Introduction

The fin-de-siècle mood in Russian literature

Ani Kokobobo and Katherine Bowers

Russian writers, especially the most notable, did not believe in the stability of civilization, in the stability of those principles upon which the world rests...; they are full of terrible forebodings of impending disaster.

– Nikolai Berdiaev

Often used to describe the period between 1880 and 1900, the expression “fin de siècle,” French for “end of century,” encompasses a meaning considerably broader than its literal definition. In a conversation toward the end of Oscar Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), two characters, Lord Henry and Lady Narborough, relate the fin de siècle to the end of the world, or fin du globe. “I wish it were fin du globe,” weighs in the perpetually bored Dorian Gray, “Life is a great disappointment.” The conflation of fin de siècle with fin du globe, Dorian’s boredom, his despair at reality’s failure to evoke any hope or inspiration, and the tension between life and a longing for the end of the world come together in this scene to illustrate the fin de siècle’s distinctly broader associations.

The concept of the fin de siècle runs over its chronology, embodying an overarching mood that affects both individuals and society as a whole. Contemporary scholar Elaine Showalter argues that we tend to experience the end of a century intensely and emotionally, and ascribe to it “metaphors of death and rebirth.” In Degeneration (1892), Max Nordau defines this emotional state in terms of illness, impotence, and exhaustion, but also an unfulfilled yearning for life and vitality:

[The fin-de-siècle mood] is the impotent despair of a sick man, who feels himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature blooming insolently for ever. It is the envy of a rich, hoary voluptuary, who sees a pair of young lovers making for a sequestered forest nook; it is the mortification of the exhausted and impotent refugee from a Florentine plague, seeking in an enchanted garden the experiences of a Decamerone, but striving in vain to snatch one more pleasure of sense from the uncertain hour.
In Nordau’s description, the fin-de-siècle mood is located in the tension between the feeling of death and the desire for life, in the figure of the frustrated sensualist unable to reach satisfaction, the despairing quest for vitality met with indifference and the inevitability of one’s own decay. For Nordau, the mood is symptomatic of the “Dusk of Nations,” a time when “man kind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world,” characterized by a broad and overwhelming pessimism. Nordau and Showalter’s perception of the fin de siècle as a mentality and “mood” rather than a simple chronological marker fits with its original parameters in France as well as with the broad outlines in which we construe the term. Similarly, Kermode observes that fin-de-siècle anxieties were not unique to the end of the nineteenth century: “The anxiety reflected by the fin de siècle is perpetual, and people don’t wait for centuries to end before they express it.”

Our volume examines the fin-de-siècle mood in Russian realism, from inception to twilight. Realism existed before, but also concurrently with, and following literary and cultural movements more commonly associated with the chronological fin de siècle such as symbolism and decadence. As such, we do not treat the fin de siècle merely as a transition that fills a gap between realism and modernism, nor as an illustration of Russia’s transition from a traditional to a more modern society. Rather, in our definition, the fin de siècle in Russian literature and culture constitutes a fluid mentality outside temporal framing, characterized by a fascination with themes of foreboding, decline, degeneration, decay, and ending.

Compared to the fin de siècle and its corresponding zeitgeist in Europe, the Russian “fin-de-siècle mood” was gloomier, as scholars note. Eugène-Melchior de Vogué, writing about the nineteenth-century Russian novel in 1886, found Russia to be a “nation prematurely rotten” with a spirit anchored in the “stormy sea of nihilism and pessimism.” Moreover, as Mark Steinberg points out, fin-de-siècle attitudes in Russia in the latter half of the nineteenth century were substantially more intense than in the rest of Europe; for Russians, the fin de siècle became a modern “time of troubles” depicted through a public “vocabulary of sickness and crisis.” Steinberg identifies “modern melancholy” – hopelessness and despondent despair with no particular cause – as the dominant emotion in the fin-de-siècle Russian psyche.

Just as the fin-de-siècle mood was more intense in Russia, so too was it more protracted. It has deep roots in Russian realism where it can be traced long before 1880. Similarly, it persisted in Russian culture, drawn out well into the twentieth century. In part, this persistence could be due to the
atmosphere of crisis and ending in the early decades of twentieth-century Russia, which saw widespread unrest. Considering the 1905 Revolution, the February and October 1917 Revolutions, and the Civil War (1917–1922), the period is marked by multiple social and political endings, the most notable being the end of the tsarist epoch. These manifold grand historical finales have led some historians to situate the end of the Russian fin de siècle as late as 1914, with the start of World War I, or even the February 1917 Revolution.  

