ontological status of representation: this raises the the question as to why the reality of the Soviet 1920s depicted in the novel is immanently metafictional, or, alternatively, why such a fictional society seems to be understood as immanently real? If we accept Clark's calibration of the Soviet twenties as a

¹⁶ Roberts, pp 105 – 19.

struggle for an authentic culture, how are we to understand Vaginov's contribution to this dialogue over culture?

The present study of *Kozlinaia pesn'* is an attempt to provide answers to these questions, albeit in a manner that is attentive to how similar questions have generated distorted interpretations of the novel and Vaginov's work in the past. Despite its manifest limitations, the existing corpus of critical literature does provide a useful basis for a critical inquiry into the novel, particularly the suggestion that Vaginov was informed by a coherent vision of culture and its historical trajectory, and how Vaginov constructs a self-reflexive literary discourse that interrogates the status of authorship, fiction and the ontological. However, for the critic undertaking a study of Vaginov, the differences between Roberts, Clark, Gerasimova and Nikol'skaia concerning Vaginov's isolation or centrality in culture could be regarded as problematic, in that they seemingly demand a 'one-or-the-other' approach from the critic intent on contextualizing his or her work amongst the extant corpus of literature: Vaginov at the centre versus Vaginov at the periphery or even excluded altogether. Yet such approaches to Vaginov's work are not as divergent as they may initially appear. Indeed, what unites them is that they are predicated on the antinomial opposition between centre and periphery in how they generate meaning in culture, whether it be by positioning Vaginov at the very epicentre of authentic modernist praxis; or by locating his authentic art at the extreme periphery of culture to differentiate a highly individual artist steeped in a vast classical education from the rabble. In determining Vaginov's own contribution to early Soviet culture by constructing his dialogue with his epoch, we articulate how he responds to the intellectual culture of his epoch in a more ambivalent manner than a simple exclusion/participation binary framework can facilitate. In so doing, we aim to

produce a more nuanced and subtle image of Vaginov's aesthetics, and simultaneously highlight how such centre/periphery paradigms in cultural praxis have resulted in distorted and misguided interpretations of the novel and the intellectual culture of the decade in which it was written.

The first step towards this nuanced image is to allow for the intertextual image of culture implicit in Roberts's study - one that is considerably broader than that encountered in Gerasimova or Nikol'skaia. Rather than see culture as various distinct micro-entities or 'centres' such as the *OBERIU*, the Serapions or Emotionalists, from which Vaginov is or is not excluded, there is considerably more mileage to be gained from a more global perspective on culture in the post-Revolutionary environment, particularly the various currents which pervaded the intellectual discourse of the period and were, we contend, common to many of the groups or '-isms' that mark the period. Therefore, over the following pages, we discuss two overlapping currents that are embodied in *Kozlinaia pesn'* and the theories and philosophies of various significant figures broadly contemporary to Vaginov, regardless of how strange their nominal allegiances to any such groups or '-isms' may initially seem. The first current in intellectual culture concerns competing views on the supremacy of diachrony or synchrony in culture, the tenability of beginnings and endings, and the possibility of culture *a priori*. The second is the fraught negotiation of the life/culture dualism, with particular emphasis placed on the idea that culture is endowed with the capacity to transform, structure and ultimately justify life. Intimately interwoven with these two intellectual themes are framings of rebirth in differing projections of the (then) future trajectory of culture. As such, the following analysis considers Vaginov's at times paradoxical relationship to the theories, ideas and philosophies of Viktor Shklovskii, Roman Jakobson, Viacheslav

Ivanov, Party Ideology and some of the members of the Bakhtin School and their treatment of the Neo-Kantian legacy. By so doing, we hope to arrive at broader image of intellectual culture and Vaginov's own position within that culture, and gain a greater understanding of how the self-reflexive or 'metafictional' properties of the novel thematise the epistemological and the ontological: not as the sudden modernist innovation and break with tradition demanded by Roberts, but a highly complex re-figuration and reiteration of the ideological structures and frames of reference inherited from the pre-'modernist' and pre-Revolutionary period, all of which Vaginov shared with his contemporaries. Such an approach is intended to establish and better comprehend Vaginov's *dialogue* with his epoch and its culture, and is deliberately unconcerned with what amount to parochial and pedantic questions as to whether Vaginov was or was not a member of the *OBERIU* or any of the other groups to which he is said to have belonged.¹⁷

Our own view of the relevance and utility of the Bakhtinian dialogism in the study of texts prompted the choice of the title of this study, an aesthetics of exclusion. Understood monologically, the title reiterates the flawed argument of Vaginov as isolated hermit from culture, suggesting both beauty in exclusion and the obtaining of a certain moral elevation in the act of deliberate self-removal from the cultural sphere on the part of the artist. Crudely put, in the context of the Soviet 1920s, it risks fostering the impression that exclusion from a popular culture inflected with Party ideology is the product of good taste. However, understood

¹⁷ For a summary of the scant critical literature exploring Vaginov's problematic relationship with the *OBERIU*, and the difficulty in locating its contradictory 'manifesto' against the cultural background of the decade see Shepherd, *Beyond metafiction*, pp. 115–116, n. 45. Shepherd argues that, in terms of articulating the qualities of Vaginov's prose, establishing his membership to the *OBERIU* 'would appear to make no substantial difference', p. 116.

in its intended Bakhtinian sense, where critical methodology and its textual object enter into a constantly shifting dynamic of mutual determination, the emphasis shifts to understanding how the act of exclusion on the part of the critic is both predicated upon and generative of an idealised aesthetics, shot through with various contradictory positions concerning what is and what is not literary, and how the text pertains to culture and the historical period of its production.¹⁸

Correspondingly, in figuring Vaginov's dialogue with the struggle for an authentic culture, this study is highly attentive to how the same intellectual currents of *a priority* in culture, a transformative understanding of the life/culture dualism, and rebirth in cultural history are thematised in critical discourse as well as the novel. Indeed, the same problematics that pervade the critical discourse are treated with far greater sophistication in the novel itself. As we will argue, a culture that is endowed with capacity to transform life is specifically a high culture, an elite intellectual discourse removed, isolated and excluded from a broader and inferior low culture. In *Kozlinaia pesn'*, it is apparent that Vaginov is acutely aware of how such a high culture, particularly the aesthetic, is totally dependent on its exclusion. Vaginov realises all too well that by virtue of necessitating its own exclusion from the masses, culture requires its own suffering and eventual demise and, to momentarily adopt the inadequate binary terminology which characterises so much of Vaginov's critical reception, it is arguably from high culture that Vaginov ultimately seeks to exclude himself, albeit in terms that allow for the norms of

¹⁸ See Bakhtin's essay 'Problema Teksta' in his *Sobranie sochinenii*, V, S.G Bocharov and L. A. Gogotishvili, eds. (Moskva: Russkie slovari, 1997), pp. 306–326; 'The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An experiment in Philosophical Analysis' in M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. By Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 103–131.

that high culture to persist in a manner where they are constantly negated by a strategy to lay low. As we will see, it is this tendency to lay low which obviously questions the long held view that Vaginov sought a peripheral position in culture as an act of resistance, attempting to protect and preserve an elitist, classical culture from certain ruin.

Vaginov's thematization of competing views of diachrony and synchrony in culture lead him to confound and problematise the possibilities of beginnings and endings in the literary work and cultural history. In contrast to this strategy to confound, the structure of this thesis is broadly linear. In the first chapter, I begin with a commentary on the prefaces to the novel, where Vaginov explores questions of authorial intention, textual coherence, style, representation and the epistemological function of a preface. I dialogise these tendencies with the critical idiom of Viacheslav Ivanov, Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, noting Vaginov's apparent insistence on the literary's imbrication with ideology. Chapter 2 begins with a commentary on the theme of rebirth in the novel and how it is embodied in the character of Teptelkin, contrasting Vaginov's treatment of the theme with that of the members of the Bakhtin School, particularly Bakhtin and Pumpianskii. Prompted by the widely accepted correspondence between Teptelkin and Pumpianskii, I highlight how the novel's status as roman-à-clef has generated the misguided interpretation that Vaginov seeks the exclusion of high culture in an act of resistance to the Bolshevik ascendancy, arguing that the novel's depiction of the intelligentsia adapting to the demands of an increasingly Soviet reality does not necessitate the view that Vaginov's aesthetics are emblematic of this dilemma. As we will see, the novel's purported base in reality has led critics to argue that the novel *is* the true reality of intellectual life under the NEP, articulating the dilemmas faced by the old-order intelligentsia

as it adapted to Party rule. In chapter 3, I consider whether the thematization of aesthetic rebirth is symptomatic of an intention towards power in culture, exploring questions of participation with or resistance to Bolshevik hegemony, and debating the tenability of interpretations which suggest Vaginov's treatment of rebirth implies his isolation from cultural and political spheres. In the conclusion, I examine some of the endings offered by the novel, considering how Vaginov articulates the need for an authentic artistic production that constantly seeks to lay low an elite high culture, yet simultaneously argues for the perpetuation of the norms of high culture in a state of constant affirmation and negation.

A note on the text

All page references given in parenthesis refer to the 2008 edition of the novel published by Eksmo as part of its twentieth-century Russian classics series. In an illustration of some of the pitfalls of internet based resources, Benjamin Sher's acclaimed translation of the novel is no longer available 'online'.¹⁹ Therefore, all translations from texts in Russian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁹ David Shepherd refers to this translation in a note to his introductory essay 'Re-introducing the Bakhtin Circle', directing the reader to the URL www.websher.net/srl/twr.html. Shepherd states that the website was accessed on 15 November 2002. At the time of

writing, any attempt to access this address is met with a declaration that 'This Account Has Been Suspended'. See Craig Brandist, David Shepherd and Galin Tihanov, eds. *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (Manchester and New York: University of Manchester Press, 2004), p. 12 n. 29.

Chapter 1: The non-beginnings of the end

It is customary to preface a work with an explanation of the author's aim, why he wrote the book, and the relationship he believes it to stand to other earlier or contemporary treatises on the same subject. In the case of a philosophical work, however, such an explanation seems not only superfluous but, in view of the nature of the subject matter, even inappropriate and misleading.¹

I began at the beginning, like an old ballocks, can you imagine that? [...] It was the beginning you understand? Whereas now it's nearly the end.²

Conventionally, the preface to a literary work can be said to sit outside the text. Though the author of the text and the author of the preface are the same being, a preface is pronounced by the author at a degree of remove from the text, as if it is an extra-literary utterance made, as it were, from life. Often, the author uses this advantageous distance to evaluate, appraise, criticise and even justify the text. The author could even be said, in some instances, to be attempting to control and influence the act of interpretation, of policing the generation of meaning, and trying to govern just what is being said and interpreted in the novel. The significance of the author's status, and the unifying force of authorial intention in the generation of coherent meaning, are thus often reinforced in a preface. The pronouncing on the text from privileged distance, acts of contextualising, framing and criticising, and the cementing of the author's status as an (author)ity on the text are all mechanisms in the

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 1.

² Samuel Beckett, 'Malloy' in *Malloy Mallone Dies The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1959 [reprinted 1997]), p. 8.

creation of coherence which are best understood dialogically and regarded as being mutually configuring. For such mechanisms to be set in motion, one event is key: the completion of the text. That the author can stand back and reflect on the text's meaning endows it with a finite quality. It has become fixed. It is an object that is ready to be published, distributed and read by a community of readers. As such, a preface can be said to constitute a beginning.³

The 1928 edition of Konstantin Vaginov's *Kozlinaia pesn'* begins with the following two prefaces:

Предисловие, произнесенное появляющимся на пороге книги автором

Петербург окрашен для меня с некоторых пор в зеленоватый цвет, мерцающий и мигающий, цвет ужасный, фосфорический. И на домах, и на улицах, и в душах дрожит зеленоватый огонек, ехидный и подхихивающий. Мигнет огонек – и не Петр Петрович перед тобой, а липкий гад; взметнется огонек – и ты сам хуже гада; и по улицам не люди ходят: заглянешь под шляпку – змеиная голова; вступишь в старушку – жаба сидит и животов движет. А молодые люди каждый с мечтой особенной; инженер обязательно хочет гавайскую музыку услышать, студент – поэффектнее повеситься, школьник – ребенком обзавестись, чтоб силу мужскую доказать. Зайдешь в магазин – бывший генерал за прилавком стоит и заученно улыбается; войдешь в музей – водитель знает, что лжет, и лгать продолжает. Не люблю я Петербурга, кончилась мечта моя.

Предисловие, произнесенное появившимся посредине книги автором

Теперь нет Петербурга. Есть Ленинград; но Ленинград нас не касается – автор по профессии гробовщик, а не колыбельных дел мастер. Покажешь ему гробик – сейчас постукает и узнает, из какого материала сделан, как давно, каким

³ For a famous re-reading of Hegel's attitude to the preface, and his famous 'deconstruction' of the preface see Jacques Derrida, 'Outwork' in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004 [reprinted 2008]), pp. 1–66.

мастером, и даже родителей покойника припомнит. Вот сейчас автор готовит гробик двадцати семи годами своей жизни. Занят он ужасно. Но не думаете, что с целью какой-нибудь гробик он изготавливает, просто страсть у него такая. Поведет носиком – трупом пахнет; значит гроб нужен. И любит он своих покойников, и ходит за ними еще при жизни, и ручки им жмет, и заговаривает, исподволь доски изготавливает, гвоздики закупает, кружев по случаю достает. (23-4)

Preface

*Pronounced by an author who is appearing on the
threshold of the book*

For some time now, I've felt that Petersburg has been daubed in a greenish colour, flickering and flashing, a ghastly phosphorescent colour. On walls, in houses and in souls a green flame trembles, sly and sniggering. The flame flickers – it is not Petr Petrovich in front of you but a slimy reptile. The flame leaps up – and you yourself have become worse than a reptile. It is not people that walk the streets: you peer under a hat – a snake's head; you squint at an old woman – a toad sits, its fat belly trembling. And the young, each with their own obsession: an engineer craves to listen to Hawaiian music; a student – a striking suicide stunt; a schoolboy – to raise a child, and thereby demonstrate his masculinity. You pop into a shop – a former general stands behind the counter, smiling artificially; you go into a museum – the guide knows that he is lying, but still continues to lie... I don't love Petersburg. My dream is over.

Preface

*Pronounced by an author who has appeared in the
middle of the book*

Now Petersburg is no more. There is Leningrad; but Leningrad does not concern us. The author is an undertaker by profession, and not a master cradle-maker. Show him a coffin – he'll give it a tap and he'll know from what material it was made, how long ago, by which master, and he'll even remember the predecessors of the deceased. The author has been making a small coffin for twenty-seven years of his life. He's terribly busy. But don't think that he's making a

coffin with some aim in mind – it's just a passion of his. He raises his nose – and catches the stink of a corpse; that means you need a coffin. And the author loves all of his deceased, he walks with them in life, shaking their hands and chatting with them, slowly preparing the planks, buying a few nails and, should the chance arise, some lace.

Upon reading these beginnings to Vaginov's novel, we are instantly struck by their strangeness. If, as conventionally understood, the preface is a device motivated by textual coherence, the extent to which the prefaces to *Kozlinaia pesn'* violate, undermine and lay bare all the epistemological mechanisms at work in the prefatory beginning is remarkable. The most obvious example with which to 'begin' such a discussion is the appearance of the author. The first preface purports to have been written by an author on the threshold [*na poroge*] of the novel, and by an author who is in the transitional state of appearing, and not a fixed, concrete being. The second preface is written by such a concrete being, for instead of the transitional, imperfective status denoted by appearing [*poiavliaiushchimsia*], the author is depicted with the perfective and static appeared [*poiavivshimsia*]. Any pretensions towards the establishment of the author's status are, however, undermined by the pronouncement being uttered in the middle of the book [*posredine knigi*]. Conventionally, a second preface would be written after a substantial period of time has elapsed since the publication of the novel – years, or perhaps even decades – compounding still further those complex, inter-configuring mechanisms of authorial reflection at a remove, control over meaning, and the hybrid beginning-ending. By uttering the second preface in the middle of the book, the novel lacks that finite status of being finished, and any notion that authorial remove from the text is advantageous, permitting a reflection on the novel that reinforces meaning, is thoroughly

confounded. The implication is that the author may have changed his attitude to the novel in some way, or that some change in the world external but contingent to the text has altered not only his evaluation of the novel, but also how he will continue writing it and, eventually, come to finish it. Such factors serve to undermine the stability of authorial intention which, in a conventional preface, is reinforced and so significant in the creation of meaning.

Embedded in this dynamic of laying-bare authorial intention is the question of style, and the extent to which it can be regarded as having a mutually configuring relationship with the creation of an authorial individuality.⁴ The two prefaces are strikingly distinct from one another in their style and composition. The first has been described by one commentator as Gogolian.⁵ Such a designation is doubtless intended to encompass the sequence of disturbing synecdochal images of toads and snakes' heads that populate the streets of Petersburg; and, by extension, the flickering phosphorescent flame perhaps understood as being a metaphor for troubled perception of both the world and the self. The second abandons such a Gogolian style, ruminating on an analogy between the professions of author and undertaker, with the author describing his autobiographical experience as a writer, and his bizarre relationship to his

⁴ Bakhtin suggests as much in his (critical) presentation of the poetic genre: 'в большинстве поэтических жанров [...] единство (и единственность) непосредственно реализующей себя в нем языковой и речевой индивидуальности поэта являются необходимыми предпосылками поэтического стиля. [in the majority of poetic genres [...] the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet's individuality as reflected in his language and his speech, which is discretely realised in this unity, are indispensable prerequisites of this poetic style.] See M.M. Bakhtin, 'Slovo v romane' in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki* (Moskva: Khudoshestvennaia literatura, 1975) p. 78. M.M Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981 [reprinted. 2004]), p. 264.

⁵ David Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in Soviet Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 110.

characters, which, he states, he talks with 'in life' [*pri zhizni*]. He then trails off with vague mutterings about the purchase of lace. By implication, the author has changed his perspective during the period of time that has elapsed between the writing of the first and second prefaces, and opted for a different style of writing to better convey this new ideological orientation. From the prefaces we can infer, then, that such is the process of the author's becoming, utterances made in different historical contingencies differ in their intention to the point where stylistic unity becomes strained, and the possibility of maintaining a consistent style across the span of an entire novel is seemingly denied.

The inclusion of style within the dynamics of authorial intention and historical contingency has the consequence of undermining the *extra*-literary position of the preface, as conventionally understood. The author reflects from a distance, but the discourse with which the author pronounces that reflection is entirely constructed with the same literary idiom with which the author creates the fictional world of the novel. That the author should shift from one idiom to another across the foreshortened timeframe of the threshold to the middle of the novel only serves to emphasise this effect. The author's prefatory reflections on Petersburg in the fictional idiom of Gogol, and his speaking with his fictional characters in life, tacitly suggests that the discourses with which life and fiction are constructed have much in common, perhaps even that they are the same. Thus, even at these strange non-beginnings, one of the fundamental dynamics not only of *Kozlinaia pesn'*, but much of the culture of the Soviet 1920s is established: the contested and difficult relationship between art and life.⁶

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–28. On how this 'crisis' was accompanied by a transition from poetry to the writing of prose, see Olga Shindina, 'K interpretatsii romana Vaginova Kozlinaia pesn'' in *Russian*

We will return to this contested and difficult relationship in due course, but, for the moment, it is worth pursuing how the prefaces serve to undermine the possibility of ideologically consistent writing and, by extension, an author with a coherent point of view. Thus far, it has been established that the articulation of a global, unified intellectual theme is threatened by an author changing his mind in an excessively short period of time. Such a reading of the prefaces would, however, imply that at any one given moment an internally consistent ideological position is possible, and it is only after this period of time, when another perspective is adopted, that, in a dialectical understanding of coherence, the two positions conflict with one another and meaning breaks down. Whilst such a reading is not invalid, there is much in the first preface that fosters the impression that the adoption of any one ideological position in any one given moment during the act of writing is also problematic. In order to appreciate this fully, it is necessary to reconfigure slightly this discussion of the mutually constitutive elements of authorship, style, historical context and ideology in the prefaces, and turn to the question of representation.⁷ As will become clear, it is an apparent crisis in representation, in part predicated on the difficult and contested relationship between art and life, which lies at the heart of the novel's aesthetics.

Throughout the first preface, there is a constant play on the question of representation centred around the green phosphorescent light that, the author states, has veiled

Literature, XXXIV (North Holland: Elsevier Science Publishers, 1993), pp. 219–221.

⁷ The term 'representation' has a specific usage here, and is intended to denote what Alastair Renfrew describes as 'the means – technical, formal – by which an object can be apprehended and represented'. See his *Towards a New Material Aesthetics: Bakhtin, Genre and the Fates of Literary Theory* (London: Legenda, 2006), p. 101.

