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Karen L. Ryan-Hayes

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

Marina (with bitterness): I study satire.

Miloserdov's son: Russian or foreign?

Marina: Ours.

Miloserdov's son: Nineteenth century?

Marina: No, contemporary.

Miloserdov's son: You have a marvelous profession. You study something that doesn't exist.

(From the film *Garage* by El'dar Riazanov)

It is fitting to begin an examination of satire with a paradox and Russian literary history presents a fine one: although major works that might be classified as satire according to traditional genre definitions are rather rare in twentieth-century Russian literature, the satirical impulse permeates and reticulates throughout Russian prose of the modern period. Satire – understood as a manner of writing, a mode rather than a genre – offers critical and persuasive force that is central to much of contemporary Russian literature. In arguing for perceiving satire as a modality rather than a form, we lay the groundwork for a critical structure far more inclusive than that endorsed by Riazanov's character (quoted above). He is certainly right in noting that no contemporary writers have donned the mantles of Gogol' or Saltykov-Shchedrin, but he ignores the satirical and ironic spirit that in fact characterizes much of contemporary Russian writing.

Satirists of the post-Stalin era trace their lineage not only to nineteenth-century classics like Gogol' and Saltykov-Shchedrin, but to writers of the so-called “Golden Age” of Soviet satire that developed in the relatively liberal decade following the

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Revolution. Vladimir Maiakovskii's plays *The Bedbug* (1928) and *The Bathhouse* (1930) helped to define Soviet satire; even in the post-Soviet period, the former is part of the permanent repertoire of Moscow's Theater of Satire. Mikhail Zoshchenko's innovations with *skaz* broke new ground in satiric characterization and effectively distilled the contradictions and excesses of the NEP period. Mikhail Bulgakov's *povesti* "Heart of a Dog" (written 1925) and "The Fatal Eggs" (1924) demonstrate his proclivity for fantasy and the absurd and prefigure his satirical *chef d'œuvre* *The Master and Margarita* (written 1940). Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov, masters of the feuilleton, also began their literary collaboration in the twenties and created the two picaresque novels that are regarded as the acme of Soviet satire, *The Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Golden Calf* (1931). The acceptance of socialist realism as Soviet literary doctrine in 1934, and especially its prescriptive corollaries of "typicality," "absence of conflict" and the positive hero, made the Russian satirist's position untenable. The fates of writers like Maiakovskii, Zoshchenko, Bulgakov and Il'f and Petrov range from tragic to dreary and need not be recounted here.

What might be termed (with some allowance for exaggeration) a "Silver Age" of Soviet satire occurred during the Thaw that followed Stalin's death in 1953. Not only were unorthodox works like *The Master and Margarita* and Iskander's *The Goatibex Constellation* published (the former in a heavily cut version 1966–67, the latter in 1966), but some of the best satirical works of the twenties were reissued during this period. The development of Russian satire in the post-Thaw contemporary period, i.e. the seventies and eighties, is the focus of the present study. This was not a propitious period for satire in the Soviet Union: censorship under Brezhnev was relatively rigid and writers and purveyors of *samizdat* and *tamizdat* literature were subject to prosecution. Indeed, all of the writers whose works are treated in this study experienced the consequences of official displeasure in the "period of stagnation." It is a measure of the power and resilience of satire that despite the hostility of the literary bureaucracy and the censor, works such as Iskander's *Rabbits and Boa Constrictors* and Erofeev's *Moscow—*

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*Petushki* were nevertheless created. Recent changes in Russia – the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restructuring of the cultural apparatus – have not obviated the central role of satire in literature. Indeed, the sweeping changes of the last decade have provided a clearer perspective on satire of the seventies and eighties, now that the Brezhnev era is receding into the past.

The specificity of Russian satire and the unique problems posed by Russian literary history present several challenges to the critic examining the satirical mode in its Russian context. In the first place, Russian and Soviet criticism tends to conflate satire and humor; a critical distinction is seldom made and the terms are usually used synonymously. The element of criticism that most Western theoreticians regard as a distinguishing feature of satire is presumed by most Russian sources to be present in humor as well. Russian literary criticism's insistence on relegating satire to a "low" status complicates the situation further. Following classical rhetoricians and eighteenth-century doctrine, Russian theoreticians and writers have ghettoized satire in special sections of journals and newspapers and in critical discourse. The bulk of Russian critical theory devoted to satire consists of manuals directing the aspiring satirist in the art of penning effective feuilletons, sketches, satirical essays and the like. Satire, unlike most other modes of literature, finds its object outside of art, in the social, political or moral life of the culture it treats. While Western literary traditions have often de-emphasized the didactic function of satire and viewed it as a forum for oppositionist commentary and mockery, Russian and Soviet criticism has emphasized the reformatory nature of the mode. Theoreticians of Russian and Soviet satire have urged practitioners to capitalize on their opportunity to instruct their readers and to ameliorate the ills and excesses they pillory. This utilitarian, functional quality of satire that has often rendered it liminal in Western art has found special resonance in Russian and Soviet culture. Finally, the issue of censorship must be taken into consideration in any study of Russian satire. Lev Loseff follows Kenneth Burke in postulating censorship in Russia and the Soviet Union as (paradoxically) a factor that contributes positively to satirical writing. The artist's balancing