In removing the temporal boundaries from the fin de siècle, the recurrent crises, denouements, and moments of possibility that punctuated nineteenth-century Russian history become strikingly apparent. Broadly speaking, Alexander I’s victory over Napoleon led to new ties with the West, and the emergence of new philosophical ideas, but democratic idealism was crushed with the Decembrists’ execution and exile in 1825. The myth of Russian military dominance was exploded by a humiliating defeat at the hands of Great Britain and France in the Crimean War (1853–1856), which exposed the backwardness of the Empire’s infrastructure and the stagnation of Nicholas I’s repressive reign. The obvious need for change inspired Alexander II to undertake a series of wide-reaching political reforms throughout the 1860s and 1870s. The first, most significant of these Great Reforms was the Emancipation of the Serfs, which disrupted the traditional estate (soslovie) order – made up of nobility, clergy, merchants, and peasants – and, in so doing, upset all areas of Russian society and life. In addition to these social changes, late nineteenth-century Russia saw the introduction of state-led capitalism in its economy without a corresponding political system, the sharp rise of industry and consequent modernization, and, as a result, significant disruption of traditional life and structures.  

The appearance of the fin-de-siècle mood could also be called a symptom of the negotiation of modernity, characterized simultaneously by extremes of optimism and pessimism. Anxiety and foreboding about the end of the world fostered a culture of viewing present-day life as contemptible, and, instead, privileging the individual’s utopian search for meaning through both physical and metaphysical means. Certainly, the symbolist and decadent movements commonly associated with the chronological fin de siècle suggest such a reading in their different approaches to the binary of crisis and possibility. Decadents believed they were living in an age of decline; Viacheslav Ivanov described decadence as “the sense both oppressive and exalted of being the last of a series.” Symbolists, too, believed the end of the world was nigh, searching for truth and meaning in a space out of time.
The crisis of ending in symbolist philosophy, however, was accompanied by transcendent rebirth into a new world. Both decadence and symbolism were marked by the pessimism of the present, but the sense of vitality and possibility that runs through modernity persisted as well. Apocalyptic imagery in Russian symbolism displays dark overtones, reflected through images of burning cities and Satanism in Konstantin Balmont’s poetry, Schopenhauerian pessimism in the poetry of Andrei Bely and others, as well as general melancholy in the works of Fyodor Sologub and others or exhaustion in Alexander Blok’s later poetry, whereas symbolist philosopher Vladimir Solovev saw the apocalypse in a positive, productive light.

Although the fin-de-siècle mood appears readily in Russian symbolism and decadence, these strands emerged after Nordau diagnosed the Russians with the fin-de-siècle malaise in 1892. Nordau’s diagnosis hinges on earlier realist writers he singles out as key representatives of the mood. He mentions Tolstoy’s Schopenhauerian despair, fears of death, and general mystical irrationalism as a prime example of the fin-de-siècle mindset. Though he dwells on later, post-conversion works from the 1880s, Nordau also cites Tolstoy’s earlier fiction from the 1850s as an example of this unfulfilled utopianism and messianic drive. In this vein, Nordau also describes Turgenev’s novella A Nest of the Gentry (1859) as a pessimistic narrative reflecting the fin-de-siècle mood, reading the character Lavretsky at the novella’s end as an embodiment of the fin-de-siècle man, broken down, depressed, and having lost his love. Contemporary scholars such as Laura Engelstein and Olga Matich similarly suggest ties between the fin de siècle and earlier Russian literary works, particularly Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s utopian novel What is to Be Done? (1863). Tolstoy, Turgeniev, and Chernyshevsky are an odd grouping as the three display opposing artistic, religious, political, even cultural tendencies. However, interestingly, all three are considered progenitors of the fin-de-siècle mood. It is the presence of this mood throughout Russian realism that may be said to provide one of the more distinctive features of this canon.

European literary realism is conventionally understood as a movement primarily concerned with the illusion of verisimilitude or the impression of reproducing all details of life. Ian Watt describes the realist novel as “a full and authentic report of human experiences . . . under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details . . . as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.” Peter Brooks takes the notion of referentiality further, describing realism as not only verisimilitude, but suggests
that referential details conjure visuality in the realist text. “[R]ealism is by definition highly visual,” writes Brooks, “Thus any honest accounting for the real, in the sense of the appearances of the world, . . . needs to give a sense of the thereness of the physical world, as in a still-life painting.”