Petersburg for some time. The flickering of this flame, denoted first by '*mignet ogonek*', then simply by the long dash, manifests a sinister essence that lurks behind the visual appearance of various objects: the statue of Peter the Great; a head under a hat; an old woman; and, presumably, one's own reflection. This representational mode of juxtaposing surface appearance and essence, object and symbol, takes a paradoxical twist roughly half way through the preface when the author abruptly contradicts himself. Whereas he has previously stated that '*i po ulitsam ne liudi khodiat*' [it is not people that walk the streets], he suddenly re-peoples the city with a description of the various types found within it: engineers, schoolboys, students, former generals and museum guides. The play on representation is maintained, with the long dash, presumably still denoting the flickering of the flame, suggesting a move from external appearance to a depiction of the private thoughts and obsessions that lurk behind the social 'reality' of these particular types. The engineer wants to listen to Hawaiian music; the schoolboy to raise a son to prove his masculinity; the student to commit suicide. Crudely put, the author has shifted from a symbolic mode of representation to a typographically disjointed manifestation of free-indirect speech. Private life has become a sanctuary from reality, but reality understood from such a private life is terrifying. The impression is one of an authorial voice that is intent on articulating a true essence that lurks behind an exterior appearance, but is unsure as to which mode of representation is better suited to his purpose, uncertain as to whether it is better to transform an object into a symbol or to depict the interior reality of the various social types.

This apparent absence of a consistent mode of representation across not just both prefaces, but within the first preface itself, has obvious implications for the undermining of

authorial intention. If the truth or essence which the author seeks to depict cannot be consistently represented, then there is the possibility that the 'truth' that inspires the author to write is also open to question, and is denied the authority to structure and direct the author's writing. The author gives a very literal confirmation of this attitude, when he remarks that he does not write with any organising aim or plan in mind, but simply out of a sense of passion [prostó strast' u nego takaia]. The 'beginning' of *Kozlinaia pesn'*, then, marks a laying-bare of all those epistemological mechanisms that are generative of coherent meaning in a preface, as conventionally conceived. The author has a status that is at once transitory and concrete; seemingly lacking conviction as to whether reality is within or without the zone of the fictional; and lacking any sense of truth, or an ideological conviction that might facilitate a consistent style or representational mode at any one given moment, let alone across a substantial period of time. Rather than offering a beginning predicated on a finished and coherent text, the prefaces seemingly constitute the failure of such a beginning, and are therefore overwhelmingly evocative of a sense of an ending;⁸ instead of a threshold of a text, the reader encounters a cul-de-sac, where all literary creation is synonymous with the smell of death and decay.

A possible alternative to such a closed interpretation is provided by considering one aspect of the conventional preface which has hitherto been ignored: the expectation that an author should frame, contextualise and criticise his or her work in a preface, thereby explaining to the reader the ideological position that has been adopted throughout the novel. The immediate answer, suggested by the discussion thus far, would be that the author deems such an act of

⁸ The phrase is, of course, borrowed from Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966 [reprinted 2000]).

criticism impossible, as it is seemingly impossible to arrive at a mode of representation which could embody such a position, let alone maintain it. We are left doubting just what it is the author is trying to say, and, indeed, whether he has the ability to say anything coherent at all. A response is provided by considering whether we must automatically assume that the author who pronounces the prefaces and Konstantin Vaginov are unequivocally the same being, and that the two terms perfectly correspond to the same object. The alternative to such a reading is that the author of the prefaces is not Vaginov, but a construct Vaginov uses to explore all the questions of authorship and coherence already highlighted.⁹

Yet, at the same time, to read the 'author' merely as a construct is to programme an ironic reversal of all such laying-bare and incoherence. Rather than threatening to destroy the dialogic and mutually configuring relationships between style, meaning, authorship and the epistemological possibility of a beginning, these textual acts of undermining and inversion appear as coherent and wilful authorial intention on the part of Vaginov, who does, in effect, make a customary pronouncement as to his aim in the prefaces and, indeed, why he wrote the book; just as an author of a conventional preface might, albeit in an (un-)conventional manner. Poised as we are on the threshold of a study of Vaginov's novel, a logical progression would be to undertake a brief framing and contextualisation of these tendencies to lay-bare and make strange the devices of the preface topos, and thereby gain a fuller sense of Vaginov's position. Of particular significance is where he stands relative to earlier or contemporary examples both of and from the meta-text of

⁹ Graham Roberts has also suggested that 'author' of the novel and Vaginov need not be regarded as the same being. See his *The Last Soviet Avant-garde: OBERIU – Fact, Fiction and Metafiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 68–70.

Russian literary culture in the context of the Revolution and its immediate aftermath. Given the wealth of literary criticism and theories of literary production from the Soviet 1920s, a brief comparison with some of the more celebrated examples of *critical* material from the period provides several useful reference points with which these strange prefaces can be dialogized, thereby articulating the ideological position Vaginov seeks both to adopt and negate in the novel.

We have already seen how critics have suggested that the first preface is Gogolian, implicitly stating the legacy of pre-Revolutionary dynamics in Vaginov's novel. An acquaintance with Gogol's *Nevskii prospekt* confirms the validity of this interpretation. However, given our stated interest in representation, Viacheslav Ivanov's theories provide a possible point of origin or 'prefatory' material from which to begin constructing Vaginov's dialogue with his epoch. In his essay 'Zavety Simvolizma' [The Testaments of Symbolism], Ivanov states that purely symbolic art is distinguished by the two following characteristics:

- 1) сознательно выраженный художником параллелизм феноменального и ноуменального; гармонически найденное созвучие того, что искусство изображает, как действительность внешнюю (*realia*), и того, что оно провидит во внешнем, как внутреннюю и высшую действительность (*realiora*); ознаменование соответствий и соотношений между явлением (оно же — «только подобие», «nur Gleichniss») и его умопостигаемую или мистически прозреваемую сущностью, отбрасывающую от себя тень видимого события;
- 2) — признак присущий собственно символическому искусству и в случаях так называемого «бессознательного» творчества, не осмысливающего метафизической связи изображаемого, — особенная интуиция и энергия слова, каковое непосредственно ощущается поэтом как тайнопись неизреченного, вбирает в свой звук многие неведомо откуда отозвавшиеся эхо и как бы отзвуки родных подземных ключей — и служит,

таким образом, вместе пределом и выходом в запредельное, буквами (общепонятным начертанием) внешнего и иероглифами (иератическую записью) внутреннего опыта.

1) The artist must consciously express a parallelism between the phenomenal and noumenal; harmoniously discover a correlation between what art depicts as outer reality (realia) and what it intuits in the outer and inner as higher reality (realiora); and signify correspondence and correlations between the phenomenon (which is 'only a likeness,' 'nur Gleichniss') and its intellectual or mystically envisioned essence, which throws before itself the shadow of the visible event;

2) A mark inherent to truly symbolic art (even in cases of so-called unconscious creation, which does not conceptualise the metaphysical connection of what it depicts) is a special intuition and energy of the word, which therefore appears to the poet as a cipher of the inexpressible; the word accepts into its sound many echoes of unknown origin and, as it were, echoes of native underground springs, and thus it serves as both boundary with and exit into boundlessness, as both letters (generally comprehensible writing) of outer experience and hieroglyphs (hieratic transcription) of inner experience.¹⁰

In the first preface to the novel, Ivanov's valourisation of the representational parallelism between the phenomenal and the noumenal, outer reality and inner essence, is echoed in the parallel images of the old woman as toad, and the heads and self as reptiles. The green, phosphorescent flame that burns on the walls of buildings, on the faces and in the souls of its inhabitants, can therefore be understood as metaphor for such an art, or rather, a metaphor for a particular kind of

¹⁰ Viacheslav Ivanov, 'Zavety Simvolizma' in *Borozdy i mezhi* (Letchworth: Bradda Books Ltd., 1916 [reprinted 1971]), pp. 134–5; 'The Testaments of Symbolism' in *Selected Essays*, ed. by Michael Wachtel, trans. by Robert Bird (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003) p. 44. The spelling in the Russian version has been changed slightly from the pre-Revolutionary Cyrillic in which it was originally published. For a discussion of Ivanov's conceptions of art and language, see Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 185–90 and pp. 330–3.

artistic envisioning, whereby a truth is made manifest through the correspondences between an object and its mystically envisioned essence, *realia* and the elevated *realiora*. The 'truth' in question appears to be a sinister essence that lurks behind a debased reality where even the author's self is degraded. Ivanov's description of the word in truly symbolic art implies that a truth in art is articulated with a word endowed with the poetic *a priori*, for it echoes what has been before. A truth in symbolic art, born of such correspondences, is therefore a long-standing extant truth reborn in a new artistic form. The damnation of the degraded reality of post-Revolutionary Petersburg is therefore 'true' *a priori*, as it is made in an idiom of a native culture that can only be intuited, and only expressed in cryptic ciphers. But, as the first preface proceeds, it is as if that debased reality has come to threaten the harmonious correspondence between phenomenal and noumenal, as it is only inner experience which can provide a sanctum from outer reality, and the flickering flame of truth proffered by symbolic art risks being extinguished. As such, Vaginov's author echoes Ivanov's symbolist paradigm of representation, but also serves to lay-bare the symbolist means by which an object is apprehended and represented, implying that it is no longer endowed with the right to articulate a universal truth in culture.

The terminology of 'making strange' and 'laying-bare' is particularly well suited to articulating many of the processes outlined above, and implies a strong convergence between Vaginov's position and that of the Formalists. If, albeit momentarily, we continue to use the terminology famously developed by Viktor Shklovsky in his (un-)intentionally hilarious battle cry of early Russian Formalism 'Iskusstvo, kak priem' [Art as Device], we might argue that Vaginov is making strange the device of the literary preface, which is an example

of an object which, 'under the influence of generalised perception', fades away [soxnet] or becomes automatised [avtomatizatsiia]. Indeed, to persist in using the idiom of Shklovsky's article, that 'most typical' example of early Russian Formalism,¹¹ can we not say that the above prefaces conform to the demand that art be '...созданы особыми приемами, цель которых состояла в том, чтобы эти вещи по возможности наверняка воспринимались, как художественные' [...created by special devices whose purpose is to see to it that these artefacts are interpreted as artistically as possible]?¹²

As we have already stated, Vaginov knew Eikhenbaum and Tynianov. It is, however, somewhat paradoxical that the terminology of the 'most typical' text from the Russian Formalist School is so appropriate to a discussion of the strategies of Vaginov's novel. In terms of constructing Vaginov's dialogue with the intellectual culture of the Soviet twenties, it risks fostering the impression that Vaginov is intent on picking up the Formalist baton and realising a literary work that sought to perpetuate the method of Russian Formalism as a viable and authentic criterion for literary production. The briefest of considerations of that Formal criterion shows that such a reading of Vaginov is unsustainable, and the comparison with the Formal school ultimately articulates Vaginov's ideological position in the extent to which it contrasts and diverges with that of the Formalists, with Vaginov emerging in often stark relief against the background of Formalist literary criticism.¹³

¹¹ The phrase is Bakhtin/Medvedev's.

¹² Viktor Shklovskii, 'Iskusstvo, kak priem' in *O teorii prozy* (Moskva – Leningrad: Krug, 1925), p.7; 'Art as Device' in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1991 [reprinted 1998]), p. 2.

¹³ For a discussion of the history of Russian Formalism see Viktor Erlich's seminal *Russian Formalism: History - Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton & Co. 1955).

Writing at the end of the twenties, Bakhtin/Medvedev stated that the formal method, of which 'Art as Device' is regarded as being programmatic, was predicated on two key principles: first, that the word exists independently of any ideological associations it may imply; and, second, the division between poetic language and all other forms of language use.¹⁴ Turning to the former, the strangeness of the prefaces is not realised out of the poetic word being shown to be free of any ideological contingency. On the contrary, the laying-bare of the temporal and epistemological sequences generated by the conventional preface is absolutely predicated upon ideological associations, with the production of the literary work shown to be contingent on changes in the external world. The strangeness of the second preface being written in the middle of the book, with all its concomitant associations of the author changing his mind, and the

¹⁴ P. Medvedev/M. M. Bakhtin, *Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedenii: kriticheskoe vvedenie v sotsiologicheskuiu poetiku* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1928), pp. 77 – 101; P. Medvedev/M.M. Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: a Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. by Albert J. Werle (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978 [reprinted 1991]), pp. 54 – 72;. We are, of course, aware of the contested authorship of Bakhtin/Medvedev's work on the Formal Method, along with the other contested texts of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and *Freudianism*. For a discussion of the disputed authorship of Bakhtin/Voloshinov's *Freizdizm: kriticheskii ocherk [Freudianism]* and *Marksizm i filozofia iazyka: osnovnye problemy sotsiologicheskogo metoda v nauke o iazyke [Marxism and the Philosophy of Language]*, and Bakhtin/Medvedev's *Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedenii [The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship]* see: Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, 'The Disputed Texts' in their *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1984), pp. 146–170; Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, 'The Disputed Texts' in their *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 101 – 120; and Ken Hirschkop, 'On the Accursed Question' in his *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 126–140. We are not concerned with taking a side in the (at times) fierce debates over the authorship of these three texts. However, in the following chapter there is an example of a particularly fascinating use of *Kozlinaia pesn'* to question whether Bakhtin could really have authored the work on Freud and whether there is something particular to the context of the Soviet 1920s that renders coherent authorship problematic and unsustainable.

undermining of coherence, is geared towards foregrounding how a change in ideological perspective results in an inevitable change in the word. If the act of writing a second preface is traditionally the preserve of the author writing upon the occasion of a second or third edition of his or her work, presumably some years after the initial date of publication, any defamiliarisation in the prefaces is due to the sense of acceleration of the ideological impacting on the word. Vaginov is troubled by the extent to which the word is contingent upon the ideological, not adamant that the two realms of art and the ideological are distinct.

The October Revolution is not explicitly named in either of the prefaces, but it is nonetheless apparent that Vaginov's anxiety over the word's contingency upon the ideological has its roots in this event. Much of the discourse of Vaginov's author results from the impact of the implied ascendancy of Bolshevism and its ideology in the aftermath of the Revolution. In the first preface, the former General's artificial smile and his presence behind a shop counter are symptomatic of the climate of unease and doubt caused by this transformation. Not content with realising this social inversion, Bolshevism has advanced into the domain which is most precious to the author, the museum, or, more broadly, culture. The resulting lies of the museum guide are the first example of the sense that, in the novel, Bolshevism constitutes a rival cultural hegemony whose values contrast with those of the previous cultural tradition and, by extension, those of Vaginov's author. The transitive power of this new Bolshevik culture is conveyed in the second preface by the act of re-naming Petersburg to Leningrad, which, if we accept such a constructed chronology, has occurred in the period between the writing of the two prefaces. The first preface ends by implying that the pessimistic end of the author's dream is bound up with Petersburg, which he

proclaims he no longer loves [*Ne liubliu ia Peterburga, konchilas' mechta moia*]. Part of the incoherence generated by the second preface results from the opening declaration on the re-naming of Petersburg, as the author goes on to dismiss any concern with the city on the part of the author [*Teper' net Peterburga. Est' Leningrad; no Leningrad nas ne kasaetsia...*]. Thus, Vaginov realises an author and a beginning 'made strange' not by adopting the Formalist position of the autotelic poetic word, which is paradoxically similar to Ivanov's word-as-cultural echo in that both posit the idea of culture *a priori*, but rather by assuming that the position of the author and his word are totally contingent upon the prevailing ideological mechanisms at work in the local cultural context.

Vaginov's insistence on all culture's contingency upon the ideological is most apparent in the image of Petersburg, which is of crucial significance not only in the two prefaces, but throughout the entire novel. As a nexus of cultural production and a source of what is of value in the cultural sphere, Petersburg occupies a similar role to that of the museum where the deceitful guide is found in the first preface. A museum is a locus that, both implicitly and explicitly, polices and frames any one given ideological calibration of the cultural. The Petersburg of both the novel and reality enjoys the status of a kind of meta-museum where cultural artefacts of historical significance enjoy a privileged status.¹⁵ The re-naming of Petersburg to Leningrad manifests the triumph of Bolshevik cultural hegemony, confirming its right to dictate its own ideological position on the cultural. Vaginov has his author make an effort of *resistance* to the Bolshevik advance in the first preface, suggesting that there is

¹⁵ For a similar discussion of the role of the many statues in Petersburg, see Katerina Clark's 'Ecology of the Revolution' in her *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 1–28.

much that is sinister and disturbing about the Petersburg under Bolshevik control. This act of resistance is articulated in the Symbolist-Ivanovian idiom of the old cultural order that contrasts with that of the Bolshevik, not only attempting to express despair with the situation, but also to perpetuate the values and ideology – true *a priori* – of the previous cultural order. The word or device, conceived as being entirely contingent upon the ideological, are selected precisely because of their ideological connotations and the desideratum that a particular cultural hegemony be perpetuated. The Petersburg of the first preface is not merely a Gogolian place where nothing is as it seems, but rather an abandoned attempt for Petersburg to be both *represented* and to *be* as such. To return to and simultaneously revise Shklovsky's formulation, the purpose of the device in the two prefaces is to lay bare the process of interpreting artistically, that is to question just what is of aesthetic worth.

The second preface can also be seen as undermining notions of aesthetic worth and what is deemed to be of value in the cultural arena. Rather than foregrounding how an author has recourse to a given idiom to establish an ideological position, the second preface focuses on artistic method to explore similar ground. The Formalist insistence on the self-sufficient and self-justifying artistic word equates to the adoption of an extreme position concerning the life/culture dualism, with art completely separate from life. The ideal Russian Formalist critic approaches literature in the spirit of the positivist encountering a particular phenomenon.¹⁶ For the Formalist,

¹⁶ This statement may seem paradoxical. However, Galin Tihanov is particularly insistent on the similarity between the Russian Formalist School and positivism: 'It is of paramount importance to realise that Formalism was a phenomenon, and an offspring, of late modernity. A comparison with positivism may help to clarify this statement. To date those studying Russian Formalism have been preoccupied with highlighting the unmistakable differences

the task of the authentic writer is the realisation of a text which lays-bare and does not attempt to conceal its own artifice, that is, a writer must display an awareness of the material with which he or she constructs a literary work. In addition to the insistence on the contingency of the ideological, Vaginov 'creates' an author whose method for an authentic art is radically different to this Formalist position. We have already discussed how Vaginov is unconvinced by the possibility of authorial distance from the text, suggesting instead that the discourses of life and culture are best regarded as being mutually constitutive. In the second preface it becomes apparent that the author views the task of the authentic artist as being the creating and structuring of both art and life [и ходит за ними еще при жизни, и ручки им жмет, и заговаривает]. The author's struggle for the image of Petersburg expresses these dialogised entities of literary idiom and artistic method, where art is present in the social environment of the city, and social acts are prefigured by the cultural, with the artist possessing the ability to create, transform and structure that life. This authentic literary

between Formalism and positivism, but one has to be aware that the Formalists' distancing of their project from positivism was, in fact, symptomatic of emulation. Russian Formalism wanted in a way to be more positivistic than positivism. It disliked the positivist obsession with historical facts and environment precisely because it wanted to be as scholarly as positivism, but by applying the rigour of science to, and focusing upon, literature alone. Scientific soundness (*nauchnost'*) was a paramount value for both positivism and Formalism, and many of the Formalists proved this in their rigorous study of verse and metre (Jakobson, Brik, Tomashevskii), or by ascertaining a finite number of verifiable patterns of narrative (Propp). Trotsky certainly sounded vulgar, but was not far off the mark, when characterising the Formalist analysis as 'essentially descriptive and semi-statistical'. In other words, Russian Formalism is a typical child of modernity. It is technical, precise, meticulous, scientific and cold as positivism itself, but it differs from positivism in that it abandons the trust in encyclopaedic scholarship and genetic explanations inherited from the Enlightenment of attention to climate, environment, race and the 'moment'. Galin Tihanov, 'Seeking a 'Third Way' for Soviet Aesthetics: Eurasianism, Marxism, Formalism' in Craig Brandist et al (eds.), *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 53–4 .

method is, in the Bolshevik context, deprived of its power to create and structure, with the analogy of the author and undertaker intended to convey how such an approach to literature is moribund in the Bolshevik contingency.

The position Vaginov establishes in the prefaces manifests a deeply paradoxical relationship to those currents in the meta-text of post-Revolutionary intellectual culture that so preoccupied the Russian Formalists. He at once shares their interest in making strange the conventions by which a text is constructed, but insists on a blurring of the line between art and life, word and ideology. In due course, we will consider how, in contrast to the Russian Formalists, it is the pervasiveness of life, and not an autotelic word-culture, that prompts Vaginov to such strategies of laying bare and the undermining of coherent meaning. However, considering how Vaginov's author articulates some of the other currents in intellectual culture, it is necessary to consider two further tenets of the Formalist critique that are germane to our discussion of the prefaces. The first is the question of authorship, and the second the question of realism.