aesthetic considerations against the possibility of reprisal has, according to Loseff, been instrumental in the creation of subtle and inventive satire.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, evading the censor may serve as a means of catharsis in a repressive society like the Soviet Union; breaking taboos in satire constitutes a literary carnival experience through which author and reader satisfy a need to transgress norms and come to terms with authority.<sup>2</sup> The role of satire is thus particularized critically, politically and psychologically in its Russian context and these factors necessarily shape this study of contemporary satirical literature.

One of the most prevalent and effective techniques used in contemporary Russian satire is parody of genre conventions. In demonstrating the importance of this literary procedure, it is essential to avoid confusing parody and satire and to that end, some clarification is in order. Parody, like satire, is better approached as a mode rather than a genre. It often supports satire, serving its ends of mockery and criticism, but it need not; parody is not subordinate to satire. With that caveat in place, we observe that in practice, the parodying of other genres is in itself a satiric convention.<sup>3</sup> The effectiveness of the device, as we shall see, depends on whether the satirist's target is susceptible to parodical treatment:

Although we are accustomed to reading texts in which parody supports satire ... such a relation exists only when the subject matter of the parody relates closely to the subject matter of the satire. Only when the parodic target (particular *signa* and manners of expression) is a metonymy for the satiric target, that is only when a language represents its speakers, is parody supportive of satire.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph Dane's formulation focuses on language, but one can argue (as I shall) that the ideology, belief systems and behavior codes associated with particular genres also determine if parody of their conventions is effective in a given satire.

A crucial distinction between satire and parody is that the former posits extramural targets (politics, social mores, cultural institutions, etc.), while the latter refers to another artistic construct. Satire aims explicitly or implicitly at the exposure or

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improvement of a faulty *status quo* in life; parody, strictly speaking, is an aesthetic phenomenon. Thus parodic satire – satire that employs parody as a rhetorical means – has its point of reference outside of the text, but utilizes parody as a strategy to achieve its critical ends. As Linda Hutcheon notes, “Satire frequently uses parodic art forms for either expository or aggressive purposes when it desires textual differentiation as its vehicle.”<sup>5</sup>

Standard descriptive or prescriptive definitions of parody are not particularly helpful in explicating the texts included in the present study. Gilbert Highet, for example, views parody as a subgenre of satire and divides it further into formal parody and material parody;<sup>6</sup> Fred Householder, focusing on classical examples, asserts that parody must be modeled on a specific work or author;<sup>7</sup> John Jump treats parody as a type of burlesque.<sup>8</sup> All of these theoreticians regard parody as an imitative form that utilizes exaggeration or distortion to discredit the original. Beyond this narrow basis of agreement, critical understandings of parody are extremely diverse. Indeed, Samuel Johnson’s characterization of parody as “a kind of writing in which the words of an author or his thoughts are taken and by a slight change adapted to some new purpose”<sup>9</sup> is useful precisely because it is so open-ended.

A major critical reevaluation of parody has occurred in the modern period and the insights that have resulted are most apropos to a discussion of contemporary Russian parodic satire. The Russian Formalists, notably Viktor Shklovskii and Iurii Tynianov, view parody as a means of progress and evolution in literature. In “laying bare” the clichés that characterize a given work or genre, the parodist “disrealizes” literary norms. As the product of struggle with established, stale literary devices and genre conventions, parody has tremendous productive, creative potential: “The history of parody is most closely connected with the evolution of literature. The laying bare of convention, the disclosing of verbal behavior, of the verbal pose – this is the enormous evolutionary work accomplished by parody.”<sup>10</sup>

Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings on parody constitute a profound