This sense of being present is often seen as a key feature in the European realist novel. Indeed, as D. A. Miller’s Foucaultian study posits, the realist novel not only recreates but also reinforces the present. In their representations of reality, realist novels insidiously reinvent the policing power of the law “in the very practice of novelistic representation,” thus inhibiting actions that could disrupt social stability.

Yet in this scheme Russian realism emerges as quite another tradition. Unlike European realisms, Russian novelistic prose was hardly grounded on the middle class. As William Mills Todd, III has argued, terms such as “middle class” or “bourgeois” cannot be comfortably translated to a Russian context. Todd continues, “Russian novels do not celebrate capitalism, secular society, or the modern state – none of which were well or long developed in the Russia of their time.”

Given this, it is unsurprising that rather than celebrating the status quo or reveling in the stability of bourgeois existence, Russian realism was riddled with instability and reeling in untimely fin-de-siècle anxiety. A canon notable for – to use Henry James’s playful terminology – “loose and baggy monsters,” the Russian realist tradition lacked a sense of literary ending and “poetic closure” (in the phrasing of literary scholar Barbara Herrnstein Smith), but reflected timely social concerns and ideological questions. Thus themes of crisis, pessimism, decay, degeneration, and apocalypse permeated even novels deemed affirmational. With its accursed questions, purported sincerity, and general rebellion against empirical rationalism, mid-century Russian realism set the stage for fin-de-siècle despair and yearning.

In The Origin of Russian Communism (1937), Berdiaev reflects that Russian realists:

Did not believe in the stability of civilization, in the stability of those principles upon which the world rests, what was called the bourgeois world of their time; they are full of terrible forebodings of impending disaster. European literature does not know that sort of religious and social unrest, for it belongs to a civilization which is more fixed and crystallized, more formed, more self-contented and calm, more differentiated and distributed into categories.

He goes on to suggest that there was inherently more to Russian realism than mere representations of reality: “It [nineteenth-century Russian
realism] was realist, but certainly not realist in the scholastic sense of the word. It was realist in an almost religious sense and in its highest form purely religious.”

There was a divergent, prophetic quality – exceptional and, in Berdiaev’s view, spiritual – in Russian literature that yielded a great deal more than rudimentary documentation. Berdiaev describes this other quality with language that evokes the fin-de-siècle malaise with its “terrible forebodings of impending disaster.” Of course, Berdiaev’s reading of the nineteenth-century canon enjoys the benefits of hindsight: his work on Russian Communism appears after he has already endured the tumult of revolution, the terror of interrogation, the displacement of exile, and the ending of a way of life.

If the twentieth century was a fulfillment of the prophecies laid out in the gloom and despair of nineteenth-century Russian realist novels, it also saw the rise of a realism shaped by engagement with the fin de siècle. As decadence and symbolism flourished, new strands of realism simultaneously emerged such as neorealism. In the twentieth century’s early decades, Russian literary critics observed a “return to reality,” a “new expanded realism that had not only been enriched by impressionistic and symbolic devices, but was characterized by a sense of the artist’s function which differed from that of traditional nineteenth-century critical realism.” This perceptible shift in Russian realism, as this volume maintains, can be understood as yet another manifestation of the fin-de-siècle mood that runs through Russian realism. Perhaps ironically, the “sense of an ending” that characterizes it served also as a catalyst for realism’s never-ending artistic creativity and literary experimentation, both before and after the chronological fin de siècle.

This volume investigates the fin-de-siècle mood’s pervasiveness and resonance across Russian realism. Its chapters explore the Russian literary experience of the fin de siècle from an array of perspectives with two main directions in mind: a consideration of ways in which the fin-de-siècle mood predated the turn of the century in Russian literature; and the effects of this mood’s intensification during the chronological fin-de-siècle period on later Russian realism. We divide the volume into four sections – “Anxieties of Disintegration,” “Destabilizing Gender and Sexuality,” “Generic Experimentation and Hybridity,” and “Facing Death and Decay” – each featuring a cluster of linked chapters addressing various manifestations of the fin-de-siècle mood. Parts I and II focus on avant la lettre studies, while Parts III and IV emphasize realism at the turn of the century and beyond, showing the fin-de-siècle mood’s far-reaching effects.
Introduction