In Vaginov's constructed author, there is much that is analogous to the theories of the Russian Formalists. Pointing to various essays by Skhlovskii, Tynianov and Eikhenbaum, Graham Roberts has highlighted how the Formalists were highly critical of the notion of the author as creative genius, and instead privileged the status of the artistic device over the author. Literature's function is to draw attention to such devices, not merely express any given writer's message about the world. Similarly the Formalists rejected the concept of originality in art. According to Shklovskii, poetic craft involved the rearranging of pre-existing images far more than it involved the creation of new ones. The literary system is ultimately synchronic and self-perpetuating. Roberts gives

the examples of Eikhenbaum's 'dialectical self-generation of new forms', and Tynianov's assertion that 'creative freedom' was nothing more than 'an optimistic slogan' before coming to Brik's oft quoted remark that *Evegenii Onegin* would have been written at some point, even if Pushkin had never been born. Brik's Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ) even stated that 'there are no poets or literary figures, there is poetry and literature'.¹⁷

The first preface, with its ironic rehearsal of the pre-existing 'devices' of Gogol and Ivanov could, if viewed in isolation, be deemed an endorsement of the Formalist understanding of the author not as a creator, but as a re-arranger. Yet Vaginov's author, as we have seen, is suggestive of a literary system not synchronic and self-perpetuating, but diachronic to the point where coherence and meaning threaten to break down, and the self-perpetuating autonomy of the literary system is threatened by the ultimate relativity of any one ideological calibration of the cultural. The author's creative genius is similarly ambiguous, with, on one hand, the author's capacity to change his mind during the act of writing an affirmation of the non-reiterability of authorial creation in any one given moment, and his ability to create not only the work of art but life. On the other hand, the author's talking with his characters in life suggests that such characters are both created in literature, but also *found* in life before they are (still-)born into an antiquated and irrelevant life/culture. This notion of finding in life shares much with the later manifestation of the Formalist conception of the author in Brik's and Chuzak's *Literatura fakta*. Brik wrote that '[a]ny work of art is the result of the complex interrelationship of

¹⁷ Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avant-Garde*, pp. 27–9, and p.196. Roberts quotes from: Viktor Shklovsky's 'Voskreshenie slova' 'Iskusstvo, kak priem', and 'Gamburgskii shet'; Yurii Tynianov's 'O Literaturnoi evolutsiisii'; Boris Eichenbaum's 'Literaturnyi byt'' and 'Teoriia formal'nogo metoda'.

separate elements of artistic creativity. The author's role is to make use of these elements and to incorporate them into a definite artistic product. These elements, from which a work of art is created, are external to the author and exist independently of him'. Chuzak was scathing of 'naive eccentrics' who are of the position that 'the so-called work of art... is somehow created by the artist, and not worked in just the same way as all other products, that is to say, from sources: from others' materials in print, from one's own papers, from old and new notes'.¹⁸

These seemingly irreconcilable tensions in post-Revolutionary culture between the creating artist and the re-arranging artist, the diachronic and the synchronic literary system, are replicated in the apparent crisis in representation. The Ivanovian word, itself an echo of the one authentic culture, is laid-bare; the harmonious connection between the phenomenon and its noumenal projection exposed as just one possible aesthetic calibration of the authentic. The first preface, with its attempt to perpetuate the Gogolian Petersburg of the old cultural order, implies a lack of conviction as to which mode of representation is best suited to depicting the city under Bolshevism. The Ivanovian relationship between object and symbol, external appearance and inner turmoil, *realia* and *realiora*, ultimately fails to articulate the truth of the city's predicament. In other words, the author struggles to maintain a *realism* that is adequate to both external reality and the truth of that reality against the Bolshevik contingency. Again, the comparison with the Formalists is somewhat paradoxical. In an article entirely in keeping with Shklovskii's bombastic 'Art as Device', Roman Jakobson exposes what he terms 'the extreme relativity of the concept of 'realism'' in discourses on both painting and

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 28 and p. 196. Roberts cites from Osip Brik's 'T. n. formal'nyi metod' and 'Uchit' pistatelei''; and Chuzhak's *Literatura fakta* and 'Opyt uchebu na klassike'.

literature. Jakobson insists that realism is not a means of conveying an artistic truth, but rather ‘the requirement of consistent motivation and realization of poetic devices’, and that realism is just as much an aesthetic construct as literary fantasy.¹⁹ The writer merely rearranges such devices into a realistic text. There can be no doubting that Vaginov accepts Jakobson’s position that any concept of realism will be relative, and that such a concept motivates a consistent succession of artistic devices, rather like the Gogolian use of synecdoche and the Ivanovian relationship of object and symbol found in the first preface. However, Jakobson’s understanding of the literary system as autotelic precludes him from considering that ideological factors are at work behind any relative understanding of realism, or that the ideological in any one realism has a deeply ambiguous and mutually constitutive relationship to the ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ that motivates its particular mode of representation.

This engagement of Vaginov in dialogue with some of the critical ideas of his contemporaries and their treatments of some of the currents in Russian intellectual culture during the 1920s makes it apparent that Vaginov’s aesthetics are in fact far more sophisticated than some of the commentary we surveyed at the outset might suggest. The idea that Vaginov was an unequivocal supporter of the values of the culture of antiquity in a degraded modernity now seems unlikely, given his insistence on the relativity of differing value mechanisms in culture. Similarly, the assertion that Vaginov was an isolated hermit outside the space-time of the cultural environment in which he lived and wrote might now appear

¹⁹ Roman Jakobson, ‘On Realism in Art’ in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971 [reprinted 2002]), p. 45.

perverse. In the following chapters, the scope of this dialogue with his epoch is expanded to encompass the ideas and philosophies of the Bakhtin School, with particular emphasis given to their contrasting treatments of the life/culture dualism, the concept of rebirth in culture and their respective formulations on the trajectory of world history.

However, it is worth framing that discussion with *another* preface which Vaginov wrote for an early draft of the novel, and which clearly addresses the questions of how we are to figure an author's dialogue with his epoch and the referents undergoing fictional projection in the novel. As Tatiana Nikol'skaia remarks in her notes to an edition of the novel published in 1991, the two prefaces we have discussed were initially preceded by another:

Предисловие, написанное реальным автором на берегу Невы

Художественное произведение раскрывается, как шатер, - куда входят творец и зритель. Все в этом шатре связано с творцом и зрителем. Невозможно понять ничего без знания обоих: если знаешь зрителя, то поймешь только часть шатра, если знаешь только творца, то, наверное, ничего не поймешь. А кроме того, читатель, помни, что люди, изображенные в этой книге, представлены не сами в себе, т. е. во всей своей полноте, что и невозможно, а с точки зрения современника. Автор в следующих предисловиях и книге является таким же действующим лицом, как и остальные, и поэтому, если можешь, не соотноси его с реально существующим автором, ограничи тем, что дано в книге, и не выходи за ее пределы. Если же твой ум так устроен, что каждое литературное произведение ты соотносишь с жизнью, а не с литературными же произведениями, то соотнеси с эпохой, с классом, с чем угодно, только не с реальным автором, - вудь человеком воспитанным.²⁰

²⁰ Konstantin Vaginov, *Kozlinaia pesn' - romany* (Moskva: Sovremeniik, 1991), p. 501.

Preface, written by the real author on the banks of the

Neva

The work of art opens up like a tent, into which enter the creator and the spectator. Everything in this tent is connected with the creator and the spectator. If you are to understand anything at all, you must be familiar with both of them: to know only the spectator is to know only part of the tent; if you know only the creator then, certainly, you won't understand anything. Above all, reader, remember, that the people shown in this book are not presented as themselves, that is, in their fullness, as that is impossible. What you have is the point of view of a contemporary.

The author in the following prefaces and the book is as much one of the cast as all the other actors in the book. Therefore, if you can, don't compare him with the real existing author. Limit yourself to what is in the book, and do not exceed its limits.

If you are so inclined that you must relate every literary work to life, and not to itself, then compare it with its epoch, with its class or whatever suits you best. Only don't compare it to the real author. Please – be an educated person.

Chapter 2: Seeds and the prototype: rebirth and power in post-Revolutionary culture

After the beginning with the prefaces, the first chapter of *Kozlinaia pesn'* reads as follows:

Глава I

Тептелкин

В городе ежегодно звездные ночи сменялись белыми ночами. В городе жило загадочное существо – Тептелкин. Его часто можно было видеть идущего с чайником в общественную столовую за кипятком, окруженного нимфами и сатирами. Прекрасные рощи благоухали для него в самых смрадных местах, и жеманные статуи, наследие восемнадцатого века, казались ему сияющими солнцами из пентелийского мрамора. Только иногда подымал Тептелкин огромные, ясные глаза свои – и тогда видел себя в пустыне.

Безродная, клубящаяся пустыня, принимающая различные формы. Подымется тяжелый песок, спиралью вьется к невыносимому небу, окаменевают в колонны, песчаные волны возносятся и застывают в стены, приподнимется столбик пыли, взмахнет ветер верхушкой – и человек готов, соединятся песчинки, и вырастут в деревья, и чудные плоды мерцают.

Одним из самых непрочных столбиков пыли была для Тептелкина Марья Петровна Далматова. Одета в шумящее шелковое платье, являлась она ему чем-то неизменным в изменчивости. И когда он встречался с ней, казалось ему, что она соединяет мир в стройное и гармоническое единство.

Но это бывало только иногда. Обычно Тептелкин верил в глубокую неизменность человечества: возникшее раз, оно, подобно растению, приносит цветы, переходящие в плоды, а плоды рассыпаются на семена.

Все казалось Тептелкину таким рассыпавшимся плодом. Он жил в постоянном ощущении разлагающейся оболочки, сгнивающих семян, среди уже возносящихся ростков.

Для него от сгнивающей оболочки поднимались тончайшие эманации, принимавшие различные формы.

В семь часов вечера Тептелкин вернулся с кипятком в свою комнату и углубился в бессмысленнейшее и ненужнейшее занятие. Он писал трактат о каком-то неизвестном поэте, чтоб прочесть его кружку засыпающих дам и восхищающихся юношей. Ставился столик, на столик лампа под цветным абажуром и цветок в горшочке. Садилась полукругом, и он то поднимал глаза в восхищении к потолку, то опускал к исписанным листкам. В этот вечер Тептелкин должен был читать. Машинально взглянув на часы, он сложил исписанные листки и вышел. Он жил на второй улице Деревенской Бедноты. Травка росла меж камней, и дети пели непристойные песни. Торговка блестящими семечками долго шла за ним и упрашивала его купить остаток. Он посмотрел на нее, но ее не заметил. На углу он встретился с Марьей Петровной Далматовой и Наташей Голубец. Перламутровый свет, казалось ему, исходил от них. Склонившись, он поцеловал у них ручки.

Никто не знал, как Тептелкин жаждал возрождения. – Жениться хочу, – часто шептал он, оставаясь с квартирной хозяйкой наедине. В такие часы лежал он на своем вязаном голубом одеяле, длинный, худой, с седеющими сухими волосами. Квартирная хозяйка, многолюбивая натура, расплывшееся горой существо, сидела у ног его и тщетно соблазняла пышностью своих форм. Это была сомнительная дворянка, мнимо владевшая иностранными языками, сохранившая от мысленного величия серебряную сахарницу и гипсовый бюст Вагнера. Стриженная, как почти все женщины города, она, подобно многим, читала лекции по истории культуры. Но в ранней юности она увлекалась оккультизмом и вызывала розовых мужчин, и в облаке дыма голые розовые мужчины ее целовали. Иногда она рассказывала, как однажды нашла мистическую розу на своей подушке и как та превратилась в испаряющуюся слизь.

Она подобно многим согражданам любила рассказывать о своем бывшем богатстве, о том, как лакированная карета, обитая синим стеганым атласом, ждала ее у подъезда, как она спускалась по красному сукну лестницы и как течение пешеходов прерывалось, пока она входила в карету.

– Мальчишки, раскрыв рты, – рассказывала она, – глазели. Мужчины, в шубах с котиковыми воротниками, осматривали меня с ног до головы. Мой муж, старый полковник, спал в карете. На

запятках стоял лакей в шляпе с кокардой, и мы неслись в императорский театр.

При слове "императорский" нечто поэтическое просыпалось в Тептелкине. Казалось ему – он видит, как Авереску в золотом мундире едет к Муссолини, как они совещаются о поглощении югославского государства, об образовании взлетающей вновь Римской империи. Муссолини идет на Париж и завоевывает Галлию. Испания и Португалия добровольно присоединяются к Риму. В Риме заседает Академия по отысканию наречия, могущего служить общим языком для вновь созданной империи, и среди академиков – он, Тептелкин. А хозяйка, сидя на краю постели, все трещала, пока не вспоминала, что пора идти в Политпросвет. Она вкладывала широкие ступни в татарские туфли и, колыхаясь, плыла к дверям. Это была вдова капельмейстера Евдокия Ивановна Сладкопевцева.

Тептелкин поднимал свою седеющую, сухую голову и со злобой смотрел ей вслед.

"Никакого дворянского воспитания, – думал он. – Пристала ко мне, точно прыщ, и работать мешает".

Он вставал, застегивал желтый китайский халат, купленный на барахолке, наливал в стакан холодного черного чаю, размешивал оловянной ложечкой, доставал с полки томик Парни и начинал сличать его с Пушкиным.

Окно раскрывалось, серебристый вечер рябил, и казалось Тептелкину: высокая, высокая башня, город спит, он, Тептелкин, бодрствует. "Башня – это культура, – размышлял он, – на вершине культуры – стою я".

– Куда это вы все спешите, барышни? – спросил Тептелкин, улыбаясь. – Отчего не заходите на наши собрания? Вот сегодня я сделаю доклад о замечательном поэте, а в среду, через неделю, прочту лекцию об американской цивилизации. Знаете, в Америке сейчас происходят чудеса; потолки похищают звуки, все жуют ароматическую резину, а на заводах и фабриках перед работой орган за всех молится. Приходите, обязательно приходите.

Тептелкин солидно поклонился, поцеловал протянутые ручки, и барышни, стуча каблучками, скрылись в пролете.

Гулял ли Тептелкин по саду над рекой, играл ли в винт за зеленым столом, читал ли книгу, – всегда рядом с ним стоял Филострат. Неизреченной музыкой было полно все существо Филострата,

прекрасные юношеские глаза под крылами ресниц смеялись, длинные пальцы, унизанные кольцами, держали табличку и стиль. Часто шел Филострат и как бы беседовал с Тептелкиным.

– Смотри, – казалось Тептелкину, говорил он, – следи, как Феникс умирает и возрождается.

И видел Тептелкин эту странную птицу с лихорадочными женскими ориентальными глазами, стоящую на костре и улыбающуюся.

Пусть читатель не думает, что Тептелкина автор не уважает и над Тептелкиным смеется, напротив, может быть, Тептелкин сам выдумал свою несносную фамилию, чтобы изгнать в нее реальность своего существа, чтобы никто, смеясь над Тептелкиным, не смог бы дотронуться до Филострата. Как известно, существует раздвоенность сознания, может быть, такой раздвоенностью сознания и страдал Тептелкиным, и кто разберет, кто кому пригрелся – Филострат ли Тептелкину или Тептелкин Филострату.

Иногда Тептелкина навещал сон: он сходит с высокой башни своей, прекрасная Венера стоит посередине пруда, шепчется длинная осока, восходящая заря золотит концы ее и голову Венеры. Чирикают воробьи и прыгают по дорожкам. Он видит – Марья Петровна Далматова сидит на скамейке и читает "Каллимаха" и подымает полные любви очи.

– Средь ужаса и запустения живем мы, – говорит она. (25–8)

Chapter 1

Teptelkin

In the town, every year the starry nights would transform into white nights. In the town, there stirred an enigmatic being – Teptelkin. He could often be seen, teapot in hand, going into the public canteen to fetch hot water, surrounded by nymphs and satyrs. Beautiful groves wafted their sweet smells to him in the most putrid of places; and sentimental statues, the affected inheritance of the eighteenth century, seemed to him radiant suns of Pentelic marble. Only sometimes would Teptelkin raise his enormous bright eyes – and he would see himself in a desert.

A desolate swirling desert taking on various forms. Heavy sands shoot up, spiralling to the violent skies, petrifying into stone. Sandy waves ascend, solidifying into walls; a column rises just a little, its summit flutters

in the wind – and a man is ready, tiny grains of sand merge and grow out into trees, glistening with wonderful fruit.

For Teptelkin, one of the most fragile columns was Maria Petrovna Dalmatova. Dressed in rustling silk, Teptelkin would see her as something immutable in mutability. And when he met her, it seemed to him she united the world into a shapely and harmonious whole.

But that only happened occasionally. Usually Teptelkin believed in the utter immutability of humanity. Having grown upwards, it, like a plant, comes into bloom, with the flowers then turning into fruit; the fruit scattering as seeds.

For Teptelkin, everything seemed as rotting fruit. He lived with the constant awareness of a decomposing membrane and rotting seeds, amongst which shoots were already beginning to sprout.

For him, rotting seeds gave off the most delicate vapours, taking on various forms.

At seven o'clock in the evening Teptelkin returned with his teapot to his apartment, and lost himself in a mindless and completely unnecessary enterprise. He was writing a monograph on some Unknown Poet, so that he could read it to his literary circle of sleepy ladies and entranced youths. A little table, complete with a small light with a floral lampshade and some flowers in a small pot, had been put out for the occasion. They would sit in a semi-circle, and he would raise his eyes with delight to the ceiling, then lower them to the scribbles on his manuscript. That evening Teptelkin had to give a lecture. Having mechanically looked at his watch, he put down his pages of scribbles and went out. He lived on the second Street of the Rural Poor. Grass grew in between the paving stones, and children sang vulgar songs. For a long time a street trader with shining sunflower seeds chased after Teptelkin, nagging at him to buy what few she had left. He looked at her, but he did not notice her. On the street corner, he met with Maria Petrovna Dalmatova and Natasha Golubets. It seemed to him that they were radiating a pearlescent light. Having bowed, he kissed their hands.

Nobody knew how much Teptelkin craved rebirth. "I wish to marry," he would confide in hushed whispers to his landlady. On such occasions he would lie on his knitted blue blanket; thin and lean with dry, greying hair. The landlady, a woman of many lovers and a craggy mountain of a human being, sat at his feet and in vain tried to tempt him with her voluptuous contours. She was a dubious former noblewoman, feigning a command of foreign languages, and cultivating a

grandiose self-image with a silver sugar dish and a gypsum bust of Wagner. Short-haired, like almost all women in the city, she, like many, gave lectures on the history of culture. But in her youth she was drawn to the occult, conjuring naked pink men out a cloud who would then kiss her. Sometimes she would tell how she found a mystical rose on her pillow, and how it transformed into vaporous slime.

Like many of her fellow citizens, she was given to talking about her former riches, about how a lacquered carriage, upholstered in quilted blue satin, would wait for her at the gates, and how she would descend the red carpeted staircase, pedestrians turning to stare until she climbed into the carriage.

“Little boys – mouths wide open!” she would say. “How they would stare! Men in fur coats with seal skin collars would look me up and down. My husband, an old colonel, would sleep in the carriage. A footman, complete with coat of arms on his hat, stood on the footboard, and we made haste to the imperial theatre.”

‘Imperial.’ On hearing the word something poetic awoke in Teptelkin. It seemed to him – he would see, how Averescu, in a golden uniform, rides to Mussolini. They deliberate on the annexation of the Yugoslavian state, and the formation of the Roman Empire, as once more it begins to fly. Mussolini marches on Paris and conquers Gaul. Spain and Portugal voluntarily unite with Rome. In Rome, the Academy convenes to create a dialect that can serve as a common language for the born again Empire; and amongst the academics – Teptelkin. But the landlady, sitting on the end of the bed, was all crackling chatter until she realised it was time for political education. She slipped her expansive feet into a pair of Tartar slippers and, swaying, set sail towards the door. This was the widow of the Kapellmeister, Evdokiia Ivanovna Sladkopevetsa.

Teptelkin would raise his grey, dry head and maliciously watch her departure.

“No noble upbringing whatsoever,” he thought. “She sticks to me like a barnacle and interferes with my work.”

He stood up, buttoned his yellow Chinese dressing-gown, purchased at the flea market, poured a cup of cold black tea, stirred it with a tin teaspoon, took down from the shelf a tome by Parny and began comparing him to Pushkin.

The window would fly open, the wind ruffling the silver evening and... Teptelkin perceived a high tower! A high, high tower at which Teptelkin kept watch while the city

slept. "The tower – that's culture," he ruminated. "And at the summit of culture, stands... Teptelkin!"