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reconsideration of our understanding of parody; theoreticians who have followed Bakhtin inevitably elaborate upon or respond to his work. According to Bakhtin, parody is a double-voiced utterance designed to be interpreted as the expression of two speakers.<sup>11</sup> The parodic utterance, moreover, is intended to discredit the original: "... the voices here are not only detached and distanced, they are hostilely counterposed" (*Rabelais*, p. 160). Valentin Voloshinov, who treats narratology in terms of "authorial speech" (*avtorskaia rech'*) and "another's speech" (*chuzhaia rech'*), views parody as a refraction of the latter.<sup>12</sup> The author of parody uses another's speech act in pursuing his or her own ends and thus endows the parodic utterance with a new intention. We experience parody – if we are apprehending it fully – as "paired." O. M. Friedenberg asserts that unless we perceive its doubleness, it is not parody: "without chiaroscuro, without something to be contrasted to something else, it does not exist."<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon's definition of parody as "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (*Theory of Parody*, p. 6) restates Bakhtin's idea but redirects the focus away from the socially and politically subversive aspects of parody toward aesthetics.

In recent critical treatments of parody as a metaliterary form, the term has come to mean almost any use of another writer's style or the conventions of another genre. In this respect, parody itself serves as literary criticism, though it is not analytic in its procedure. The reflexivity that is a feature of parody is characteristic of what Margaret Rose calls the "modernist episteme" as a whole. She suggests that parody has thus become normative and is no longer necessarily anti-generic.<sup>14</sup> The present study is concerned with parody's function within satire rather than its progressive potential, but the broader scope of contemporary parody may be inferred from G. D. Kiremidjian's assertion that the widespread presence of parody (understood as a metaliterary form) in modern literature suggests that it expresses something fundamental about our age.<sup>15</sup>

As our understanding of parody expands and as we move from structure to utterance, it becomes more and more difficult to establish what techniques are characteristic of parody; even

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devices such as exaggeration and emphasis become problematic. Moreover, parody can operate within a text of virtually any length, so that the parameter of size is also destabilised. The comic effect that often results from parody is deemed a false indicator by Rose (*Parody//Meta-Fiction*, p. 21), and Gary Saul Morson concurs that the “functional shift” that occurs in recontextualization through parody “need not be in the direction of humor” (*Boundaries of Genre*, p. 111). Perhaps only incongruity remains as a distinguishing feature of parody. The critical distance established by the parodist is usually signaled by irony and as Hutcheon notes, “Irony’s patent refusal of semantic univocality matches parody’s refusal of structural unitextuality” (*Theory of Parody*, p. 54). However, incongruity and irony are so broad in their scope that they are of little use in delimiting parody. Because it is essentially parasitic and dependent on a model, parody – even within satire – discourages any rhetorical systematization of formal features.

The notion that the primary intent of parody is mockery, derision or ridicule of its model has been largely discredited by critics. In fact, parody need not criticize the original at all. Rose points out that the parodist’s admiration of the model is often inseparable from a desire to reply to or modernize it (*Parody//Meta-Fiction*, p. 30). J. G. Riewald traces the change in our critical perception of parody’s intent; he writes: “True parody is always critical, but, being inspired by a certain amount of sympathy, it does not make the reader devalue its original. It is this element of sympathy, admiration, or love even, that takes the sting out of what used to be called the *genus irritabile*.”<sup>16</sup> This is not, moreover, a strictly modern development. Aristophanes may well have approved of Euripides’ poetry and there are many other examples of “pure” or “absolute” parodies that do not imply dissatisfaction with the original. Friedenberg, in examining classical sources of parody, stresses the contiguity that underlies parodic texts and performances (“Origin of Parody,” p. 275).

Recognizing that the intent of parody is not exclusively negative illuminates the curious dual nature of parody as both subversive and affirmative. Because it incorporates and thus

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legitimizes the original, parody may function as “the custodian of the artistic legacy” (Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, p. 75). Even as it recontextualizes the model, it reinforces its primacy, its claim to aesthetic or ideological significance. In the works included in the present study, we shall see that parody tends to serve the stable norms posited by the model explicitly or implicitly. Indeed, in recent Russian satirical literature, there is none of the “anarchy and randomness” (*ibid.*, p. 80) that are associated with metafiction as a whole. Satire – even when it uses parody in experimental, productive ways – does not question the moral and ethical norms against which the target is measured. Instead, genre norms and individual texts are recast through parody so as to satirize social, political or moral aspects of contemporary culture.