Part I analyzes narratives of disintegration in the context of emerging scientific, philosophical, and political ideas, as well as generic experimentation. In these chapters’ examination of various modes of disintegration – familial, internal, generic, and societal – anxiety comes to the fore, exposing the “terrible forebodings of impending disaster” Berdiaev observes in Russian realism. Kate Holland’s chapter examines the relationship between Zola’s Les Rougon-Macquart novel cycle (1871–1893) and Saltykov-Shchedrin’s satiric family novel The Golovlev Family (1875–1880) through the prism of degeneration theory, which gained rapid popularity in France and was just entering Russian intellectual discourse in the 1870s. Holland uses Saltykov-Shchedrin’s novel about family decline to study Zola’s rise and fall in popularity, as well as the concurrent debates about degeneration in the Russian journalistic press. Turning from the family to the individual, Yuri Corrigan’s chapter examines the crisis of the self as the basis for societal decline in Dostoevsky’s The Adolescent (1875). Corrigan considers Dostoevsky’s hero, Arkady, within the context of the desperate fin-de-siècle search for a stable concept of the personality, reading the novel as an early philosophical attempt to solve the crisis. Through Arkady’s attempts to conceive of a personal identity, which he imagines to reside in a variety of locations, Dostoevsky diagnoses Russia’s growing social disintegration as emanating from a deeper insecurity and sense of emptiness within the self.

Robin Feuer Miller’s chapter examines the darker side of childhood in Dostoevsky’s “A Boy at Christ’s Christmas Party” (1876), identifying a source for the story in two related genres: the fairy tale and the Christmas story. The chapter investigates how Dostoevsky subverts generic convention to undermine reader expectations, while crafting a powerful portrait of childhood in the face of social ills such as poverty and neglect. Dostoevsky’s fin-de-siècle foray ends in pessimism in Corrigan’s analysis, but Miller exposes the writer’s affirmational side despite his gloomy subject matter. Rounding out the section, Alexander Burry and S. Ceilidh Orr take Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina (1877) as their focus, considering the novel’s apocalyptic imagery and its relationship to political philosophy and industrial progress. In their reading, the collision of apocalyptic and utopian elements in the novel, intriguingly focused around the character of Stiva, is a manifestation of the anxiety and pessimism surrounding the development of Slavophilism in the 1870s. The sense of terror and disintegration promoted by these elements serves as an indicator of the fin-de-siècle mood avant la lettre.
Part II revisits the theme of disintegration, but focuses on anxieties surrounding gender roles and sexual politics in the second half of the nineteenth century. Emma Lieber’s chapter dwells on the relationship between repression, decay, and degeneration, exposing Turgenev’s “uncivilized” fin-de-siècle turn, a surprising one for an author widely known for his works’ civilizational effect. Using Freud’s theories in her reading of *First Love* (1860) and “A Living Relic” (1874), Lieber reveals the way images of degeneration in Turgenev’s works illustrate the pathological effects of civilization’s repression of sexuality and other primal urges. While Lieber focuses on sexuality, Connor Doak’s chapter concentrates on gender as he explores anxieties related to masculine degeneration in Dostoevsky’s novel *Demons* (1872). Doak identifies two kinds of degenerate masculinity in the novel: the effeminate, ineffectual 1840s men whose failures pave the way for the brutally violent 1860s men. While Dostoevsky condemns both forms of masculinity, he struggles to locate a favorable alternative, and ultimately it is the masochistic and effete Stepan Trofimovich whom he chooses to undergo Christian conversion. *Demons* thus resists simplistic calls for the remasculinization of society of the kind found in the work of Nordau and other fin-de-siècle reactionaries. The anxieties surrounding masculinity resurface in Jenny Kaminer’s chapter on the contrast between female heroism and masculine superfluity in Chekhov’s plays *Ivanov* (1887) and *The Seagull* (1896). The chapter examines Chekhov’s heroines in the context of the paradigm of female heroism suggested more than thirty years earlier in Dobroliubov’s 1860 essay praising the purposeful female protagonist of Ostrovsky’s play *The Storm* (1859). In Kaminer’s analysis, Dobroliubov’s vision of Ostrovsky’s heroine as a “ray of light in the kingdom of darkness,” standing against the status quo propagated by the play’s superfluous man-heros, establishes a paradigm of female heroism that Chekhov revisits in his fin-de-siècle negotiation of gender roles.