"Where are you all hurrying off to ladies?" asked Teptelkin, smiling. "Why are you not attending my seminar? Today I shall be speaking on a most wonderful poet, and on Tuesday, in a week, I shall lecture on American civilisation. You know, at this time America is a land of wonders! They have soundproof ceilings, they're all chewing aromatic rubber, and at factories and industrial plants an organ prays for the workers before they start working! You simply must come!"

Teptelkin bowed robustly, kissed their outstretched hands and the young ladies, heels clattering, disappeared down the pavement.

Whether Teptelkin was walking in a garden by the river, playing whist on a green table or reading a book, Philostratus was always be at his side. The whole of Philostratus' being was full of music that was too sacred for words. Beautiful young eyes smiled out from under the wings of his eye lashes; long fingers studded with rings held a tablet and stylus. As they walked along, it was as if Philostratus and Teptelkin were communing with one another.

"Look," Teptelkin would say. "See how the Phoenix dies and is reborn."

And Teptelkin would see this strange bird with feverish oriental female eyes, standing on a bonfire smiling.

Do not think, reader, that the author does not respect Teptelkin and is laughing at him. On the contrary, perhaps, Teptelkin thought up his unbearable surname so as to banish the reality of his being, so that nobody, laughing at Teptelkin, would be able to reach Philostratus. It is well known that in consciousness there exists a duality, and perhaps Teptelkin suffered from such a duality of consciousness, and who could deduce whether Teptelkin dreamed up Philostratus, or Philostratus Teptelkin?

Sometimes Teptelkin would dream: he descends from the top of his tower, the beautiful Venus stands in the middle of a pond, the sedge whispering, the rising sun gilding them both with its lustre. Chirping sparrows hop along the path. He sees – Maria Petrovna Dalmatova sitting on a bench reading Callimachus. She looks up, her eyes full of love.

"We live between horror and desolation," she says.

The second preface, purportedly written *after* this chapter when the writer has reached the middle of the book, reveals an author who has given up on the idea of giving birth to a literary creation through the act of writing. Vaginov's author abandons the notion of a writer creating life, instead choosing to see himself as an undertaker for the characters he meets in life. In the character of Teptelkin we encounter a figure who has yet to reach such a state of pessimism, and the idea of rebirth figures prominently. Teptelkin draws the analogy between humanity and an idealised plant. This plant grows upwards, produces fruit and, in turn, rots and is scattered as seed [*semena*]. Unlike the author of the second preface, for whom the smell of decay promises only death, the process of decomposition is, for Teptelkin, endowed with a real beauty despite its stench, promising regeneration and renewal. Teptelkin's concept of rebirth is so all encompassing that it can be termed a world-view, and is entirely justified aesthetically. It is generative of the aesthetic forms that accrue around Teptelkin, and aestheticises the forms that he perceives in the world. This results in the aestheticisation of all commonplace kitsch objects such as cheap statues. The strong desire to marry, which, we are told, he has kept from his acquaintances, shows the extent to which Teptelkin's personal life is governed by what is ultimately an aesthetic criterion. Similarly, Teptelkin's double Philostratus is also born out of this world-view, which is to say that the aesthetic is generative of life. Both Teptelkin and Philostratus perceive the Phoenix, perhaps the ultimate image of rebirth in perpetuity, in the flames of the everyday bonfire.

From the discussion of the prefaces to *Kozlinaia pesn'* in the previous chapter, it is apparent that Vaginov and the author who writes them are not necessarily the same being, with Vaginov constructing an author to lay bare and problematise questions of authorship, representation and the literary's

imbrication with the ideological. It follows that a similar, and fundamentally dialogic, relationship exists between Vaginov and the characters that populate the novel, and that the point of view expressed by these characters is not Vaginov's unmediated authorial word articulated in the mouth of another. With its imagery of Philostratus, the Phoenix and a character totally believing in a mythologised, aesthetically justified understanding of existence as perpetual rebirth, the first chapter of the novel could, if Vaginov's authorial voice was understood in simplistic terms, be deemed to be an expression of support for such a world-view. However, in this chapter we will argue that Vaginov's dialogue with the dominant of rebirth in intellectual culture is far more ambivalent than some accounts of the novel allow. In order to understand Vaginov's ambivalent attitude to questions of rebirth in culture, and how such questions were formulated in the meta-text of the intellectual culture of the Soviet Twenties, it is necessary to explore Vaginov's dialogue with the members of the Bakhtin School. The turn to the Bakhtin School is suggested most obviously by the long standing reading of Teptelkin's character as being the fictional projection of Lev Pumpianskii, who, along with Bakhtin and Matvei Kagan, was a foundational or core member of the School. As we shall see, such a reading focused on the prototypes of the various figures in the novel has itself been generative not only of distorted interpretations of Vaginov's aesthetics, but mis-readings of how the cultural dominant of rebirth figures in the novel's tendency towards *roman-à-clef*. In the final part of the chapter, I consider how the novel and its culture-as-collapse reception and its base 'in historical reality' figure in Aleksander Etkind's discussion of the phenomenon of resistance in the intellectual culture of the Soviet 1920s.

The Bakhtin School is said to have had an uneven existence, lasting from 1918 to around 1927, with the most productive period being the years 1918 and 1919 when the three leading members of the school, Bakhtin, Kagan and Pumpianskii, were in constant contact. In an essay where he refers to the Bakhtin School with his own alternative designation of the *Nevel* School, Nikolai Nikolaev argues that 'it is not yet possible to describe the shared principles of the Nevel School. All that can be said is that the works of its principal members have in common a frequently declared anti-psychologistic, anti-metaphysical and anti-dogmatic thrust, and a determination to pursue pure research in the philosophical sphere of cognition'.¹ In describing the School's contribution to the intellectual culture of the period, Nikolaev is reluctant to confine himself to the strict idiom of the discipline of philosophy. Instead he is more comfortable speaking of a 'particular trend of thought within twentieth-century Russian culture', the significance of which can only be appreciated by the study not only of the works of its three leading members, but also their 'friends, pupils and followers'. Amongst such followers of the leading members, Vaginov is listed alongside Mariia Iudina, Valentin Voloshinov, Boris Zubakin, Ivan Sollertinskii, Pavel Medvedev, Ivan Kanaev and Mikhail Tubianskii, all of whom made 'outstanding' contributions to their own spheres of activity.²

¹ Nikolai Nikolaev, 'The Nevel School of Philosophy (Bakhtin, Kagan and Pumpianskii) between 1918 and 1925: Materials from Pumpianskii's Archive' in David Shepherd (ed.), *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy Authorship Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1998), p. 30.

² Nikolai Nikolaev, 'Lev Pumpianskii and the Nevel School of Philosophy', trans. by David Shepherd, in Craig Brandist, David Shepherd and Galin Tihanov (eds.), *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (Manchester: UMP, 2004), p. 125. Recently, an edition of Pumpianskii's work has been published. See L. V. Pumpianskii, *Klassicheskaia traditsiia: sobranie trudov po istorii russkoi literatury*, Nikolaev, N. I. and A. P. Chudakov and E. M. Isserlin, eds. (Moskva: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2000). However, we will rely on Nikolaev's excellent summary of Pumpianskii's work

From such a remarkable list, including as it does academics from various disciplines, musicians, and a writer of poetry and fiction, we gain the impression of the sheer range of this trend of thought, and the possibility that such trends in Russian culture could lend themselves to all encompassing world-views. In his discussion of the primary concerns of Pumpianskii's writings, Nikolaev argues that the question of cultural rebirth was a key facet of his thinking, particularly concerning his attitude to the idea of the Third Renaissance in Russian culture. The idea of the Third Renaissance held that the 'Romance and Germanic Renaissances would be followed by a Russian (Slavic) Renaissance'. Teptelkin's world-view of rebirth governs all aspects of everyday phenomena, and, concomitantly, reality is thoroughly aestheticised. According to Nikolaev, the idea of the Third Renaissance was similarly all-encompassing, described as a 'historiosophical' foundational principle that governed Pumpianskii's philosophical, aesthetic and literary historical work, and provided a principle with which to evaluate both Russia's and Europe's past, present and future. Similarly, what we encounter in the figure of Teptelkin is someone who makes no distinction between such an aesthetic schema and an understanding of existence in its historical sequence.³

Teptelkin's world-view of rebirth leads him to regard humanity as immutable. The cycle of birth, death and renewal is, at its core, predicated on the idea of constancy and repetition of certain forms. The tawdry statues from the eighteenth century are a re-manifestation of Pentelic marble. Teptelkin's personality re-generates the ancient figure of Philostratus, who suffered when Christianity was forcibly

because it reveals both a knowledge of Pumpianskii's works (some unpublished) that pertain to Vaginov's novel *and*, as we shall see, it is also guilty of allowing the 'gravitational pull' of the Bakhtin Circle to distort and mis-read Vaginov's aesthetics.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

introduced by the Romans, as well as nymphs and satyrs.⁴ The bonfire reproduces the image of the Phoenix. All of which suggest that that which is constant and reborn anew originates in antiquity and is highly evocative of the classical. Pumpianskii, according to Nikolaev, had a similar theory, which understood classicism as the repetition of stable classical forms in the Russian literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nikolaev notes how, at the beginning of the Soviet twenties, Pumpianskii defined classicism as ‘a movement in borrowed forms, an absence of formal creativity’.⁵

Teptelkin’s interest in the Unknown Poet, introduced here and expanded upon as the novel progresses, is an interest in one whose language simultaneously repeats and regenerates the language of antiquity, or what Pumpianskii referred to as ‘the tradition of poetic language’. The Russian Poet, unknown as he is in the novel, occupies a privileged position in such an understanding of the poetic language. According to Pumpianskii, the first classical genre to be assimilated into Russian literature was the classical ode. ‘Thus this “tradition of poetic language”, remembering as it did its birth in the ode, was from the outset classical, and predetermined forever Russian literature’s notion of the classical ideal and formal perfection’.⁶ It is worth recalling how, in the discussion of the first preface, we discerned an attempt at a representational paradigm analogous to that of Viacheslav Ivanov’s *realia* and *realiora*. Ivanov himself was also an enthusiastic advocate of the idea of the Third Renaissance, and the concept of *realia* and *realiora* was predicated on an attitude to language similar to that of Pumpianskii, with Ivanov suggesting that poetic language contains within itself

⁴ See note 4, p. 4.

⁵ Nikolaev, ‘Lev Pumpianskii and the Nevel School of Philosophy’, pp. 131–135.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.137.

'echoes of unknown origin', the legacy of a culture which is encountered *a priori* in poetic language.⁷

However, just as the prefaces imply that Ivanov's testament pertains only to the past and not any present or future artistic practice, Vaginov and his author maintain a sceptical attitude to the theme of rebirth in culture. There is a constant tension between the imagery of rebirth as perceived by Teptelkin, and the presence of such imagery on a different level, which, as an alternative to the lofty cultural ideals of Teptelkin, can be said to represent a lower reality of the everyday. Teptelkin is described as craving rebirth, presumably through marriage and the subsequent birth of children who are expected to embody the classical ideal. When, however, Teptelkin returns from the public canteen to his apartment, teapot in hand, he walks past a group of children on the street; but instead of being the very embodiment of an ideal they are depicted as being rude and singing vulgar songs [*i deti peli nepristoinye pesni*]. Instead of walking through the desert of shifting and regenerating forms of his mind's eye, Teptelkin walks along the shabby renamed street of *Derevenskaia bednota*, where there grows not the fruit bearing plant of perpetual cultural rebirth, but unkempt grass. Similarly, Teptelkin's fixation on the image of the seed as the source of rebirth is parodied in the 'real' manifestation of the street trader trying to sell her remaining stock of sunflower seeds. The Russian for sunflower seeds '*semechka*',

⁷ There is a strong consensus that the full import of the Third Renaissance in Russian culture has not yet been fully appreciated. However, for some useful discussion of this trend in Russian intellectual life see: Vitalii Makhlin's 'Tretii renessans' in *Bakhtinologiiia: issledovaniia perezvody publikatsii* (Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteia, 1995), pp. 132–154; and Nikolaev's 'Sud'ba idei Tret'ego Vozrozhdeniia' in V.S. Durov (ed.) *MOYZEION: Professoru Aleksandru Iosifovichu Zaitsevu ko dniu semidesiatiletiia. Sbornik statei* (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt Peterburgskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1997), pp. 343–50; and Craig Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 30–32.

is much closer to '*semena*' [seeds], and the parallel between the two objects is much clearer than the English suggests. On this level of the everyday, language does not regenerate classical forms, nor does it contain *a priori* the echoes of an ancient culture, and the *realia* serve to lay low and lay-bare the high ideals of the *realiora*. Whereas Teptelkin and his enormous landlady see the perpetuation of culture in the forms of tawdry statues and a gypsum bust of Wagner, Vaginov lays low such pretensions to high culture, and hints that such objects are merely the product of bad taste.

This fundamental *doubleness* encountered in the first chapter results from the clash between two all encompassing world-views. On one hand, there are Teptelkin's lofty cultural ideals of perpetual rebirth, a classical *a priori* poetic language and a justification of existence that is entirely predicated on the aesthetic. On the other hand, there is the tendency to negate and lay low such a world-view, with an emphasis on the mundane 'reality' of the everyday. Although such a reality is, of course, just as aestheticised as that of Teptelkin's, it rejects the lofty and transcendent ideological content of cultural rebirth, dragging such ideals down from the elitist height of the tower to the level of the everyday. The emphasis on the doubleness of consciousness, that is, of the ultimate relativity of Teptelkin's world-view, is established in the repeated use of constructions such as '*vse kazalos' Teptelkinu,*', '*kazalos' Teptelkinu,*' and the tautological '*kazalos' emu – on vidit'*'. When he is confronted with the 'real' image of a seed in the form of the street trader trying to sell her stock of sunflower seeds, he is described as looking at her but not noticing her [*On posmotrel na nee, no ee ne zametil*].⁸

⁸ For the moment, our use of the term double consciousness is intended to develop the discussion of how any ideological position is found to be relative in Vaginov's aesthetics. We will turn to the more specific connotations of the dual consciousness of the

Vaginov was not alone in the meta-text of early Soviet literary culture in implying a plurality of consciousness in all manifestations of cultural life. This doubleness of consciousness has obvious parallels with Bakhtin's theories put forward in his first book on Dostoevskii *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* [*Problems of Dostoevskii's Art*]. In the chapter devoted to the idea in Dostoevskii, Bakhtin argues against the existence of a universal consciousness in which an idea exists in an absolute form, where one world-view has the same meaning for all. Instead Bakhtin posits an understanding of consciousness as plural, and suggests an idea is fought over and debated between two consciousnesses, two 'others'.⁹ In the context of the first chapter of *Kozlinaia pesn'*, the obvious temptation is to align Vaginov with Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and the dialogism, suggesting that in the first chapter of the novel we encounter a dialogue between the consciousnesses of Vaginov, his author and Pumpianskii/Teptelkin; between the ideas of cultural rebirth and of an immediate, all encompassing life. The suggestion of an outright similarity between the positions of Vaginov and Bakhtin is rendered problematic by a section which Bakhtin would later add to the chapter in his later revision of the Dostoevskii book *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* [*Problems of Dostoevskii's Poetics*]. In his later iteration, Bakhtin introduced the concept of the *prototip* [prototype] into this chapter on the idea. It is this concept which reveals a significant difference between Vaginov and Bakhtin concerning how each understood authentic literary production: Vaginov's author, as we have already seen, likens the profession of an author to that of an

'poputchik' – [fellow-traveller] in the Soviet twenties later in this chapter.

⁹ M. M. Bakhtin 'Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo' in *Sobranie sochinenii*, II (Moskva: Russkie slovari, 2000), pp. 57–71.

undertaker; Bakhtin consistently allocates rebirth a central place in literary discourse.

Problems of prototypes and the roman-à-clef

In *Problems of Dostoevskii's Poetics*, the concept of the prototype is intended to evoke a specific relationship between an author, in this case Dostoevskii, and his epoch. In Dostoevskii, Bakhtin identifies an authentic model of literary production, where the author, understood as one consciousness engaged dialogically with other consciousnesses, conducts a great dialogue with the epoch in which he is writing. This author encounters prototypes for the 'idea-images' that he will subsequently rework into living artistic images of ideas, just as Dostoevskii re-worked the prototypes of Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* and Napoleon III's *Histoire de Jules César* into the living artistic idea-image of Raskolnikov in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*. Bakhtin, in expressing his valourisation of dialogic poetics over the much denigrated monologism, is adamant that Dostoevskii did not merely copy these prototypes, but rather that '[Достоевский] свободно-творчески перерабатывал в живые художественные образы идей [...] Он прежде всего разрушал замкнутую монологическую форму идей-прототипов и включал их в большой диалог своих романов, где они и начинали жить новой событийной художественной жизнью.' [[Dostoevskii] freely and creatively reworked them into living artistic images of ideas [...] Above all he destroyed the self-enclosed monologic form of idea prototypes and incorporated them into the great dialogue of his novels, where they began living a new and eventful artistic life.] (My emphasis)¹⁰

¹⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1972), p. 152; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson

Bakhtin's conception of the prototype is strongly reminiscent of Pumpianskii's understanding of the interlinked ideas of rebirth and classicism in culture, where an element is re-born into an aestheticised existence, implying the lasting legacy of the ideas of the Bakhtin School up to Bakhtin's rewriting of the Dostoevskii book. Etkind has argued that Bakhtin's more global concepts of dialogue and dialogism should be understood as a manifestation of the idea of rebirth in Russian culture, quoting Bakhtin's remark that: 'В любой момент развития диалога существуют огромные, неограниченные массы забытых смыслов, но... нет ничего абсолютно мертвого: у каждого смысла будет праздник возрождения'. [At any moment in the development of dialogue there are huge, unlimited masses of forgotten meaning, but... there is nothing absolutely dead: every meaning will have its day of rebirth.]¹¹ For Etkind, the presence of the theme of rebirth in Bakhtin's writings is symptomatic of nothing less than a unitary Dionysian complex in both Bakhtin and the culture of Russian modernism, fixated on the idea of eternal rebirth.¹² We shall come to Vaginov's rejection of the Dionysian as a source of regeneration in culture and its concomitant understanding of the trajectory of world history in due course. For the moment, it will suffice to note how, in the second preface, the author denies the possibility of such a rebirth, and pursues the analogy between the role of an author and that of an undertaker; and how, in the first chapter, there is such an obvious *doubleness* that pervades Vaginov's sceptical representation of rebirth in

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [reprinted 2003]), p. 91.

¹¹ Aleksandr Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo: Razvitie psikhoanaliza v Rossii* (Moskva: Gnozis – Progress Kompleks, 1994), p. 323; *Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia*, trans. by Noah and Mariah Rubins (Oxford: Harper Collins, 1997) p. 337. Etkind quotes M. M. Bakhtin, *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1986), p. 328.

¹² Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo*, pp. 41–79 and pp. 307–321; *Eros of the Impossible*, pp. 39–79 and pp. 321–335.

culture. If we accept Etkind's calibration of the global context of Russian modernism as being afflicted with a Dionysian complex, it could be argued that rather than intending to preserve such a value system from the Bolshevik onslaught by withdrawing to the heights of the tower, Vaginov seeks his exclusion precisely from such an elevated, Dionysian ideology of cultural rebirth, and perhaps even to sound its death knell. Authentic literary representation, at best nostalgic for the potential of cultural rebirth, must recognise that such an ideology has lost its ability to structure literary existence. Creation is equated with death; not the death of rot and decay that promises the eternal rebirth of which Teptelkin dreams, but the death of an absolute ending. 'Culture', to return to Bakhtin's words, is absolutely dead and shall be reborn no more.

