CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

> The trivia and atoms of life past have been studied to exhaustion and their final poet has been given to us . . . If not Chekhov, that last bard of decomposing trivia, then surely someone will show us a way out other than Moscow and old galoshes? . . . Surely Chekhov is not art's end-point?
>
> (Zinaida Gippius, 1904)

> What is there left to express? Cobwebs, sighs, the last elusive thing . . . From that point of view I am finishing literature and have finished it.
>
> (Vasilii Rozanov, 1915)[1]

In this book I treat what I identify as an epistemological conflict at the core of Russian literary conceptions of the everyday. I will introduce my theme through two brief examples from the Russian literary canon. I begin, however, with a scene from a French classic.

In an episode from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* the unhappy heroine is taken to the Rouen opera by an unsuspecting husband in an effort to hasten her recovery from a nervous illness suffered in the wake of her cynical abandonment by Rodolphe, her seducer. Flaubert juxtaposes the mundane, *petit bourgeois* prattle of the subscribers with the undulating emotions of Emma Bovary. Struggling to persuade herself of the mismatch between the dramatic peripetiae of the romantic novels she reads and the dreariness of the provincial reality imprisoning her, Emma sees in the operatic scene played out in front of her a depiction of her own life as it should have been: "All her attempts at denigration evaporated before the poetry of the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

singer's role which envelopped her and, drawn towards the real man by the illusion of the character . . . she longed to rush into his arms and seek refuge in his strength."[2]

Flaubert's emphasis on the contrast between fictional illusion and the mundane realities of the provincial quagmire is temporarily undermined when Emma's musical fantasy is displaced by the "real-life" reappearance after a long absence of Monsieur Léon, her first admirer. With Léon's help, Madame Bovary rejoins the adulterous path to ruin which provides the novel with its linear trajectory.

The operatic sequence highlights a contradiction in which literary plot plays the dual role of the false background against which the (realistic) action of the novel is perceived, *and* the model which each twist in that action follows. On one hand, it provides a foil to the sense of sameness which makes Emma's life seem all too real. On the other hand, precisely as a consequence of the "real life=stasis, fiction=eventfulness" equation, it offers the only standard against which to measure the change necessary to ensure that this life constitutes a story. The contradiction is resolved in two ways. First, Flaubert's knowing irony safely removes him from his heroine's clichéd behaviour, facilitating the reassertion of reality over art. Secondly, by weaving together the rhythms of Emma's everyday routine with those of her adulterous affairs, the author reveals that the essence of provincial reality is to be discerned not in complete stasis, but in the patterned integration of (plotless) repetition *and* (plot-like) change. The pattern is that of the "*moeurs de province*" which provide the novel's subtitle, inscribing it within the realist canon. In Emma's operatic outing, then, we find *images of the aesthetic* deployed against the background of *everyday reality* in the interests of furthering the ability of *representational narrative* to integrate stasis with change, verisimilitude with readability. I will suggest that this three-way convergence is endemic in western narrative art from Cervantes to Joyce.

What of our Russian examples? In Chekhov's story "The Kiss" ("*Potselui*"), all three components are present. There is a story to be told, an everyday reality to be depicted, and a set of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

clichéd images with which to contrast it. An outline of the narrative seems to confirm its adherence to the model. A soldier on duty in the provinces attempts to create from a kiss mistakenly planted on his lips at a military soirée an amorous liaison. His efforts to imagine the identity of his mysterious "admirer" and the future development of the "affair" are based on images gleaned from literary romance. Not surprisingly, the affair does not materialize. The soldier is left gloomily contemplating the dull realities of his existence.

There is, however, a subtle difference. In *Madame Bovary*, the encounter between art and the everyday is managed such that the terms emerge mutually enriched. In its narrative guise, we conclude, art embraces repetition as well as change. In its essential rhythms, meanwhile, everyday reality transpires to be as engaging as any other kind of reality. "The Kiss," by contrast, ensures mutual *contamination*. Because of a curious case of collusion between "narration" and "narrated," provincial life acquires the features of a pointless anecdote, while art adopts the humdrum inconsequentiality of provincial life. The notion of reality as a mediocre story permeates "The Kiss" and is brought out in a Chekhovian version of *mise en abîme*. Shortly after the incident that is the focus of Chekhov's off-center tale, the hero attempts to relate the details to his comrades. The resulting story is a miniature of its containing narrative – an off-center piece of trivia which, in Cathy Popkin's words, strikes its audience as barely "worth telling":

> "A strange thing happened to me at the von Rabbeks'," he began, imparting to his words an indifferent, mocking tone. "I went off to the pool room, see" . . . He began describing very minutely the story of the kiss, and a moment later fell silent . . . Listening to him, Lobytko, who was a great liar and so never believed anyone, looked at him doubtfully and laughed.[3]

A routine consisting of dull rituals and inconsequential marginalia such as the kiss generates a mockery of the plotting necessary for good narrative. The hero soon discovers that the only way that even *he* might make sense of things is to embellish the occurrence with romantic images: "[H]e would close his eyes and see himself with another, entirely unfamiliar girl . . .