In Part III, the chapter cluster centers around the generic experimentation and productive hybridity that proved critical in late realism’s development. While Miller’s earlier chapter introduces the notion of genre as a realist tool, the four chapters in this section explore fin-de-siècle motifs through the prism of genre, emphasizing crises of family, sexuality, individuality, and, ultimately, of realist vision itself. Katherine Bowers’s chapter traces the gothic “fall of the house” plot in three works spread across realism: Aksakov’s *The Family Chronicle* (1856), Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlev Family*, and Bunin’s *Dry Valley* (1911). In Bowers’s analysis, the gothic mode and its gloomy generic conventions offered Russian realists a means to capture fears about family decline as well as widespread
Introduction

social anxiety, both before and during the chronological fin de siècle. Ani Kokobobo’s chapter provides a study of the grotesque in Tolstoy’s later theological and philosophical works and his novel *Resurrection* (1899), as well as Artsybashev’s novel *Sanin* (1907). As Kokobobo argues, the novels by Tolstoy and Artsybashev reflect a “grotesque realism” that enables ideologically opposed writers to showcase differing moral positions, condemning and praising sexuality, respectively. In its hybridity and estrangement, the grotesque appears as a manifestation of the zeitgeist in a society with unmistakable loss of spirituality, collapsing under the weight of pessimism and despair. In her examination of Russian fantastic realism, Muireann Maguire argues that symbolism altered the genre’s course, developing a darker, self-destructive variation on the natural school’s original archetypal hero, the put-upon clerk or “little man.” Maguire’s chapter compares the liberating vengeance achieved by Gogol’s protagonist in “The Overcoat” (1842) with the frustration suffered by his twentieth-century descendants in Sologub’s “The Little Man” (1907) and Krzhizhanovsky’s “Quadraturin” (1926).

While the examples of the gothic, grotesque, and fantastic emphasize anxiety in the face of social breakdown, these dark meditations are offset by Vladimir Korolenko’s late-century sketches (ocherki) in Jane Costlow’s chapter, which concludes this section. Korolenko’s sketches of rural life present a fluid and nuanced picture, their very genre emphasizing realism’s inherent visual quality. In Costlow’s reading, Korolenko’s fresh realism is a product of late-century Russia that emphasizes the importance of observation and experience. If the predominant fin-de-siècle mood emphasizes predominant anxieties about degeneration, as well as burgeoning...
ecological awareness and the existential experience of human mortality. Edith Clowes's chapter on Andreev's neorealism similarly emphasizes corporeal reality that appeals to what some might call the "lower senses." Clowes's reading of three stories – “The Abyss” (1902), “The Red Laugh” (1904), and “Seven People Hanged” (1907) – highlights what she terms “abject realism”; Andreev’s fin-de-siècle art does not celebrate sensory experience's fullness, but instead exhibits a strongly ascetic disgust of the body. His realist focus on the distorted and dismembered body, in Clowes’s reading, denies human endurance and, ultimately, human goodness.

In Newlin and Clowes’s chapters, decay abounds, and Ilya Vinitsky’s chapter closes the volume with this theme, reflecting on its transposition between realism and symbolism. Vinitsky studies the Balzacian thinking oyster – an image representing a cognizant being trapped in its own lifeless, useless husk of a body – in Turgenev’s later works, and the way this image changes when taken up by symbolist Konstantin Annensky following the realist’s death. The painful physical decay of Turgenev’s cancerous body and his existential torments – a palpable experience of ending – effects a shift in his realist vision, argues Vinitsky, a shift that resonates with fin-de-siècle philosophies as Annensky incorporates the thinking oyster into his own artistic vision.

While the chapter clusters outlined above provide one way of thematically linking elements of the fin-de-siècle mood we identify in Russian realism, organic links between individual chapters open myriad productive avenues for consideration of this volume's subject. Debates about psychology, degeneration theory, and sexuality underlie the chapters by Holland, Lieber, and Doak. Similarly, an emphasis on disease and the body’s mortality link Lieber, Newlin, and Vinitsky. Transgression and perversions of childhood feature in chapters by Corrigan, Miller, Lieber, and Doak, while an emphasis on family decline connects Holland, Bowers, and Newlin. The visuality of realism plays a crucial role in Korolenko’s open-ended ocherki in Costlow’s chapter, but also in Andreev’s abject realism and in Tolsyot and Artsybashev’s grotesque strands as discussed by Clowes and Kokobobo, respectively. This visuality necessitates an emphasis on exterior life, a perfect balance for Corrigan’s exploration of the crisis of interiority. Apocalypticism, broadly conceived, unites the chapters by Burry and Orr, Bowers, and Maguire, but appears tempered in Korolenko’s ocherki and Annensky’s symbolism in Costlow and Vinitsky’s chapters, respectively. Despite this tendency toward darkness and gloom, the fin-de-siècle mood provides some glimpses of light. Kaminer’s analysis of female heroism – a “ray of light” in the words of Dobroliubov – provides one point, as do