The prototype raises other questions about how Vaginov's aesthetics have been portrayed in critical literature, and, given the novel's purported base 'in reality', how Vaginov's aesthetics inform accounts of the reality of the intellectual life of the period. As already stated, the above comparison with the ideas of Pumpianskii and Vaginov was suggested by the widely accepted reading that the character of Teptelkin is based on Pumpianskii, just as the character of the Philosopher is based on Bakhtin. This correspondence between character and referent 'in life' has led to the long accepted designation of the novel as belonging to the genre of *roman-à-clef*. However, given the manifest difference between Bakhtin and Vaginov over the question of rebirth, and the latter's sophisticated interrogation of the life/culture dualism, should this designation automatically result in Pumpianskii being regarded as the prototype of Teptelkin? The danger posed by a conventional understanding of *roman-à-clef* is that any potential meaning in a literary representation is exhausted by the unearthing of the

historical sources of the various personalities that undergo fictional projection. The 'key' concept of this sub-genre of the novel is that its fictional representation is entirely adequate to the object in life that is being represented. Despite Bakhtin's frowning upon authors who merely copy historical personalities into such a self-enclosed, monologic discourse, many critics have failed to appreciate the full significance of Bakhtin's concept of the prototype, and fallen into the monologic trap of merely identifying the historical source of certain characters in the novel. It is this tendency which prompted David Shepherd to remark disapprovingly on the tendency towards 'prototype spotting' in much of the critical literature on Vaginov and other authors of the period, often at the expense of any serious discussion as to whether the critical idiom of the period found its way into fictional literary discourse.¹³

Both appropriately and ironically, it was Bakhtin himself who cemented the reading of *Kozlinaia pesn'* as being an example of *roman-à-clef*, by stating that the prototype for Teptelkin was Pumpianskii, with whom Vaginov was a close acquaintance, and a participant in the Bakhtin School.¹⁴

Nikolaev's excellent summary of the philosophy of

¹³ David Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in Soviet Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 93. Shepherd lists the following examples of 'prototype spotting': Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 115–9, p. 370, Vyacheslav Zavalishin, 'Proza i stikhi Konstantina Vaginova', *Novyi Zhurnal*, 157 (1984), pp. 285–6; Leonardo Poleari, 'Tvorchestvo glazami tvortsa. Roman o pisatel'skoi kukhne', in Vaginov, *Trudy i dni Svistonova* (NY: Silver Age, 1984), p. xii; and K. Nevel'skaya, [Introduction to M. M. Bakhtin i M. I. Kagan. (Po materialam semeinogo arkhiva)], *Pamyat': istoricheskii sbornik* (Paris: YMCA), 4 (1981), pp. 250–1. Shepherd notes that this 'prototype spotting' was merely a rehearsal of the novel's reception by Vaginov's close associates, pointing to Tatiana Nikol'skaia's 'K. K. Vaginov. (Kanva biografii i tvorchestva)' in M. O. Chudakova (ed.), *Chetvertye Tynianovskie chteniia: tezisy dokladov i materialy dlia obsuzhdeniia* (AN Latviiskoi SSR, In-t filosofii i prava; Riga: Zinatne, 1988) p. 75 and p. 81.

¹⁴ M.M. Bakhtin and V. D. Duvakin, 'Razgovory s M. M. Bakhtinym: Vaginov i drugie' in *Chelovek*, 4 (Moskva: 1994), pp. 182–184.

Pumpianskii and the Bakhtin School has proved invaluable in terms of contextualising Vaginov's aesthetics of (non-)rebirth amongst those of his contemporaries within the meta-text of literary culture in Soviet twenties. Sadly, his discussion of *Kozlinaia pesn'* fails to transcend the pitfalls of *roman-à-clef* prototype spotting, and his brief discussion of the novel is particularly useful in foregrounding some of the risks created by reading the novel as a *roman-à-clef*, where expectations of both intellectual influence from his 'prototypes' and resistance against the Bolshevik regime serve to create distorted interpretations of Vaginov's aesthetics.

Nikolaev points to the excellent notes in the 1991 edition of *Kozlinaia pesn'* and Bakhtin's famous conversations with Viktor Duvakin to highlight how those close to Pumpianskii recognised him in Vaginov's fiction. In relation to the first chapter of the novel, the philosophical and literary ideas of the two were thought to be the same, with Pumpianskii also engaged in a comparison of the poetry of Pushkin and a French poet (André Chénier). Bakhtin recognised Teptelkin's blanket as being that of Pumpianskii and observed that everything about Pumpianskii was 'reproduced in the novel quite precisely'. Nikolaev points to various pieces from Pumpianskii's archive to hint that the monograph Teptelkin is writing on some Unknown Poet is most likely a paper Pumpianskii wrote on Vaginov a short while after the publication of a volume of the latter's poetry. Nikolaev even ventures the suggestion that the origin of the name Teptelkin 'as a denotation of something extremely negative' came from Pumpianskii in an autobiographical note from the spring of 1921 in Petersburg. If there could be any lingering doubt as to the accuracy of Vaginov's portrayal, Nikolaev ends his description of the many similarities between the two by referring to Pumpianskii's severing of all contact with Vaginov after the novel's publication, implying that Pumpianskii was

so incensed by the accuracy of what he read that he broke off all correspondence.¹⁵

In emphasising the precision with which Vaginov depicts Pumpianskii, Nikolaev still uses the term prototype to refer to both Pumpianskii and Bakhtin and their respective fictional projections in the novel. If the term is used with Bakhtin as its intended addressee, Nikolaev risks failing to convey the full dialogic sense in which Bakhtin understands the term by stressing the almost exact correspondence between the real Pumpianskii and the fictional Teptelkin. The extent to which he fails to do so is made apparent in his paradoxical insistence that Pumpianskii and Teptelkin are categorically *not* the same being, and that there ‘can be no greater error than to assume Teptelkin is Pumpianskii’. Given his use of the term prototype we might expect Nikolaev to proceed from such a statement to demonstrate how Vaginov had freely and creatively ‘re-worked’ Pumpianskii into a living image of an idea, but this is not so. Instead, Nikolaev states that it is precisely the lack of correspondence between the two that generates the peculiar comic effect of the novel, ‘an effect that only Pumpianskii’s friends understood’.¹⁶ The implication is that Vaginov is effectively stuck, and does not, if we accept Bakhtin’s definition of the term, give birth to a creation that is independent of its referent, but wholly dependent on its historical object in order to generate meaning.

Nikolaev’s use of the term prototype does not convey the core *dialogic* aspect of Bakhtin’s use of the term and effectively perpetuates an example of the monologic discourse of which Bakhtin was so disparaging. In addition,

¹⁵ Nikolai Nikolaev, ‘Lev Pumpianskii and the Nevel School of Philosophy’, p. 142. Nikolaev quotes M. M. Bakhtin, *Besedy s Duvakinym* (Moscow: Soglasie, 2002), p. 223. For further discussion of the ‘meaning’ of ‘Teptelkin’ see A. Gerasimova, ‘Trudy i dni Konstantina Vaginova’ in *Voprosy literatury* 12 (1989), p. 149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–142.

we see how the emphasis on *roman-à-clef* prototype-spotting has tended to portray Vaginov as being intellectually subservient to the prototypes he represents, and there have been few successful attempts to consider Vaginov as one other interacting dialogically with various others on an equal plane. Beyond establishing the (non-)correspondence with Pumpianskii and Teptelkin, the only attempt Nikolaev makes at a discussion of Vaginov's novel is a reiteration of Bakhtin's impossibly vague statement that the fundamental feature of Vaginov's poetics is 'on one hand, closely detailed description and the subtlest of nuances, and on the other, an unusually, almost cosmically broad horizon'. By referring to Bakhtin's pronouncements on the novel, Nikolaev only perpetuates the sense of Vaginov's subservience to his prototypical masters, unable to extricate himself from Bakhtin's word.¹⁷ If, for the sake of argument, we accept Bakhtin's concept of an author dialogically engaged with his or her contingent epoch, it is clear that critics have not only failed to advance beyond the level of identifying the sources of Vaginov's novel, but have also portrayed Vaginov as being intellectually dependent upon such prototypes. He emerges in such readings not as an other engaged dialogically with the ideas of his epoch, but merely a vessel that is filled with whatever meaning is required by the main partner in such a 'dialogue'.

We have already seen how Vaginov's complex aesthetics struggle with a number of intersecting dynamics such as the untenability of culture and language *a priori*, the search for a mode of representation adequate to the Bolshevik contingency, pitting the dominant of rebirth in Russian modernist culture against an all encompassing life in a radical refiguration of the life/culture dualism. The laying-bare of the ideological at work in the Ivanovian representational system of *realia* and *realiora* serves to question whether such a

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 141. Nikolaev quotes from M.M. Bakhtin, *Besedy*, p. 221.

system of representation is adequate to a given object in the post-Revolutionary environment, thereby implying the fundamental relativity of any ideological position which attempts to structure literary discourse. If indeed the 'key' concept of the *roman-à-clef* genre is that its fictional representation is entirely adequate to the object in life that is being represented, then the suggestion that such a simplistic representational paradigm is at work in Vaginov's aesthetics, and that Vaginov merely copies his prototypes into the fictional world, is unsustainable. Such a reading ignores his tendencies to problematise and lay-bare, and the core ambiguity of the life/culture dualism manifested in the novel where life is utterly fictionalised and the fictional granted the same ontological status as life itself. There is perhaps no more unequivocal confirmation of this point from Vaginov's typically ironic dismissal of such interpretations in the third preface, where the one dimensional association of prototype spotting and the *roman-à-clef* is dismissed as childish.

Fictional histories

In addition to generating a mis-representation of the intricacy of Vaginov's aesthetics, the tendency to regard the novel as *roman-à-clef* has, in combination with the acceptable Chukovskian line of Vaginov *resisting* Bolshevik hegemony in culture, resulted in the paradoxical situation where the novel is called upon to stand for a completely unproblematic evocation of the historical period during which it was written. It is thereby called upon to serve as a kind of substantiating evidence for the dilemmas and crises undergone by the historical personalities during the period. Alexander Etkind offers a most striking example of this tendency to substitute Vaginov's novel for the historical context of the 1920s. In a discussion of the phenomenon of resistance to Bolshevik hegemony in intellectual life, Etkind says of *Kozlinaia pesn'*

that: 'Этот роман зло и скорее всего достоверно изображает жизнь узкого кружка интеллектуалов, к которому принадлежал Бахтин, Волошинов и сам Вагинов, бывший с ними дружен. Мы видим жизнь отвратительную и абсолютно отчужденную, полную непонятого еще страха и осознанной обреченности любых духовных усилий. [The novel maliciously but probably accurately depicts the life led by the narrow circle of intellectuals to which Bakhtin, Voloshinov and their friend Vaginov belonged. We see a repulsive, totally alienated existence, full of as yet incomprehensible fear and a sense that any spiritual efforts are doomed from the start.] Etkind refers to the novel in this way to substantiate his critique of Bakhtin's/Voloshinov's text *Freidizm*, and its contested authorship. Given our present interest in how Vaginov's novel is represented in critical discourse, the precise content and authorship of this infamous disputed text is largely irrelevant. What is of interest is how Etkind comes to the conclusion that the contested authorship of *Freidizm* is ultimately insignificant, arguing that it is difficult to imagine such a book being written by one of the heroes of *Kozlinaia pesn'*, given that the novel is: '...построена на тотальном противопоставлении деградирующей, но теплящейся частной жизнью несуществующему обществу.' [...built on the total opposition between a fictional society and a degraded private life that nonetheless offered a flicker of hope.]¹⁸ Thus, the long accepted reading of Vaginov and his fictional creations withdrawing from society to preserve the flickering flame of high culture becomes paradigmatic of the historical experience of the intellectual struggling to resist and adapt to

¹⁸ Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo*, p.313 and p.317; *Eros of the Impossible*, p. 327 and p. 330. What is of specific interest here is the way in which *Kozlinaia pesn'* figures in Etkind's argument as an 'accurate' designation of the cultural environment of the Soviet 1920s, and how coherent 'authorship' is rendered problematic by that environment.

the Bolshevik real. A similar dynamic can be discerned in Nikolaev's essay on Pumpianskii. For Nikolaev, the principal point of convergence between Teptelkin and Pumpianskii is their tragic aspect, which is predicated on the fool (Teptelkin/Pumpianskii) abandoning his lofty cultural ideals – which are much in evidence in the first chapter – and going to work in the service of the Bolshevik regime. The literary tragedy thus blurs with the historical tragedy of the intellectual making reluctant compromise with the regime.¹⁹

There is, of course, nothing particular or even 'new' in such a blurring of the literary and the non-literary in a historical narrative of the decade, but an over emphasis of this aspect risks fostering two conflicting impressions. The first sees Vaginov's aesthetics as the emblem of an author who was essentially a prisoner of circumstance, or, worse still, the product of a crude determinism between the writer and the context in which he wrote. Such a reading negates any possibility of an author actively engaging with his or her epoch or negotiating a dialogue with that context. The second is the complete opposite of this negation of aesthetics in the face of the power of history: the total substitution of history by the aesthetic. The implication, to adapt Nietzsche's famous phrase slightly, is that history can only be justified aesthetically, and it is in Vaginov's fiction that we encounter the 'true' historical reality of the period. Having already ascertained that Vaginov views no absolute dividing line between life and art, and historical personalities from the period both are and are not in the novel, there is no reason to reject the notion that his novel constitutes part of the picture of the historical 'reality' of the 1920s. Yet the description of Teptelkin/Pumpianskii's tragic predicament is shot through

¹⁹ Nikolaev, 'Lev Pumpianskii and the Nevel School of Philosophy', pp. 141–143. Nikolaev notes that Pumpianskii went 'into the service' of the Bolsheviks in the same year as the novel's publication.

with all kinds of implicit assumptions as to how Vaginov both subscribes to and reacts against Bolshevik hegemony. However, in constructing Vaginov's dialogue with his epoch, with the dictates and complex ramifications of Party Ideology as one constituent element in such a dialogue, it is necessary to maintain an awareness of how the Bolshevik contingency can generate its own aesthetics of the 'fellow-traveller' author or even 'dissident' author, who seeks to rebel against and resist the Bolshevik hegemony in culture from which he or she is gloriously excluded.²⁰ From the discussion of Vaginov's novel thus far, it is clear that neither the 'text as product of history' or the 'history as text' paradigm is capable of articulating the nuanced aesthetics it contains.

Though Bolshevism is not named in the first chapter of the novel, its presence is felt everywhere. The renaming of the street hints at the same transitive power with which Bolshevism transforms the reality of Petersburg/Leningrad. Teptelkin's corpulent landlady finally leaves him alone when she hurries off to attend a class on political education [*politprosvet*], hinting at the workings of the Bolshevik hegemony in society, just as the lies of the museum guide in the first preface imply that a Bolshevik interpretation is being imparted to those who visit the museum. Thus the presence of Party Ideology serves as a one of the relative value systems in both life and culture, alongside those of the Vaginov, his author and Teptelkin that are generative of the sense of doubleness in consciousness and representation.

²⁰ David Shepherd pursues a similar argument in his *Beyond Metafiction*. However, Shepherd is primarily concerned with how an overemphasis on regarding an author as a victim of the Soviet hegemony results in mis-readings of the status of an 'author' in the context and fiction of the Soviet 1920s. In addition, Shepherd rightly uses examples of the 'meta-fiction' from the Soviet twenties to question some of the critical excesses in accounts of the post-modern.

We have already discerned the thematization of dual consciousness in the first chapter, predicated on Vaginov's world-view of laying-low and Teptelkin's elevated cultural sensibility. Towards the end of the chapter, the phenomenon of dual consciousness is raised by the author in a paragraph that was inserted into a later edition of the book. In an attempt to resist the interpretation, not entirely unjustified, that he is mocking Teptelkin, the author suggests that perhaps Teptelkin himself dreamt up his ridiculous surname as a defence against the reality of his being: 'может быть, Тептелкин сам выдумал свою несносную фамилию, чтобы изгнать в нее реальность своего существования, чтобы никто, смеясь над Тептелкиным, не смог бы дотронуться до Филострата.' The author ponders whether such a sentiment is the result of the existence of a duality in Teptelkin's consciousness, which itself is interwoven with classical ideals of the old cultural order to the extent that it is impossible to determine whether Teptelkin thought up Philostratus or Philostratus Teptelkin: 'Как известно, существует раздвоенность сознания, может быть, такой раздвоенностью сознания и страдал Тептелкиным, и кто разберет, кто кому пригрезился – Филострат ли Тептелкину или Тептелкин Филострату.' (28)

The author's speculation that Teptelkin is suffering from a manifestation of such dual consciousness suggests not only the ultimate relativity of Teptelkin's world-view, but, in addition, has a very specific valence in the context of the Soviet twenties. This pertains to the attitude of the intelligentsia in the aftermath of the Revolution, and is read by critics not in terms the ambivalence of Vaginov's aesthetics, but as another example of the 'history determines text' paradigm, where Vaginov's writing is moulded by his epoch. Nikolaev describes the phenomenon of dual consciousness as being 'characteristic of the section of the

intelligentsia that had remained in Russia and, recognising that the old model of cultural creativity was no longer possible, sought, in painful compromise, to preserve at least some measure of intellectual independence within the bounds of the new ideological language'.²¹ By phrasing the matter of dual consciousness in such a way, with an appeal to widespread awareness of such a phenomenon, we see how Nikolaev aligns the cultural trends of rebirth found in the writings of the Bakhtin School, and embodied here in the figure of Teptelkin, with the question of the existence of the intelligentsia under the Bolshevik order; and, moreover, with the question of how that order is to be resisted and/or accommodated. As a corollary, there is the expectation that Vaginov, as a member of the intelligentsia, make his own act of resistance against the regime. In the next chapter, we consider how Vaginov's biography and the Chukovskian reading of his theory of culture suggest Vaginov as a suitable prototype for the aesthetics of exclusion and resistance seemingly demanded by the context of the Soviet 1920s. We will also consider whether such demands are sustainable in the light of Boris Groys's critique of the morally inflected binary opposition between the intelligentsia and the Party; and, following the logic of Groys's argument, whether Vaginov's aesthetics can be framed in terms of the will to power in culture.

²¹ Ibid., p. 143.

Chapter 3: We know our future: exclusion, participation and the will to power in culture

The awakening of the imperial

There is a danger in invoking such an entity as the post-Revolutionary intelligentsia and resistance to Bolshevik hegemony, in that it can result in an overly schematic division between the intelligentsia and the Bolsheviks. In Vaginov's case, such a division might lead to two conflicting interpretations. The first, and most unlikely, would be that by 'maliciously' depicting the life of the post-Revolutionary intelligentsia, laying-low the lofty ideals of an *intelligent* and the degraded reality of his dual existence, Vaginov almost becomes an apologist for the Bolshevik regime who seeks to destroy the noble values of the old order. The second, and widely accepted view, would be that by highlighting the plight of 'degraded' private lives or the phenomenon of dual consciousness, Vaginov was taking a position of resistance against the regime. Due to the fierce criticism to which Vaginov was subject, he himself serves as a suitable 'prototype' for such depictions of the beleaguered intelligentsia. David Shepherd notes one article by A. Manfred 'dense with pugnaciously pro-proletarian invective', where Vaginov is named as the 'undertaker-in-chief' [*leib-grobovshchik*], inspired by a 'necrophiliac muse' [*kladbishchenskaia muza*]. Vaginov's cult of Petersburg is derided as a 'masked form of expressing protest against the existing social order', and Manfred discerns the 'voice of the class enemy' in Vaginov's work. In 1932, Shepherd recounts that 'Vaginov was subjected to the newly fashionable ritual of public self-criticism and, in response to official pressure,

collaborated on a history of the labour movement in Petersburg'. This interweaving of life and works – the article by A. Manfred seems to take the prefaces to the novel too literally – cements this reading of resistance in Vaginov's works that has predominated in critical studies. Writing in 1982, Viacheslav Zavalishin suggested that Vaginov was 'the best of the forerunners of today's dissidents'.¹

Such a schematic division between the intelligentsia and the Bolshevik hegemony, and the concomitant aesthetics of resistance demanded of the writer, have been challenged in recent years. Etkind begins his discussion of the phenomenon of resistance by stating that the intelligentsia were not entirely without blame for what transpired during the years of Soviet rule: 'Интеллигенция, которая в России всегда претендовала на особость своей судьбы невообразимо пострадала от того, что произошло со страной за долгие советские десятилетия. Но она же несет немалую долю ответственности за это'. [The Russian intelligentsia, which had always laid claim to a particular destiny, suffered unimaginably from what happened to the country during the hard decades of Soviet rule; but intellectuals themselves bore a considerable share of responsibility for these events.] Etkind notes A.P. Chekhov's remark from 1899 that 'Я не верю в нашу интеллигентцию, лицемерную, фальшивую, истеричную, невоспитанную, ленивую, не веру даже, когда она страдает и жалуется, ибо ее притеснители выходят из ее же недр'. [I do not believe in our intelligentsia – hypocritical, false, hysterical, ill-mannered, and lazy. I do not believe them even when they suffer and complain, since their persecutors emerge from their own ranks.] He also points to the close collaboration between renowned writers,

¹ David Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction*, pp. 92–4. Shepherd quotes from: A. Manfred, 'Kladbishchenskaia muza', *Kniga i revolutsiia* 12 (1929), p. 32–3; and Viacheslav Zavalishin, 'Proza i stikhi Konstantina Vaginova', *Novyi zhurnal*, 157 (1984), pp. 283–4.

musicians and scholars from the end of the 1920s on, offering the examples of such figures as Stanislavskii, Meyerhold and Gorky among others.² Whilst Etkind hints at the culpability of the intelligentsia for its own situation under Bolshevism, he seems reluctant to abandon the notion of the intelligentsia as a thing apart from the ruling Bolsheviks, preserving the intelligentsia's victimhood under the cruel new order and its struggle to resist its strictures. For some time now, Boris Groys has persuasively argued against any polarisation of the Russian intelligentsia (good) versus Bolshevism and later Stalinism (bad to even worse). Groys has effectively stated that the pre- and post-Revolutionary intelligentsia were not immune to the will power in culture, and that many of the foundations of the intelligentsia's understanding of art and its role are replicated and maintained in Bolshevik and Stalinist conceptions of the aesthetic and its telos, even going as far as stating that Socialist Realism is the rebirth of one manifestation of the intelligentsia in cultural life: the Russian Avant-garde.³

According to Groys, the tendencies shared between the Avant-garde and Socialist Realism, the aesthetic canon of high Stalinism, can be traced back to the philosophy of Solov'ev, who conceived of the practice of art not as representation, but theurgic transformation. For the Russian Symbolists, of

² Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo*, p. 299; *Eros of the Impossible*, pp. 312–313. Etkind quotes A.P. Chekhov's letter to I.I. Orlov, 22 Feb 1899 from *Pism'na A. P. Chekhova*, ed. by B. N. Bochkarev (Moskva: I. D. Sytin, 1909), p. 54.