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

In his imagination he talked, caressed her, leaned over her shoulder, pictured war, separation, then meeting again, supper with his wife, children."[4] To further underline the difference between the reality of poorly plotted truth and the falsity of good plot, Riabovich's abortive attempt to relate his adventure is juxtaposed with the fulsome account of the liar, Lobytko:

"I was going to Kovno last year . . . the carriage was crammed . . . I lay down and covered myself with a blanket . . . It was dark you see. Suddenly I felt someone touch me on the shoulder . . . I opened my eyes and just imagine – a woman. Black eyes, lips red as fresh salmon, nostrils breathing passionately – a bosom like a buffer."[5]

Throughout, Chekhov maintains the distinction between a world of romantic images and fabricated anecdotes, and one of insignificant trivia and unchanging ordinariness. Rather than being cleanly *delineated* from the inauthenticity of art, this "real world" is instead incestuously *assimilated* to it as its mirror image. Chekhov's own account of Riabovich's life consists of a monotonous catalogue of insignificant trivia and dreary routines:

And before him on the road were nothing but long, familiar, *uninteresting* scenes . . . To right and left, fields of young rye and buckwheat with rooks hopping about in them . . . The vanguard and the singers, like torch-bearers in a funeral parade, often forgot to keep the correct distance . . . To Riabovich it was all perfectly comprehensible and therefore *uninteresting* . . . Riabovich knew that, of the horses on which they rode, those on the left were called one thing, while those on the right were called another – it was all *very uninteresting*.[6] [Italics added]

By underscoring the tedium of these trivia, Chekhov induces reality to equate itself with the subversion of its own narration.

One important difference between Chekhov's "The Kiss" and Riabovich's account is that while the latter peters out, the former rambles on before dissipating. This is because Chekhov's narrative must convey both aspects of Riabovich's life – the boringly repetitious and the inconsequentially transient, while Riabovich focusses purely on the latter. The difference between Chekhov and Flaubert follows from this. Flaubert integrates incident and routine into a pattern that

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

simultaneously renews the claims of everyday life to narrativity and reinforces art's claims to representational authenticity. (The "trick" is to assimilate one's plots to a rhythm which seems new and significant, yet instantly recognizable.) Chekhov combines incident and routine in an unintegrated medley which leaves both life and art looking like a lousy anecdote – the very image with which Riabovich leaves us: "The water was running, he did not know where or why, just as in May . . . And the whole world, the whole of life struck Riabovich as an unintelligible, aimless joke."[7] It is also the frustrating note on which Chekhov ends when, taunting his readers one last time with the deflating rhythms of anti-narrative, he presents Riabovskii with the chance to renew his amorous quest, only to remove it and stop where he started – with a non-adventure: "The orderly informed them that they had all gone to 'General Fontriabkin who had sent a messenger on horseback to invite them . . . ' For a moment there was a flash of joy in Riabovich's heart, but he extinguished it at once, got into bed, and, in spite at his fate, as though to annoy it, did not go to the General's."[8]

The way in which reality becomes ingrained with the attributes of "bad" art characterizes Chekhov's variant on the encounter within narrative of daily life and the aesthetic. But the symbiotic intertwining of anti-narrative and reality is not exclusive to Chekhov. My final example takes us into the lurid world of Russian Decadence and reveals the extent to which, in less than a generation, the phenomenon had taken hold, developing a momentum of its own. Close to the dénouement of Fedor Sologub's novel, *The Petty Demon*, the author depicts a riotous town masquerade. What we find in this scene is tantamount to a meta-textual *enstaging* of the process which had, from Pushkin to Tolstoy, bound the antithetical categories of everyday life and artistic cliché ever more disconcertingly together. The enstaging occurs on two levels, causing the process to acquire personified form, then to be reenacted as metadrama. First, the characters whose petty actions Sologub chooses in order to typify the unremitting provincial torpor pervading the novel, appear at the masquerade dressed up as grotesque misrepresentations of artistic conceits and mytholo-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

gical figures: Night, a she-bear, the classical deities, an Ancient-German warrior. The licentious dress and behaviour of the vulgar gossip, Grushina not only fails to generate an artistic rendition of the goddess Diana, it produces a ribald caricature:

> Grushina had the idea to dress up as Diana. Varvara laughed and asked:
> – So are you going to put on a collar?
> – Why do I need a collar?
> – What do you mean? You've managed to get yourself up as the Dog Dianka . . . It's a little bare, isn't it? Grushina replied, winking insolently:
> – Yes, but that way I'll get all the men following me.[9]

Also present is an embodiment of everyday life's antithetical twin: *bona fide*, artful plot. This takes the form of an androgynous boy who, in an exquisite subterfuge, has been disguised as a *geisha* by a hedonistic aesthete named Liudmila. Sologub thus engineers a full-scale physical battle between the everyday and the aesthetic. On winning the prize for best female costume, the *geisha* is set upon by the unruly crowd of masqueraders who unceremoniously tear his costume from him: "[S]he threw herself on the *geisha* with a penetrating screech and clenching her dry fists. Others followed . . . A wild assault began. They broke her fan, tore it up and trampled it on the floor . . . Some vicious young man or other bit into the *geisha*'s sleeve and ripped it in half."[10] Presenting itself as a wicked caricature of its nemesis, post-Chekhovian provincial routine attains its final victory – a literal *unmasking* of the mendacious aesthetics of good plot. This, in a Decadent novel wherein art supposedly reigns supreme!

There is a final twist. The frenzied anger of the provincial crowd generates a wave of destructive energy which leads, paradoxically, to one of the novel's few "plot-like" events – the burning to the ground of the masquerade hall (site of art, the everyday, and "the everyday as artistic parody"). Moreover, the source of this incendiary catharsis is none other than Ardal'on Peredonov, the demon of provincial pettiness himself. Thus, for a brief moment, narrative is reinstated on a new footing, freed of both its aesthetic and its anti-aesthetic burdens – of the need

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

to integrate art with everyday life (Flaubert), and the subversive impulse mutually to contaminate them (Chekhov).

This reversal points fleetingly towards a reconfigurement of the triadic relationship pitting art against the everyday within narrative. The reconfigurement will provide my study with its focus. In order to characterize the nature of the realignment there is an intricate web to be disentangled. One thing will already be plain to those familiar with the examples adduced. Just as the economy we have been "plotting" plays itself out in unusual fashion in Russian fiction, so it will appear that its most important category is, here, misnamed. For we are dealing in both Russian examples with the articulation not of "everyday life" but of the virtually untranslatable phenomenon of *byt* ("routine existence," "way of life," "the humdrum"). I will argue that *byt*'s array of negative connotations can be traced to the role I began to assign to it in Chekhov: that of referential "shadow" to a complex of anti-narrative strategies developed through nineteenth-century Russian prose.

I set myself three tasks. The first is to account for the cultural formation and literary evolution of *byt* in the framework of the three-way model (art – the everyday – representational narrative) with which I began. One argument I make is that *byt*'s inception as a culturally significant category can be traced to the Silver Age. My second goal is therefore to identify, through my analysis of *byt*, the specificity of Russia's contribution to European modernism. The very choice of Chekhov as a starting point suggests that *byt*'s genesis has its roots deep in the nineteenth century. A third aim is thus to link the particular qualities of Silver-age prose to those of nineteenth-century Russian realism. Alexander Blok's rejection of "the poison of modernism" with its autonomous and therefore "dead" aesthetic objects in favour of an art that "irradiates" what is truly *alive*, amounts to much more than a call for the idiosyncratic dose of civic concern frequently cited as an ingredient in Russia's literary diet : "Art is a kind of radium. It is able to radioactivate anything, the heaviest, the crudest, the most ordinary things: thoughts, tendencies, 'experiences,' feelings, everyday life. It is only what is alive that may be irradiated,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

hence that which is crude; it is impossible to radioactivate that which is dead."[11] Blok appeals to a distinctive sensibility shared by all the practitioners of Russian modernist narrative and reflected in a long-standing Russian concern to integrate the aesthetic and the ethical in one category. The desire to define this sensibility unites all three goals.