Just as the intent of parody is variable, the resulting tone ranges from scathing and sarcastic to playfully ironic. Where on this tonal scale a particular parody (or parodic passage within a work) will fall is conditioned by the parodist’s point of view *vis-à-vis* the model. The extent to which the parodist disagrees with or disapproves of the original may usually be inferred from tone. While we must certainly avoid the so-called intentional fallacy, it seems that satire presents a special case in which it is virtually impossible to proceed without making inferences about authorial intention.<sup>17</sup> The reader must decode the encoded intent and assign what Morson calls “semantic authority” correctly, i.e. to the second voice. We must understand with whom we are to agree in order for the parody to be effective (*Boundaries of Genre*, p. 109).

Given the extent to which satire pervades modern Russian literature, it is inevitable that a single critical study should be selective in its scope. Many important contemporary satirists are not treated here: Vasilii Aksenov, Iuz Aleshkovskii, Aleksandr Zinoviev, Andrei Siniavskii, Sasha Sokolov and others are not included. The works chosen for this study are, however, seminal on both historical and aesthetic grounds and taken together, constitute a representative corpus. The five works examined represent a common attempt to adapt and



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transcend genre canon through use of parody. Each of the satirists treated here – Iskander, Erofeev, Limonov, Dovlatov and Voinovich – writes within a recognizable genre tradition. Having adopted genres with established conventions, they all proceed to subvert, mock, modernize or respond in some other manner to the forms chosen. Generic parody thus supports and enhances satire of Russian and Soviet culture under Brezhnev.

The authors treated in the present study also represent the diversity of contemporary Russian satire. Iskander was formerly claimed as a “Soviet” writer and has been successful in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Erofeev, though he never left the Soviet Union, was an iconoclast and never sought the official sanction of the Soviet Writers’ Union. Limonov, Dovlatov and Voinovich were all to some extent dissident writers under the Soviet regime and emigrated to the West. The range of satiric tonalities expressed in the texts examined is predictably broad, from gentle and mocking (Horatian) to harsh and caustic (Juvenalian). Moreover, the prose styles of these works vary widely, from relatively conservative (e.g. Dovlatov and Voinovich) to experimental (e.g. Erofeev). Finally, the individual texts are not necessarily the best known or the most typical of these authors’ works. Rather, they are selected to illustrate a technique that is artistically and ideationally effective and that unites disparate strains in Russian satire.

The evidence supplied by even a cursory reading of recent Russian prose suggests that the satirical impulse is a major motive force among contemporary writers. In light of this wealth of satirical literature, the dearth of criticism focusing on the praxis of Russian satire is striking. There are, of course, important exceptions. Richard Chapple’s *Soviet Satire of the Twenties* is thorough, but limited in its scope; Peter Henry’s two-volume *Anthology of Soviet Satire* includes an excellent historical introduction to Russian and Soviet satire. Russian critical contributions are more numerous, but these works remain for the most part untranslated. They include Ja. El’sberg’s *The Heritage of Gogol’ and Shchedrin and Soviet Satire*; L. Ershov’s *Satirical Genres of Russian Soviet Literature*; V. Frolov’s *The Muse of Flaming Satire*. Also very valuable to the student of Russian satire

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is E. K. Ozmitel's comprehensive (if dated) bibliographical guide *Soviet Satire: Seminars*.

The present study is intended to fill a gap in Western criticism on Russian satire. It is my aim to characterize contemporary Russian satire through close reading of five texts written in the seventies and eighties. In each of the five chapters that follow, I place the text treated within the generic traditions – both Russian and Western – in which it is written. I then demonstrate through textual explication how parody functions as a device that supports satire. Since parody is intertwined with other elements (both formal and thematic), I consider related issues such as narratology and stylistics that contribute to satirical efficacy. Stated in the broadest terms, the goal of this study is to explore the extraordinary diversity and range of the satiric modality in contemporary Russian literature.

The chapters that constitute this study are arranged to reflect the chronological development of generic norms that serve as the models for parody in recent Russian satire. Chapter 1 examines Iskander's *Rabbits and Boa Constrictors* as a parodic recontextualization of allegory. Chapter 2 is an examination of Erofeev's *Moscow–Petushki*, a text that parodies the conventions of the picaresque. A reading of Limonov's *It's Me, Eddie* as a parody of autobiography follows in chapter 3. Dovlatov's *Ours*, the subject of chapter 4, is treated as a parodic adaptation of the family chronicle, a popular nineteenth-century genre. In the fifth and final substantive chapter, I analyze Voinovich's *Moscow 2042* as a modern dystopia, a genre arguably written exclusively in our century, but with roots in earlier utopian literature.