³ See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, trans. by Charles Rungle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); 'The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-garde' in *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, ed. by Hans Günther (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990), pp. 122–148; and 'The Birth of Socialist Realism' in *Laboratory of Dreams: the Russian Avant-garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. by John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 193–218. For a sympathetic critique of Groys' 'revisionist model' of the evolution of Stalinist Culture see Katerina Clark's essay 'The Avant-Garde and the Retrospectivists as Players in the Evolution of Stalinist Culture', also in Bowlt and Matich, eds., pp. 259–276.

whom Ivanov was the foremost theoretician, Solov'ev's philosophy provided the foundation for a theory of art that sought nothing less than the transformation of reality. Art is endowed with the capacity to transform the consciousness that perceives reality, thereby creating life in the ideal order of the cosmos, proceeding from *realia* to *realiora*. Groys traces the continuation and development of these themes in such figures as Tatlin, Rodchenko and Malevich, consistently noting the similarities between their aesthetic philosophy and that of Socialist Realism, pointing to Malevich's concern that this restructuring of the world would restore a lost harmony and provide an 'aesthetic justification of the world'.⁴ Though Groys does not explicitly refer to the Bakhtin School or the ideas of the Third Renaissance or rebirth in Russian culture, it is not difficult to discern the same transformative understanding of art and thoroughly aesthetic justification for the world found in Teptelkin's world-view. Teptelkin's posited self-creation as an act of resistance to the Bolshevik order cannot, therefore, be contained in the schematic division of good versus bad, victimised intelligentsia versus Bolshevik hegemony of which Groys is so contemptuous because the aesthetic philosophies that underpin both such world-views are not as dissimilar as they may at first appear.

Much of Groys' argument is polemical in tone, frustrated that, at least at the time he was writing, the works of art of the Avant-garde, in part due to their status as victims of totalitarian control over artistic expression, were uniformly held to be great works of art, and frequently exhibited in museums. Socialist Realism, by comparison, was denigrated almost as a non-art, and removed from public view and not

⁴ Boris Groys, 'The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-garde', pp. 126–128. Groys quotes Vladimir Solov'ev, *Sobranie i sochinenie*, vol. 6 (Brussels, 1966), p. 90 and K. Malevich, 'God is not cast down' in K. Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1968), pp. 188–223.

displayed in the museum. Though the situation has now changed, the impression lingers that it was the absence of any obvious manifestation of the most overt visual language of the totalitarian Stalinist apparatus in the work of the Avant-garde that prevented western critics from drawing the parallels between the latent ideological components that structure both trends in Russian art. If we were to indulge in the kind of historical hindsight upon which Groys would no doubt frown, we might forgive those members of the intelligentsia for not being fully aware of the logical conclusions of their assumptions. Such conclusions were, after all, only confirmed in their most brutal form later in 1930s.

However, in Vaginov's depiction of Teptelkin in the first chapter of the novel, we encounter what appears to be an astonishingly prescient vision of the totalitarian potential of the life-creating ideologies of cultural rebirth and an aesthetic justification of a harmonious Utopian existence. When the landlady talks of her frequent trips to the imperial theatre, Teptelkin is inspired into what, post Groys, reads like a disturbing anticipation of the consequences of such assumptions. Teptelkin envisions Alexandru Averescu and Mussolini recreating the classical form of the Roman Empire, with first Yugoslavia, and then Gaul conquered, before Portugal and Spain willingly consent to unification with the re-born Empire. Teptelkin grandiosely imagines himself being called upon to attend the academy in Rome, in a session tasked with the finding of a new dialect that will serve the resurrection of Empire. That this nightmarish vision of the future is justified aesthetically is shown in the way the word Imperial is described as awakening something *poetic* in Teptelkin: *'при слове "императорский" нечто поэтическое просыпалось в Тептелкине'*.

Vaginov's dialogic relationship with his author, and the characters of Teptelkin and his landlady, exposes the fundamental relativity of any intention towards power in culture and how such intentions are shot through with ideology. Post-Groys, there is the temptation to cast Vaginov as something of a lone figure who discerned the possible totalitarian endgame that lurks behind not only the Bolshevik justifications of culture, but all transformative theories of culture where the life/culture dualism is figured in terms of how culture can justify and transform life. By pursuing a strategy of laying-low such lofty cultural ambitions, Vaginov seems to resist any pretensions to hegemony in culture, be they those of the intelligentsia or Party ideologues. In addition, Vaginov is, unlike the vast majority of his commentators from Chukovskii onwards, aware that the self-willed exclusion on the part of the artist/intellectual is an intention towards a position of authority in culture and, albeit passively, to determine the future direction of culture in a self-fulfilling prophecy of decline and collapse. This is clearly articulated in a later chapter in the novel entitled 'The Island', when Teptelkin and his circle of artists and intellectuals retreat to a dacha outside of Petersburg.

Teptelkin achieves the pathetic realisation of his dream to stand at the summit of culture. He invites a group of characters to come and stay at his tower, an old shabby merchant dacha a short distance from Petersburg in the seaside town of Petergof which he has rented through spring and the summer. The tower is literally and figuratively an island that can only be reached by boat. This physical separation and exclusion of the dacha from the hustle and bustle of the urban centre, and its relative freedom from the mainland of Bolshevik hegemony, are attractive to Teptelkin and his guests, offering the promise of creative and intellectual freedom in a rural idyll for the various members

of the old intellectual order. Teptelkin says to himself that: 'Тихо тут, совсем тихо, я буду работать вдали от города; здесь я могу сосредоточиться, не разбрасываться.' (66) [It's quiet here, absolutely quiet. I shall work at a distance from the town. Here I can concentrate and not spread myself too thinly.] The promise of respite is, however, not forthcoming. The neighbouring dachas have been rented by Soviet bureaucrats who scoff at Teptelkin and his eccentric guests. Teptelkin declares to his visitors that 'Мы последний остров Ренессанса' [We are the last island of the Renaissance] (67), and complains that they are under attack from all sides. The overall mood at the tower is sombre. The beleaguered Teptelkin bemoans how few of his kind are left, and is found crying in the grounds of the dacha.

Despite such a contrived, self-inflicted siege mentality, there are no signs of the eventual compromises with the requirements of the regime that occur later in the novel. Two of Teptelkin's guests, the Unknown Poet and Kostia Rotikov undertake a day trip to what has become Leningrad. The Unknown Poet, as if aware of the suicide that eventually awaits him in the city, is in a mood of profound pessimism, and Kostia Rotikov attempts to cheer him up as they sit alone in a railway carriage, talking of the baroque and reciting sonnets. The Unknown Poet is inspired by what he hears, declaring that he will continue writing poetry as an act of resistance to the reality in which they exist: 'Еще поборемся' (71) [We shall struggle on]. The Leningrad they encounter is still that of Petersburg, conveyed synecdochally by a series of famous locations. They visit the Summer Garden, the banks of Fontanka, the Catherine Canal and stroll along the banks of the Moika and the Neva. That the city is in a state of decline is shown in the beautiful patina of verdigris that covers the most famous location in all of Petersburg/Leningrad, the

Bronze Horseman, which the city authorities have neglected to polish and restore.

Back at the dacha, the conversation is heavy with imagery of the decline necessitated by the promise of cultural rebirth.

Teptelkin is asked to explain the meaning of a couple of lines of poetry which contain Dionysian images of wine, classical statues and the fruit of cyclical rebirth: 'Есть в статуях вина очарованье / Высокой осени пьянящие плоды...' (70)

[There is in statues the charm of wine / The intoxicating fruits of high autumn...].

Teptelkin replies that: 'в этих строках скрыто целое мировоззрение, целое море снующих, то поднимающихся как волны, то исчезающих смыслов! [in these lines a whole worldview is concealed, a whole sea of swirling thoughts, now rising, now disappearing!]' (70). There is even some talk of Philostratus. Unlike in the first chapter of the novel, Philostratus does not appear as a double with which Vaginov's author deftly mocks Teptelkin, but is here earnestly invoked by the group as a kind of messianic (re-) incarnation of the one ideal author who will sing of their feelings and experiences. The group, like the pagan Philostratus who suffered at the forced introduction of Christianity, fear they will suffer for their convictions and that they will be depicted as devils by the triumphant new order, and are horrified at the thought that they may even become contemptuous of each other:

- По-моему, - прервал он молчание, - должен был бы появиться писатель, который воспел бы нас, наши чувства.

- Это и есть Филострат, - рассматривая только что сорванный цветок, остановился неизвестный поэт.

- Пусть будет по-вашему, назовем имеющего явиться незнакомца Филостратом.

- Нас очернят, несомненно, - продолжа. неизвестный поэт, - но Филострат должен на изобразить светлыми, а не какими-то чертями.

- Да уж, это как пить дать, - заметил кто то. -
Победители всегда чернят побежденных и
превращают, будь то боги, будь то люди, -
чертей. Так было во все времена, так будет и с
нами. Превратят нас в чертей, превратят, как пить
дать.
- И уже превращают, - заметил кто-то.
- Неужели мы скоро друг от друга отскочим? -
ужасаясь, прошептал Тептелкин, морга глазами, -
неужели друг в друге чертей видеть будем? (68)

*'I think,' he interrupted his silence, 'a writer would have
to appear who would sing of us and our feelings.'*

*'That's Philostratus,' interposed the Unknown Poet
abruptly, looking closely at a flower which he had just
picked.*

*'Let it be as you wish. We will call the unknown who
must appear Philostratus.'*

*'They'll vilify us, without a doubt,' continued the
Unknown Poet. 'But Philostratus must depict us in our
beauty, not as some devils.'*

*'Oh yes, you better believe it,' said someone. 'The
victors always besmirch the vanquished. Whether
they're gods or people, they'll turn them into devils. It
has always been so and that's how it will be for us.
They'll turn us into devils, you better believe it.'*

'They're already at it,' noted someone.

*'Will we really turn on each other?' whispered a
horrified Teptelkin, blinking. 'Will we see one another
as devils?'*

In order to appreciate how all the components of this ideology of exclusion from culture are, in fact, symptomatic of the will to power in culture, it is important to highlight Vaginov's dialogue with another trend in post-Revolutionary intellectual culture: the Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School and Hermann Cohen. When Teptelkin arrives at the Tower, he makes a brief speech where he declares his belief about the Tower and his friends being the last island of the Renaissance. Having begun with this bold statement, he proceeds with the following remarks which, with their contempt for dogmatism and profound respect for criticism,

humanity and the sciences, are shot through with neo-Kantian rhetoric:

...в обставшем нас догматическом море; мы, единственно мы, сохраняем огоньки критицизма, уважение к наукам, уважение к человеку; для нас нет ни господина ни раба. Мы все находимся в высокой башне, мы слышим, как яростные волны бьются о гранитные бока. (67)

...we stand alone in a sea of dogmatism. We, and we alone, keep the flame of criticism burning, with respect for learning, respect for humanity; for us there is neither master nor slave. We are all in the high tower. We hear how fervently the waves beat on the granite walls.

One of the guests in the tower is the Philosopher Andrei Ivanovich Andreevskii who, as we have already indicated, is the fictional projection of Bakhtin. When the Philosopher is invited to play his violin for the gathered company, he plays a mournful melody, and is described as envisioning Marburg and Hermann Cohen himself: 'Философ играл. Он видел Марбург, великого Когена...' (67) [The Philosopher played. He saw Marburg and the great Cohen]. Yet, whilst they may retreat to the tower to preserve culture, there is the sense that both Teptelkin and the Philosopher do wish to participate in society, albeit on their own terms which might allow them to serve as the privileged (and suffering) bearers of knowledge for the new generation. They are concerned by the changes in the university curriculum. The Philosopher occupies a position at a university and Teptelkin longs for a professorship that he is never granted.

It is significant that Teptelkin does not differentiate Neo-Kantianism from the ideology of cultural rebirth that determines every aspect of his existence, and the retreat to the height of the tower is made to preserve the philosophy of Cohen and the Marburg School. Intriguingly, Craig Brandist

sets up a tension in the early works of the Bakhtin School between participation and exclusion, Neo-Kantianism and classical Hellenism, that contrasts with the projection of such themes in Vaginov's novel. In the terms of Brandist's discussion, participation is seen as an effort to engage in a dialogue with Bolshevik hegemony, and seeking to participate in and influence the course of cultural life as it unfolded in the aftermath of the Revolution. Exclusion is characterized by the refusal to sink to the level of politics or engage with the new regime on any level. For Brandist, the introduction of neo-Kantianism by the School into the post-Revolutionary cultural nexus is symptomatic of the behaviour of what Trotskii termed 'fellow-travellers', intellectuals who 'critically accepted' the regime, but who also actively sought to influence the direction of its historical development. As such, the Bakhtin School sought to transform the abstract and aloof tenets of Neo-Kantianism into 'something relevant to the concrete issues of life' in works such as Bakhtin's *K filosofii postupka* [Towards a Philosophy of the Act] and *Iskusstvo i otvetvenost'* [Art and Answerability], with the former described as an attempt to explore the relationship and boundaries between aesthetics and ethics as dimensions of life and culture, and being 'obsessively' concerned with making neo-Kantianism and ethics concrete and relevant to 'life'.⁵

However, in articulating the tension between participation and exclusion, it is precisely the fact that the School were drawn into the 'Hellenistic cult among the intelligentsia' and their adherence to the idea of Third Renaissance that, for Brandist, reveal the tendency towards exclusion and their belief that they were 'above politics'. To substantiate this view of the Bakhtin Circle, it is Chukovskii's reading of

⁵ Craig Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 28–9 and pp. 34–5.

Kozlinaia pesn' to which Brandist refers, arguing that Vaginov's mythology of cultural rebirth, with its central feature of the writer as the 'preserver of cultural artefacts in order to facilitate the rebirth of culture' was also replicated in the writings of the School's members. Once again, the novel is called upon to serve as the historical reality of period: 'Vaginov's parodic portrayals of Bakhtin, Medvedev and (especially) Pumpianskii in this novel were depictions of a group engaged in such an enterprise among an increasingly philistine population'.⁶

Kozlinaia pesn' exposes the ultimate fragility of the participation/exclusion dynamic when articulated purely in the terms of either the fellow-traveller intellectual making circumspect engagement with the Bolshevik regime, or the writer as hermit who refuses to stoop to the level of politics as he paradoxically protects culture from the very collapse that necessitates its regeneration. Contrary to both Chukovskii's and Brandist's interpretations, the novel does not merely refuse to sit on one side of such a binary schema, but demands that the concept of exclusion versus participation be framed in more sophisticated terms, and that either position can be emblematic of the will to power in culture and its institutions. As we encounter them in the novel, Neo-Kantianism and the historical scheme of decline and rebirth are *both* programmes of engagement with life and the historiosophical principles with which to understand it, *and* symptomatic of why culture must retreat to the heights of the tower as dogmatism and philistinism pound upon its walls. In the chapter entitled 'The Island' we see how the tenets of neo-Kantianism and the ideological content of the Third Renaissance interpenetrate each other, and the neo-Kantian great Hermann Cohen is valorised by Teptelkin and his assorted guests as part of that great culture in need of

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–1.

protection from the Bolshevik collapse before it can be reborn anew. Those passages discussed both here and in the two previous chapters of our analysis suggest a more profound dynamic in the meta-text of post-Revolutionary literary culture, where culture and life encounter one another in a deeply ambiguous and mutually constitutive fashion. One of the key demands of this mutually constitutive dynamic is that life and active participation with and within it be understood in broader terms than the question of political engagement permits.

Whilst Vaginov exposes the ultimate fragility of Brandist's participation/exclusion binary in culture, Brandist's description of the Bakhtin Circle's Neo-Kantianism as having 'something relevant to the concrete issues of life' seems an excellent way of explaining Vaginov's tendency to lay low and lay bare absolute and elevated conceptions of culture. In the chapter entitled 'The Island', the interweaving world-view of cultural rebirth is located in opposition to the contrasting world-view of the life that lays low and lays bare seen in the first chapter of the novel. During the train journey to Leningrad, the Philosopher/Bakhtin utters a remark that: 'Мир задан, а не дан; реальность задана, а не дана.' [The world is posited, not given. Reality is posited, not given.] (72) The prototype spotters have seized on this remark as an accurate depiction of the Bakhtin School at the time, regarding it as ample justification to explore the influence of Cohen on the early writings of Bakhtin and the Bakhtin School.⁷ However, the remark has, to our knowledge, not been discussed in the immediate context in which it is made

⁷ See Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MAS and London: Belknap Press, 1984), p. 59 and Nikolai Nikolaiev, 'The Nevel School of Philosophy (Bakhtin, Kagan and Pumpianskii) between 1918 and 1925: Materials from Pumpianskii's Archives' in David Shepherd, ed., *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers Association, 1998), pp. 30–1.

in the novel. As we have already seen, The Unknown Poet and Kostia Rotikov sit elsewhere on the train, resolving to struggle on against the situation in which they find themselves. Also on the train is Katerina Ivanovna, the widow of a famous poet:

В конце поезда, в вагоне, одна, сидела Екатерина Ивановна и обрывала ромашку: любит – не любит, любит – не любит. Но кто ее любит или не любит, – не знала. Но чувствовала, что ее должны любить и о ней заботиться.

А в самом последнем вагоне ехал философ с пушистыми усами и думал:

"Мир задан, а не дан; реальность задана, а не дана".

Чиво, чиво, поворачивались колеса.

Чиво, чиво...

Вот и вокзал. (72)

At the front of the train, alone in a coach, sat Ekaterina Ivanovna plucking the petals off a daisy: he loves me – he loves me not, he loves me – he loves me not. But who loved or did not love her, she did not know. She felt that she should be loved and someone should care for her.

And in the very last coach travelled the philosopher with a bushy moustache. He pondered:

"The world is posited and not given; reality is posited, and not given."

What-what went the wheels of the train.

What-what...

Look, here's the station.

The location of Ekaterina Ivanovna and the Philosopher at different ends of the train might be emblematic of the difference between them, the Philosopher engaged in far loftier thoughts and not craving personal attention from an admirer. However, the remark on the world and reality being posited and not given is phrased in exactly the same manner as the nursery game with which Ekaterina Ivanovna attempts to divine whether somebody loves or not. The lofty thoughts of the Philosopher are therefore laid-low, brought down to the level of life and petty human concerns. The '*chivo, chivo*'

of the train's turning wheels is part its double image. Earlier in the chapter, a gypsy fortune teller offers to predict the future for the various characters staying at the tower. Steeped in their absurd mythological understanding of cultural history, they dolefully tell her that such services are not required: 'Не надо, не надо, - отвечали ей, - мы свое будущее знаем.' (75) ['Don't bother' they replied 'We know our future.'] In the world-view of the characters, the train is a trope that articulates the irrevocable path of culture towards destruction in the great cycle of history, rushing the Unknown Poet towards his self-annihilating act of suicide in the town. Yet, in the eyes of the author's all encompassing life it is merely a train that carries its passengers back and forth between a town and countryside which are both pervaded by the Bolshevik hegemony. The '*chivo, chivo*' sound of the train—a colloquialised 'what, what'—lays low any possibility of elevated thought, juxtaposing the constant questioning of meaning that pervades life against the certainty of ruin and destitution disseminated by Teptelkin and his ilk. The repetitive forms of the utterances 'любит – не любит, любит – не любит' [he loves me, he loves me not; he loves me, he loves me not] and 'Мир задан, а не дан; реальность задана, а не дана' [The world is posited, not given; reality is posited, not given] are merely the sound of history moving onwards in life, but not along a trajectory towards ruin and rebirth, just simply onward.