In accomplishing my aims, it is not my wish to deny western modernism's undoubtedly profound influence on its Russian counterpart – an influence comprehensively described in a volume edited by Peter Barta and Ulrich Goebel.[12] The view underpinning this and other accounts is that an assessment of Russia's contribution to modernism should, in George Gibian's words, eschew the search for "priority or uniqueness."[13] Such studies assume that, since Russian modernism's most celebrated achievements were in painting, poetry and architecture, any comparison with European trends should proceed by comparing qualities within and between these forms and the historical movements they generated. Implicit in my approach is the counter-assumption that cultures develop as *organic wholes*, that external influences are, when absorbed, subject to *structural transformation*, not merely cobbled together with native traditions, and that Russian modernism's salient qualities have therefore to be sought in the monumentalism of its nineteenth-century civic culture which was *prose-oriented* and to which the "everyday" theme was crucial. I thus make no apologies for implying through the title of my book that, rather than playing second fiddle to poetry and the visual arts, prose narrative was at the cutting edge of Russian modernist culture.[14]

The method of analysis I employ draws on semiotics and narratology. It is, above all, informed by the conviction that Russian literature's anti-narrative impulse, its provocative and contradictory attitudes to the production of artistic meaning, arise from its problematic assimilation of western *ways of knowing*. Many of the distinguishing features of Russia's epistemological traditions find their clearest formulation in its religious thought. I should stress that I do not wish to present the Orthodox faith as the hermeneutic key to the "mystique" of some exoticized Slavic soul. Many of the writers I treat are far

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

removed from Orthodoxy. Moreover, the fact that Russia has always been a willing *receptacle* for western influences of all kinds is central to my argument throughout. It is, however, from Orthodox theology that I derive an important component in my interpretative master-code as it is applied to the task of determining how these influences were transformed by the unquestionably foreign soil into which they were transplanted.

It will be my contention that the tensions engendered by the conflict that Russian fiction expresses converge in a nexus located at the heart of *byt*. Though the phenomenon is hardly limited to the Silver Age, the twenty or so years of intense cultural activity that this period produced contains the defining cycle in its development. There is symbolic significance in the fact that Chekhov, dubbed the last realist, began his career writing the briefest of anecdotes from the realm of humdrum life, while Vasilii Rozanov and Aleksei Remizov, the end-markers of Russian modernism's pre-revolutionary phase (and, if Rozanov is to be believed, of literature itself), attained their artistic peaks with the publication of fragmentary episodes from their daily routines.

My argument will be conducted through close readings of works written at, and between, the two boundaries of this crucial segment in *byt*'s history: Chekhov's stories, Sologub's *The Petty Demon* (part II), and the autobiographical writings of Belyi, Rozanov and Remizov (part III). Since my selection cuts across the boundaries dividing the familiar literary schools (realists, symbolists, neo-realists etc.), the appearance of the anti-narrative assault that is the hallmark of these works varies considerably, encompassing the deflationary rhythms of Belyi's prose, Rozanov's domestic fragments and Remizov's meandering collage documenting the grim exigencies of day-to-day survival in revolutionary Russia. With each writer, the drama of plot-subversion is accompanied by a sustained focus on the decidedly undramatic world of routine existence; hence Belyi's disorienting flitting between the mindbending cosmos of the Eternal and the banal comedy of the everyday, and Rozanov's agressive championing of the ordinary minutiae of life at home.

As suggested by the example of Rozanov, these writers are

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521580099 - Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday
Stephen C. Hutchings
Excerpt
More information

interested not in the *representation* of *byt*, but in harnessing its anti-aesthetic force so as to exorcize its negative associations. Chekhov progressed from condemnation of provincial stagnation to celebration of the provincial beauty of the lady with the little dog. Sologub countered the grey monotony of *byt* with the vitality of myth. Belyi chose to invest *byt* with the cosmic (the apocalypse in a sardine can in *Petersburg*). Rozanov turns the tables on the nineteenth-century social critics by adopting the trivia of domestic existence as the badge of true authenticity.

In order to construct a framework within which to broach these hypotheses more fully, and to lay the ground for the textual analyses in which they are to be tested, I begin with an introductory section consisting of two chapters. In chapter one, I propose in broad terms one way of understanding the central role of the concept of everyday life in the European cultural tradition. I then pinpoint a complex of factors integral to Russian culture which, in assimilating that role, simultaneously act to undercut it, and posit a set of critical tools appropriate for studying the resulting conflict. Chapter two provides an account of the early "fruits" of that conflict in nineteenth-century Russian literature which doubles as a pre-history of *byt*. The study thus adopts a progressively narrowing focus – from general theory, through literary history to textual analysis – before opening out in the conclusion to consider the unique convergence of aesthetics and politics that characterized the Russian revolutionary era, that time when, in the words of Remizov, "the whole of life was turned on its head and was with each day being uprooted . . . and . . . ordinary people . . . found themselves in the hardest situations and lived out their days at a pace that set the head spinning."[15]

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org