The strongest indication that history is no longer following the Dionysian path of decline and rebirth is the change in how wine is viewed by the protagonists in the novel as the narrative approaches its ending. In 'The Island', wine is still central to the world-view of cultural Renaissance, as when Teptelkin is asked to explain the meaning contained in a poem. As the narrative advances, wine, along with many of the components of Chukovskii's understanding of Vaginov's

mythologised history, is deprived of its poetic or regenerative aspect. The last scene where wine enjoys the privileged status of determining literary activity and the direction of historical progress is the episode where the author invites some of the characters in the novel round for dinner. The author states that he will dig up the wine he buried in 1917, in the hope that it will inspire conversational and literary creativity in both himself and his guests: 'Завтра я приглашу моих героев на ужин. Я угощу их вином, зарытым в семнадцатом году мною во дворе под большой липой.' (97) [Tomorrow I'll invite my characters to dinner. I'll treat them to the wine that I buried in the courtyard under the tall lime in 1917.] The act of burying the wine in the ground has obvious connotations of preserving an artefact from destruction in the turbulent year of 1917; the act of burying it in the earth evocative of fertility and analogous to the planting of seed. The wine is well received by the author's heroes, with the Unknown Poet proclaiming: 'Мы в Риме [...] Несомненно в Риме и в опьянении, я это чувствовал, и слова мне по ночам это говорят' (97) [We are in Rome [...] Undoubtedly in Rome and intoxicated. I feel it, and words speak of this to me at night.] There are toasts to the refined arts and literary science: 'За утонченное искусство!', 'За литературную науку!' The evening progresses with the same sombre tone found in 'The Island' chapter, with the various characters mourning the very decline and collapse their world-view of rebirth demands, and the Philosopher once more playing a mournful melody on his violin.

After this scene, wine is stripped of its poetic powers and ceases to provide an aesthetic justification for the world as the assorted characters gradually abandon their mythological understanding of cultural history, undertaking various acts of compromise with life in the Bolshevik real. The world-view of which wine is a key element is deprived of any validity,

losing its *a priori* right to determine the direction and path of history as it is overwhelmed by an all encompassing life. Existence can no longer be justified according to such aesthetic criteria, and those same aesthetic criteria are no longer generative of a relevant art that structures and justifies existence. The Unknown Poet, aware that his poetry lacks purchase on the reality in which it is composed, declares: 'Какое идиотство считать вино средством познания'. (138) [How idiotic to think of wine as a means of knowledge.] A short while before his suicide, the Unknown Poet ceases to be referred to as such, with the author and various characters referring to him as 'Agafonov' [Agafon], a reference to the classical figure of Agathon found in Plato's *Symposium*, and whose entire poetic works have been lost. As Agafonov, he reads his poetry to a member of a co-operative and is berated for writing meaningless poetry: 'Я полагаю, – заметил кооператор, – что бессмысленных стихов писать не стоит' (139) ['I suggest,' noted a co-operative member 'that meaningless poetry is not worth writing.'] A short while later, shortly before he commits his literary act of suicide, he is depicted as feeling thus:

Тщетно напивался Агафонов. И в опьянении он чувствовал свое ничтожество, никакая великая идея не осеняла его, никакие бледные розовые лепестки не складывались в венок, никакой пьедестал не появлялся под его ногами. Уже не чисто он подходил к вину, не с самоуважением, не с сознанием того, что он делает великое дело, не с предчувствием того, что он раскроет нечто такое прекрасное, что поразится мир, и вино теперь раскрывало ему собственное его творческое бессилие, собственную его душевную мерзость и духовное запустение, и в нем было дико и страшно, и вокруг него было дико и страшно, и хотя он ненавидел вино, его тянуло к вину. (142)

It was in vain that Agafon got drunk. Even when intoxicated he was aware of his own insignificance. No great idea would come to him; no pale pink rose petals

arranged themselves into a wreath; no pedestal appeared under his feet. No longer did he treat wine honourably, or with a sense of self-respect or the knowledge that he was producing a great work; nor did wine bring him the vision that he would reveal something so beautiful that the world would be astonished. Now wine revealed to him his creative impotence and the utter desolation that lurked deep within him. Within himself and all around him raged terrifying horror. But although he hated it, he was still drawn to wine all the same.]

Given Groys's robust demolition of the intelligentsia/Party binary, demonstrating their shared intention to power predicated on transfigurational theories of aesthetic reality, and Clark's suggestion that the dominant in the cultural life of the Soviet twenties was the struggle for an authentic culture, the question remains as to whether Vaginov himself is culpable of the will to power in culture. By realizing a narrative that chronicles a trajectory towards compromise and capitulation, laying low any such transfigurational theories of the aesthetic and world culture, and insisting on the relativity of any one calibration of the cultural, is Vaginov's ideological position equally culpable of the will to power in culture? Or, alternatively, is Vaginov so adept at laying low any pretension towards power in culture that *Kozlinaia pesn'* necessarily evades the constraints of this particular paradigm of cultural history?

Vaginov's position is one which, in the context of Soviet twenties, manifests the ultimate relativity of any desire to transform and structure culture in the face a world-view that will lay low any attempt to suggest superiority over another. Vaginov's aesthetics do not endorse the dual consciousness that resulted from the co-existence of the intelligentsia and Bolshevism, but rather a plurality of consciousnesses and the ultimate relativity of any one attitude. Vaginov's author may be the undertaker-in-chief of the old Petersburg order, but, as

we saw in the previous chapter, Vaginov engages with this author in a manner similar to Bakhtin's understanding of consciousness, where questions of authorship, the life/culture dualism and world-view of rebirth are all laid bare, their constituent ideological components exposed as relative propositions and manifestations of discourse that have no *a priori* validity in terms of questions of cultural truth, and which lack purchase on the very reality they seek to transform.

Etkind, who is explicitly interested in the idea of resistance, finds a similar attitude of man as discourse in the contested texts of *Marksizm i filosofija iazyka* [*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*] and *Freidizm* [*Freudianism*]. For Etkind, this position is nothing less than the seed of totalitarianism, and he compares the two texts with Stalin's *Marksizm i voprosy izaykoznaniia* [*Marxism and Issues in the Science of Language*], where Stalin denies the existence of any *a priori* entity that exists independently of linguistic material. '[В]се что имеет значение, должно быть подконтрольно; контролируется то, что может быть прочитано; прочитано может быть то, что выражено в слове... И потому в советском человеке нет ничего, что выражено в слове.' [Everything important must be under control; only what can be read can be controlled; only what can be expressed in words can be read; and for this reason, there was nothing in the Soviet man that was inexpressible in words.]⁸ Thus the qualities in Vaginov's novel which could be regarded as an alternative path to the latent, aesthetically justified, totalitarian utopias of Teptelkin and Socialist Realism are just as likely to lead to the same result. Though, as we have already seen, Etkind does not recognise such

⁸ Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo* p. 316; *Eros of the Impossible*, pp. 229–330. Etkind refers to J. V. Stalin, *Marksizm i voprosy izaykoznaniia* (Moscow: 1949).

qualities in the novel. As Etkind writes of

Bakhtin/Voloshinov's book *Freidizm*:

В общем, между социальным идеалом, очень ясно выраженным в этой книге, и идеями, столь же ясно изображенными в написанном несколько раньше романе Е. Замятина «Мы», нет особой разницы. Замятин написал антиутопию; книга «Фрейдизм» содержит в себе начала вполне серьезной, добросовестной тоталитарной утопии. Тяжело представить себе, что ее писал один из героев «Козлиной песни», которая вся построена на тотальном противопоставлении деградирующей, но теплящейся частной жизни несуществующему обществу. «Не люблю я Петербурга, кончилась мечта моя», – безнадежно говорит в ней Вагинов.

Generally speaking, there is no particular difference between the clearly expressed social ideal in this book and the ideas that were just as clearly depicted in Zamiatin's We, written a short time earlier. Zamiatin constructed an anti-utopia; the book Freudianism contains the beginnings of a perfectly serious, well meaning, totalitarian utopia. It is difficult to imagine that it was written by one of the heroes of Vaginov's Goat Song – a work built on the total opposition between a fictional society and a degraded private life that nonetheless offered a flicker of hope. 'I don't like Petersburg, my dream is over,' Vaginov wrote, in despair.⁹

Whether Vaginov is the lone figure aware of latent totalitarianism in culture or the seed from which High Stalinism will be (re-)born is probably a moot point, particularly in light of David Shepherd's suggestion that Vaginov challenges notions of creative autonomy and high cultural value in a manner that exposes the false premises upon which such mechanisms ultimately depend, simultaneously *affirming* and denying the various authorities in culture present in the novel, be they the historiosophical theories of a transcendent world culture, Party Ideology or the world-view of the concrete, all-encompassing life.¹⁰ As such,

⁹ Ibid., pp. 316–7; p. 330.

¹⁰ David Shepherd, *Beyond Metafiction*, pp. 118-121.

the binary frameworks of resistance/engagement, exclusion and participation that feature in critical accounts of the novel and the intellectual context of the Soviet 1920s all ultimately prove inadequate at articulating Vaginov's aesthetics. In using such terminology, we are left with a series of paradoxical binaries, where Vaginov seeks exclusion from elitist high culture and Party Ideology, yet seeks such exclusion in an all encompassing, relevant life that serves to lay low and undermine. Vaginov lays low and affirms the ideologies of rebirth and Bolshevism equally, rejecting their respective pretensions towards hegemony over culture in acts of subversive affirmation. In the light of Shepherd's highly preceptive discussion of Vaginov's prose, in the conclusion that follows we shall consider whether the various endings to the novel offer any solutions to the dynamics that pervade its discourse and its critical reception.

Conclusion

As *Kozlinaia pesn'* begins with prefaces which confound and problematise the tenability of beginning and finishing a literary creation, it is unsurprising that the various endings offered by the novel frustrate and deny the possibility of a final ending to the literary work. Appropriately, extant versions of the novel offer different endings. In the version of the novel published by Priboi in 1928, the author imagines the curtain coming down on a performance of his novel, and heads off to a restaurant together with his cast of actors. The author declares that his pages have gone off to the printers, and walks off into a charming Petersburg evening.¹ In an edition published by Eksmo in 2008, the author sees a large moon illuminating the former House of the Arts. Teptelkin and Maria Petrovna depart into a cold, windy night. The author looks out of his window and, with the sound of *Kozlinaia pesn'* ringing in his ears, ponders writing another Petersburg tale if people are prepared to listen to him. (170) In either version, the possibility of a definite ending to a clearly delineated narrative arc is denied. In the latter variant, the author watches Teptelkin and Maria Petrovna depart from the House of the Arts, despite Maria Petrovna having died in the previous chapter of the book after falling into a canal. Similarly, the former variant implies all that has taken place is mere artifice acted out by real personalities, and refutes the veracity of its own representation. The suicide of the Unknown Poet in an earlier chapter is negated by his subsequent return to the discourse of the novel, as if a death in fiction is merely an evocative trope expressive of the

¹ Konstantin Vaginov, *Kozlinaia pesn': roman* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1928), pp. 194–5.

values of the old cultural order, but ultimately unrealistic if the character (and perhaps its prototype) persist in life with all its concreteness and relevance.

Kozlinaia pesn' is a novel which is reluctant to offer any solutions to the complex dynamics that pervaded the intellectual culture of the Soviet 1920s, and, beyond rendering the binary framework of inclusion/exclusion which has been the dominant of critical enquiries of Vaginov's work wholly inadequate, the novel's aesthetics resist any attempt to substantiate definite conclusions about its literary qualities, or its status in early Soviet literature and the cultural history of its epoch. Indeed, writing a purported conclusion or argumentative synthesis on the novel would, in view of the nature of its subject matter, be inappropriate and misleading. However, immediately prior to these non-endings, the novel articulates something approaching an ending. Teptelkin and his coterie gradually all abandon the high cultural ideals that govern every aspect of their existence, and, in turn, their lives are marked by compromises with the reality of Bolshevik hegemony in both life and culture. In an ironic inversion of his desire to stand at the summit of the tower of world culture, Teptelkin is elected to the position of chairman of the housing committee at the summit of an apartment block. Misha Kotikov, a double of Kostia Rotikov who accompanied the Unknown Poet on the train journey to Leningrad, abandons his study of the great poet Zaefratskii and begins a career as a dentist.

As has already been stated, Vaginov's attitude to such compromises is profoundly ambivalent, with his tendencies to lay low and problematise implying that he is neither an isolated figure, steadfastly resisting the new order to preserve culture until its next flowering; nor is he an apologist of the new regime ruthlessly mocking the absurd attitudes of high

culture and its devotees. Shepherd's argument that Vaginov's fiction is marked by a constant tension that affirms and negates traditional power structures is particularly useful in negotiating Vaginov's dialogue with debates over resistance, the will to power and exclusion in the Soviet 1920s. The question persists, however, as to whether Shepherd's argument might illuminate our earlier discussion of the dynamics of synchronic rebirth versus diachrony in culture, a relevant authorial praxis and the life/culture dualism in the novel. If (and it is after all only an *if*), we take such a position of compromise to be the one end point offered by the novel, the question remains as to whether Vaginov offers any (re-)solutions to the problematics of diachrony versus synchrony in culture, the nature of authentic authorial praxis, and the problem of power in cultural institutions. Ultimately, does an alternative figuring of the life/culture dualism emerge in such a 'life', with all its concreteness and relevance. Alternatively, is the affirmation/negation dynamic so pervasive in Vaginov's fiction that the competing arguments for diachrony and synchrony, beginnings and endings, and an authentic literary praxis are all subject to this tension? And does the sense of crisis and ambiguity so prevalent in the prefaces still pervade the novel at its non-ending?

Materials and a possible artistic method

A possible answer to such questions is provided in one of last chapters of the novel, where we encounter the character of Mikhail Petrovich - Misha Kotikov.² Although he has qualified as a dentist, he has kept up his interest in the great poet, Aleksandr Petrovich Zaevfratskii. In a chapter simply entitled 'Materialy' [Materials] he is found perusing the various

² The character is referred to with two names in the novel: Misha Kotikov and the more formal Mikhail Petrovich.

materials he has gathered on Zaevfratskii, whose widow Ekaterina Ivanovna was singing at the opposite end of the train to the Philosopher during the train journey to Leningrad. Mikhail Petrovich has been meeting Ekaterina Ivanovna to gather information for his study of the poet. He has now amassed such a knowledge of his subject that he not only decides to deposit materials with an archive, the *Tikhoe ubezhishche*, but also to marry Ekaterina Ivanovna. He even begins composing verse in an exact imitation of the great poet Zaevfratskii:

Уже давно Миша Котиков подумывал о том, чтобы отправить собранные им материалы в Тихое Убежище, но сегодня, вернувшись от Екатерины Ивановны, решил окончательно.

До глубокой ночи он в хронологическом порядке складывал карточки и перевязывал их бечевками. На обратных сторонах карточек были пейзажи с избами и гармонистами и девушками и части географических карт. Лицевые стороны карточек были разлинованы и заполнены почерком Заэвфратского, усвоенным Михаилом Петровичем. Когда все было перевязано, остались дублеты, Михаил Петрович придвинул лампу и на фоне пакетов перечел:

1908 г. мая 15-го. Среда. В 3 часа дня. Александр Петрович обедал в Европейской гостинице. В 5 часов дня из Европейской гостиницы Александр Петрович отправился в Гостиный двор с Евгенией Семеновной Слепцовой (балерина). Купил ей лайковые перчатки, кольцо с сапфиром.

Сейчас (1925 г. 5 января 6 ч. дня) Слепцова - хорошо сохранившаяся брюнетка. Груды у нее небольшие, плечи шире бедер, ноги, как у всех балетных, мускулистые. По собранным сведениям, в свое время она была удивительна. Из ее слов я мог заключить, что А. П. отличался необыкновенной мужской силой. Из ее слов я также мог заключить, что из Гостиного двора А. П. поехал к ней.

1912 г. Апрель 12, пятница. С 8-ми до 10-ти часов вечера А. П. читал лекцию в своем особняке. Точно установить тему лекции не удалось, не то о Леконте-де-Лиле, не то об аббате де-Лиле. После лекции лакей подошел к А. П. Гюнтер и доложил, что А. П. просит ее пожаловать в кабинет, по поводу ее стихов об Индии.

Удалось установить, что небольшой столик красного дерева был сервирован, что пили шампанское, что А. П. рассказывал, как он путешествовал по Индии.

Р. С. Гюнтер маленькая блондиночка. Сейчас (1926 г. февраль 15) преждевременно состарившаяся. Теперь она не пишет стихов. Вспоминает об А. П. с благодарностью, как о первом наставнике. Говорит, что это был самый интересный мужчина.

1917 г. Зима. Вечером, перед отъездом (куда - неизвестно), час неизвестен. Связь с маникюршей Александрой Леонтьевной Птичкиной. Птичкина говорит, что она никаких подробностей не помнит. Глупая, необразованная натура. Говорит, что А. П. был как все мужчины.

Но тут Михаил Петрович посмотрел на часы. - Какое весеннее утро. Подумать только, что я вызываю из небытия жизнь Александра Петровича.

Утром, перед уходом в лечебницу, еще не совсем одетый, Михаил Петрович сел. Стал творить почерком Заэвфратского стихи об Индии. В них была и безукоризненная парнасская рифма, и экзотические слова (Лиу-Киу), и многоблещущие географические названия, и джунгли, и золотое, отражающее солнце плоскогорье, и весеннее празднество в Бенаресе, и леопарды и тамплиеры Азии, и голод, и чума.

Стихи были металлические.

Голос был металлический.

Ни одного ассонанса, никакой метафизики, никакой символики.

Все в них было, только Михаила Петровича в них не было.

Если б их, в свое время, написал Александр Петрович, то одни бы нашли, что это стихи замечательные, что в них проявляется стремление культурного человека в экзотические страны, от повседневной серости, от фабрик, заводов, библиотек, в загадочную, разнообразную жизнь, другие, что в Александре Петровиче жил дух открывателей, что в старые времена он был бы великим путешественником и, кто знает, может быть, вторым Колумбом. А третьи бы говорили, что в стихах проявилась наконец совершенно ясно полная чуждость Александра Петровича традициям русской литературы и что, собственно, это не русские стихи, а французские, что они находятся по ту сторону русской поэзии.

Окончив стихотворение, устремил глаза Миша Котиков на портрет Заэвфратского.

Заэвфратский был изображен на фоне гор между кактусов.

"Крепкий старик", - подумал он.

Михаил Петрович вспомнил, что пора идти, что его ждут, что, должно быть, скопилось много больных, что опять придется запускать пальцы в раскрытые рты и ощупывать десны.

Михаил Петрович взял палку, за ним щелкнул американский замок.

По лестнице поднималась девушка, остановилась на площадке, прочла на металлической дощечке "Зубной врач Михаил Петрович Котиков. Прием с 3-6 ч.". Позвонила.

Весенний вечер. Ни малейшего ветерка. Дым из труб поднимается к небесным красноватым барашкам и незаметно растворяется.

Внизу выходит Михаил Петрович из частной лечебницы и, остановившись, любуется на небо.

Ему хочется погулять.

Затем он вспоминает, что сегодня условился встретиться с Екатериной Ивановной. Он садится в трамвай; на театральной площади он выходит и направляется к новой Голландии.

Дойдя до крайнего пункта набережной, он садится на скамью, смотрит на уголок моря. Там виднеется здание горного института. Сегодня он выбрал это место для встречи. Часто молодой зубной врач мечтал здесь о далеких морях, о безграничных океанах. В течение шести лет ему являлся корабль, огромный, европейский корабль. На нем он и видел себя отъезжающим. Но теперь, когда материалы собраны и отправлены, когда он чувствует себя заурядным врачом, он понимает, что он никуда не уедет, что он никогда не пойдет по пути Александра Петровича, что только в зоологическом саду его ждет экзотика: облезлый лев, прохаживающийся за решеткой.

Или цирк, где беззубые звери делают то, что они никогда не делают на родине.

Мечта о путешествиях догорела и погасла.

Вчера он получил бронзовую настольную медаль от Тихого Убежища. Вот и все воздаяние за шестилетние труды. А стихи его разве печатают? Все только смеются. Правда, он член Союза поэтов, но какие же там поэты! Как только начнешь читать стихи, говорят - это не вы, а Александр Петрович.

Но он женится на Екатерине Ивановне. Правда, она глупа, но ведь Александр Петрович на ней женился в свое время, - значит, и он, Михаил Петрович, должен на ней жениться. (147-9)

For some time, Misha Kotikov had been thinking about whether he would send his collected materials to the Quiet Refuge Archive, but, having returned from Ekaterina Ivanovna, he decided once and for all. Deep into the night he put various cards in chronological order and tied them together with a piece of string. On the backs of the cards were landscapes with peasant huts, accordion players with girls and parts of geographical charts. The front of the cards were lined and filled with the handwriting of Zaevfratskii, which Mikhail Petrovich had imitated. When everything had been tied together only some duplicates remained. Mikhail Petrovich drew up a lamp and read:

15th May, 1908. Thursday. 3 p.m. Aleksandr Petrovich dined in the Hotel Europe. At 5 p.m. Aleksandr Petrovich headed for Gostyni Dvor' with Evgenia Semenovna Sleptsova (Ballerina). He bought her kid gloves and a ring with a sapphire.

Today (5th January, 6 p.m.). Sleptsova – a well preserved brunette. Flat chested, shoulders broader than her hips. Legs, as with all ballerinas, are muscular. According to gathered accounts, in her time she was stunning. From her words I can conclude that A. P. was distinguished by extraordinary masculine vigour. From her words, I can also conclude that A.P accompanied her home from Gostyni Dvor.

12th April 1912. Friday. From 8 until 10 o'clock in the evening A.P. gave a lecture in his private residence. I have not been able to establish exactly the topic of the lecture. It was perhaps the one on Lecompte de Lille, or the one on the Abbé de Lille. After the lecture the servant went up to Günter and announced that A. P. bid her welcome to his study, à propos her poetry about India.

I have managed to establish that a small redwood table was laid, and they drank champagne as A.P. told of his travels in India.

P.S. Günter was a young blonde. Now (15th February 1926) prematurely aged. She remembers A.P. with great affection as her first mentor. She no longer writes poetry. She says that he was a most interesting man.

Winter 1917. In the evening, before departure (destination unknown), time unknown. Affair with a manicurist, Aleksandra Leont'evna Ptichkina. Ptichkina says that she does not remember any details. A stupid and uneducated sort. She says that A.P. was like all men.

But then Mikhail Petrovich looked at his watch.

'What a spring morning. To think I only just called Aleksandr Petrovich's life out of obscurity.'

In the morning, before leaving for the hospital, not yet fully dressed, Mikhail Petrovich sat down. He began to create a poem about India in Zaevfratskii's handwriting. In these lines were the flawless Parnassian rhythm and exotic words (Liu-Kiu), and glistening geographical locations: jungles and gold, the twinkling sunlight of the plateau, and the spring feast at Benares, and leopard and Asian Templars. And famine and plague.

The poems were metallic.

The voice was metallic.

Not one assonance. Neither metaphysics, nor symbols.

Everything was in them; only Mikhail Petrovich was absent.

If Aleksandr Petrovich had written them in his own time, then these lines would have been remarkable. People would have seen the striving of a cultured man against everyday boredom in exotic countries. Striving against factories, industrial plants and libraries towards an enigmatic and multifaceted life. Others would have said that Aleksandr Petrovich lived a life in the spirit of discovery, so much so that in olden times he would have been a great traveller and, who knows, perhaps even a second Columbus. Some might even have said that the verses clearly revealed Aleksandr Petrovich's complete alienation from the traditions of Russian poetry, and that these poems were not Russian, but French, and that they were far removed from Russian poetry.

Having finished the poem, Misha Kotikov's eyes fixed on the portrait of Zaevfratskii.

Zaevfratskii was painted against a background of mountains between cacti.

'Tough old fellow' he thought.

Mikhail Petrovich remembered that it was time to leave, and that people were waiting for him. Many patients would have turned up and yet again he would have to stick his fingers into open mouths and feel around gums.

Mikhail Petrovich took his walking stick. Behind him a yale lock crackled.

A girl was coming up the stairs. She stopped on the landing and read on a metal plaque: 'Dentist Mikhail Petrovich Kotikov. Practice hours 3 – 6. She rang the bell.

A spring evening. Quite a stiff breeze. Smoke from the chimneys rose upwards to the heavenly red lamb-clouds and dissolved.

Below entered Mikhail Petrovich from the private hospital and, having stopped, admired the skies.

He felt the urge to go for a stroll.

Then he remembered that he had arranged to meet with Ekaterina Ivanovna. He sat down on a tram. He got off at Theatre Square and headed towards New Holland.

Walking along the furthest point of the embankment, he sits down and looks at this corner of the sea. From there you can see the Mining Institute building. Today he had chosen this place for the meeting. Often the young dentist would sit here, dreaming of far-away places and limitless oceans. For six years a ship had appeared to him; a large European vessel. He would see himself sailing away on it. But now that the materials had been gathered and dispatched, and now that he felt himself to be an ordinary dentist he understood that he wasn't going anywhere, and he would never follow in the footsteps of Aleksandr Petrovich. Only in the zoological gardens would he encounter the exotic: a mangy lion, skulking behind bars.

Or in the circus, where toothless beasts do things which they would never do in the wilderness.

The dream of travelling finally burnt out and expired.

Yesterday he received a bronze table medal from the Quiet Refuge. That's what you get for six year's work! But would they publish his verses? They only laughed. True, he was a member of the Poets' Union, but what poets you find there! You only begin to read a verse and they say – 'It's not you, but Aleksandr Petrovich.'

But he would marry Ekaterina Ivanovna. True, she was stupid, but Aleksandr Petrovich had married her all those years ago. That meant that he, Mikhail Petrovich had to marry her.

This depiction of the writer and his method in life has much in common with the strangeness of the prefaces to the novel with their tendency to confuse and lay-bare the epistemological sequences of beginning, writing and finishing in the text. In this section, an author has finished his study of Zaevfratskii and resolves to deposit his materials in an archive. However, the gathering of these materials and their being reconstructed into the life of the great poet is a

remarkably haphazard affair that flits between past and present, as Mikhail Petrovich inserts his own impressions of the various people he interviews the duplicate narrative of events from Zaevfratskii's life. This assembling of materials from various meetings has obvious similarities with the author declaring, in the second preface, that he meets with his characters in life. There is the sense that Brik and Chuzhak would approve of this author working on his materials. He does not create a work of literature, but merely fashions one from gathered notes and sources. In addition to assembling a biography of Zaevfratskii, Mikhail Petrovich writes poetry that is, in effect, a duplicate of the great poet's work, even to the extent that his handwriting is an exact copy of Zaevfratskii's own. This is the ultimate triumph of synchrony in culture, where cultural forms are merely repeated in minute detail in the literary work. However, this is emphatically not the triumph of that elitist cultural synchrony, that is, the rebirth or echoes of the classical forms of an unknown idealised culture, but the reiteration and repetition of the mundane events of an individual who happened to write poetry.³

As in the very first chapter of the novel, the world-view of life tramples any lingering ideals of a transformative high culture. The life brought into being by Mikhail Petrovich amounts to nothing more than a string of mundane sexual conquests. Rather than realising a fitting tribute to a great literary talent,

³ Shepherd is particularly enthusiastic about the similarity between Vaginov's fiction and Brik and Chuzhak's *Literatura Fakta*. Though his discussion refers primarily to Vaginov's subsequent novel, *Trudi i dni Svistonova*, his argument seems equally applicable to *Kozlinaia pesn'*: 'the subversion [...] of traditional notions of creative autonomy and "high" cultural value seen in the novel might emerge as a far from pessimistic suggestion that a sustained challenge to such notions is not after all undesirable. [...] The positive alternative of which the novel affords a glimpse is very much in accordance with that implicit in the arguments of Brik and Chuzhak: the possibility that with a question mark placed over the extent of authorial authority, critical discourse can give weight to factors which this authority traditionally demand be played down'. p. 120.

it is the words of the manicurist Ptichkina that ultimately ring true, for she declares that Zaevfratskii was just like all other men. The obsessive detail in which Mikhail Petrovich researches the life Zaevfratskii, even down to the level of clarifying what kind of table was set for a meal, is patently absurd and the product of the labours of a sycophant so in thrall to the power of his literary master that he is prepared to marry his widow, regardless of her stupidity. This desire to marry is an example of how, despite the colossal power of life to lay low any lofty pretensions towards cultural elitism, the crisis in representation seen in the prefaces still persists, and the norms of the old cultural order are replicated in the life of the Bolshevik context. Mikhail Petrovich's dream of becoming an adventurer à la Zaevfratskii flickers and burns out, just as the author's dream of Petersburg is declared over in the first preface, but he still persists in marrying the great poet's widow in a final act of the aesthetic determining life and its historical path.

The lingering crisis in representation prompted by the demands of the Bolshevik real is articulated most explicitly in the author's damning appraisal of Mikhail Petrovich's verse, with the voice and the quality of verse dismissed as metallic. The author does concede that if such verse had been written in the time of Zaevfratskii it would have been astonishing, and reflected the striving of a man against many of the grim realities of life. Yet as poetry in the Soviet 1920s it is effectively useless and lacks any transitive aesthetic power or relevance such as that of the Party ideology, which literally writes itself onto the streets and minds of contemporary Petersburg. Thus, life, as all encompassing world-view, is caught between demanding total acceptance of synchronic constancy in culture, but the nature of that life and its overbearing contingency demand total acceptance of diachrony in the literary system. Beginnings, endings and

repetitions co-exist in uneasy tension in the contemporary author's method. The depositing of his materials in an archive is ambiguous, perhaps suggestive of an author-hermit safeguarding culture before its eventual regeneration, but is equally an act of abandonment by an author whose dreams of adventure are now over and whose profession is that of a dentist and not a writer. Mikhail Petrovich decides not to pursue any involvement with artistic institutions, avoiding the Union of Poets and dismissing an award for his work as trivial.

Ending

In addition to the endings of Teptelkin's conversion to the regime, the Unknown Poet's suicide, and Mikhail Petrovich's completion of his study of Zaevfratskii, there is one more resolution before the novel reaches its non-conclusion.

During a church procession on Easter Sunday Teptelkin's wife, Maria Petrovna, the fragile embodiment of his idea of rebirth, falls into a canal and subsequently dies.

Марья Петровна вышла из дверей огромного, изнутри освещенного люстрами, лампадами и свечами здания, похожего не то на перечницу, не то на письменный прибор, расстегнула жакетку и вынула сплюснутый китайский фонарик, расправила его, встала между колонн и, защищая огонь от ветра, вставила свечку в фонарик.

Часть толпы направилась к проспекту 25-го Октября, часть пошла по проспекту Майорова. Некоторые, в том числе Марья Петровна и Тептелкин, направилась по Галерной к мосту лейтенанта Шмидта. Высохшие от морозца улицы отражали звездное небо, с крышки чернилницы доносился колокольный звон, дрожащие огни свечечек освещали лица, руки, улицы, улочки и переулки, и Марье Петровне, утратившей религиозное чувство, казалось, что она участвует в карнавальной шествии.⁴ Не будучи уже

⁴ This mention of 'carnival' creates the temptation to compare Vaginov's novel with Bakhtin's theory of Carnival. Such a comparison would, in our view, be deeply misguided. Anthony Anemone offers a brief survey of the critical literature which has attempted to establish how the novel exhibits all the 'defining

христианкой, она любила церковь за обряды, как архаический театр и условное представление. По тем же соображениям она предпочитала церковь Тихона живой церкви. Она считала, что возвышенное представление требует особого языка и некоторой непонятности, в то время как живая церковь, не поняв этого, стремилась к опроценству, тем самым уничтожая психическую рамку, низводила высокое действие на степень быта. В искусстве должен быть момент иррационального. Так думала Марья Петровна, идя со своим мужем по мосту лейтенанта Шмидта и держа фонарик, как участница возвышенного театрального действия.

Тептелкин тоже нес зажженную свечку в картузе из вчерашней вечерней "Красной газеты". И, расплываясь в мечтах, уносился в свое детство. Он видел себя в гигиенической комнате, окрашенной масляной краской, икону св. Пантелеймона с малиновой многогранной лампадкой. Охраняя огонек, свернул Тептелкин на 1-ю линию Васильевского острова, а Марья Петровна, смотря в фонарик и приняв чужую спину за спину своего мужа, свернула в другую сторону. И вдруг почувствовала, что кричать надо. Изнутри тянуло, качало, вокруг было жарко, веки не размыкались, и, удерживая тошноту, услышала голоса:

- Топаи в аптечку, доложи штурману - человек за бортом был. И в отдалении другой голос: - Только что вошел по трапу на палубу, слышу крик, што ли, смотрю - человек за бортом, я сиганул в воду, зюйдвестку побок, дождевик тож, а вода-то, мать честна, холодна. Насилу выбрался, груз-то велик, может, она и мало весит, да знатна, судорога прихватила.

- Сидим мы, это самое, скучаем, как бы бутылочку раздавить одну, другую. Сережка бултыхается, смотрю и думаю - тащить надо. Смотрю, за волосы бабу волокет, рыбу-кит тащит. Ой пожива, думаю, во христово воскресение; саданул стаканчик водки, пыхтеть начал,

characteristics' of Bakhtin's theories of both the carnivalesque and menippean satire. However, in addition to offering the rather odd remark that Vaginov's carnival is antithetical to that of Bakhtin, Anemone notes that comparing the novel with Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and menippean satire is ultimately an anachronism: '...Bakhtin did not discuss carnival and menippea in print until after Vaginov's death'. See his 'Carnival in Theory and Practice: Vaginov and Bakhtin' in David Shepherd, ed., *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 57-70.

зарумянился, поди, то святое крещение принял, иорданское.

Марья Петровна приподняла тяжелую голову и обвела глазами. Два человека, баня, остальные в дверях, в полосатых тельняшках, иллюминатор сверху втягивает воздух, какой-то человек фонарь идет заправить на корму.

- Вишь, гляделки открыла, отдай иллюминатор; вирай ее на воздух.

Закутали они Марью Петровну. Матросы хотели проводить ее, но она пошла одна. И уходя, слышала:

- Кипяточку наладили, в камбузе чайку подзаварили, напоили бабоньку, отойдет чего, бывают в жизни огорченья, похрипит, покашляет, воспрянет. (166-7)

From behind an enormous door, Maria Petrovna exited the building that looked like either a pepper mill or a paper weight. The interior was illuminated with chandeliers, icon lamps and candles. She unbuttoned her jacket and took out a folded up Chinese lantern. Having unfolded the lantern, she stood between the columns and, shielding the flame from the wind, placed a candle in the lantern.

Part of the crowd headed to 25th of October Prospekt, another part went along Prospekt Maiorov. A few, including in their number Maria Petrovna and Teptelkin, headed along Galernaia towards the Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge. Dry with frost, the streets reflected the starry heavens. From the lid of the inkwell, the peel of bells could be heard. The trembling candle flames illuminated hands and faces; streets, side streets and alleys. And to Maria Petrovna, who had lost the feeling for religion, it seemed as if she were taking part in a carnival parade. No longer a Christian, she loved the church for its ceremonies, as archaic theatre and the performance of ritual. For the same reason she preferred the church of Tikhon to the Living Church. She believed that the sublime demanded its own language and some incomprehension. At this time, the Living Church failed to understand this, and strove towards simplification, and so doing destroyed the psychological frame, lowering the elevated act to the level of the everyday. In art there should be a moment of the irrational, thought Maria Petrovna, walking with her husband along Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge and holding the lantern like a participant in an elevated theatrical act.

Teptelkin also carried a lit candle, cradled in yesterday's 'Red Gazette'. And, losing himself in dreams, was carried back to his childhood. He saw himself in a hygienic room, decorated with oil paint, an icon of Saint Panteleimon with a crimson, many-sided lamp. Guarding the flame, Teptelkin headed for the first line of Vasilevskii Ostrov, and Maria Petrovna, looking at the lantern, took someone else's back to be that of her husband and turned to the other side. And suddenly she felt the need to cry out. From within she felt something pulling, something rocking. All around her it was hot. She could not open her eyes, and, repressing a feeling of nausea, she heard a voice:

'First Aid! Tell the navigator – man over board!' and in the distance another voice: 'I just gets down the ladder to the deck and I hears a cry or somethin'! Man over board! I jumps in the water, in the south west side - raincoat an'all. On my mother's name the water was that cold! I only just managed to get out, I had the cramp that much. Maybe she's quite a catch. She didn't weigh much, but she's well known.

'We're just sitting, bored, passing a bottle around between us. Serezhka plops in and I thinks, gotta get 'im out. I look, and he's tugging this lady by the hair, like he's bagged a fish or a whale. My, I thinks, it's all come good on Easter Sunday. He knocks back a glass of vodka, starts huffing and puffing and goes all red like. He got himself a right holy Jordanian baptism, I shouldn't wonder!'

Maria Petrovna raised her heavy head and looked around. Two men, a bathroom, the rest standing in a doorway in striped sailor's vests. Air was coming in from a porthole up above. Some man goes to the stern to prime a lantern.

'See, she's opened her peepers. Let's be having the porthole, give her have some air.'

They wrapped up Maria Petrovna. The sailors wanted to accompany her, but she went alone. As she left, she heard:

'They put on some hot water, in the galley they're brewing a pot of tea, give the lady a drink and she's off somewhere. Grief will happen in this life. She'll wheeze and cough, then she'll bounce back.

In many respects this bizarre passage represents the culmination of Vaginov's tendency to lay-bare, make strange and problematise the various dynamics in post-Revolutionary

culture that have been addressed in this analysis. The Church procession encapsulates the highly ambiguous nature of the life/culture dualism in the novel. Maria Petrovna's participation in this aestheticised performance in life is yet another example of the constant blurring of the line between life and culture, where different calibrations of the aesthetic struggle for supremacy in life. Maria Petrovna, drawing a comparison between religion and art, believes that art must have an element of irrationality within it, a trace of elevated spiritual experience that cannot be articulated in words, and which demands its own language, just as Viacheslav Ivanov demands that truly symbolic art be evocative of the *realioria*, and expressed in inner hieroglyphs. Yet, as much as she feels that art should have this trace of the irrational, Maria Petrovna does not abandon herself to sensory experience. Instead she intellectualises her participation in this event, for, having lost the feeling for religion, she believes she can only participate in the procession as if she were taking part in a form of archaic theatre. The use of archaic underscores the distance between the origin of such a ritual and the present in which it is enacted. The procession and, by extension, such an elevated irrational art, could not have originated in the contingency of the (Bolshevik) present.

Maria Petrovna may express dislike at the lowering of the elevated aesthetic act to the level of the everyday, but she is ultimately powerless in the face of this force, literally tumbling down from the height of her thoughts into the cold waters of the canal, ignominiously dragged out of the waters by her hair. The disembodied voices of the sailors travesty the Easter myth of resurrection and that of purifying baptism. Typically, the image of water is pervaded with doubleness: it is at once a purifying force that cleanses Maria Petrovna of her lofty cultural sensibilities in an inverted baptism in the base discourse of the masses; but, simultaneously, it is also a

terrifying, turbulent force that robs her of the powers of speech and sight, and proves to be the source of the illness that will kill her.⁵

Ironically, it is this terrifying loss of sight and speech that signals that Vaginov has finally arrived at a reconciliation of the competing world-views of elitist culture and the all-encompassing life. It is as if this immersion in the mundane and coarse discourse of the masses is providing her with the authentic irrational experience which she seeks in elevated art, but the cost of this immersion is the death of all those elitist cultural ideals of rebirth which she embodies for Teptelkin. To suggest that this death is endowed with a sense of pathos and loss by its association with the demise of authentic Christian culture of the church of Tikhon would be to ignore those aspects of the novel which are nostalgic for the authentic pagan culture of Philostratus exterminated by the Romans. In a bizarre act of inversion, it is as if we have come full circle, and, by abandoning Christianity she has reverted to an archaic and pagan self analogous to that of the valorised Philostratus, albeit stripped of the elitist sensibility of the old cultural order which the author mocks in Teptelkin and his entourage. It is as if the all encompassing imperative to mock and lay low – embodied in the voices of the idealised, but resolutely non-Bolshevik, masses – is the one possible trajectory of culture, where the ideals of the old high culture can be perpetuated only by their constant negation, but ultimately preserved in a constant, unchanging future.⁶ The need for an author to sing of experience, or, alternatively,

⁵ For a similar discussion of the 'double' image of water in the literature of Petersburg, see Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 1–28.

⁶ For a contrasting view, where Vaginov's novel is depicted as a monument to the impossibility of preserving culture, see Dmitri Segal's 'Literatura kak okhrannaia gramota' in *Slavica hierosolymitana*, 5–6 (1981), p. 231.

assemble that experience into a literary work is obviated by the complete immersion of the self in the total aesthetic experience of life. The norms of high culture are both reborn and negated simultaneously; at once justifying and modelling existence and negated by the world-view of life in the same instant.

It is as if, at these strange endings, where he allows his characters to be endlessly reiterated into the interdetermining discourses of life and fiction, walking away into life outside the novel and dying according to the terms of their art, Vaginov finally arrives at a beginning.

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