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*Mark Lipovetsky*

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# Genis and Surroundings, or Twenty Years Later

*Mark Lipovetsky*

When Alexander Genis's book *Dovlatov and Surroundings* was released by the Moscow-based publisher Vagrius in 1999, for two months it held the place at the top of the most popular book charts and ceded its primacy (sliding down into second position) only to Pelevin's *Generation "P"*. For the first time in post-Soviet Russia, a critic's book became a literary fact and, as Tynyanov would have put it, became a phenomenon that changed the trajectory of literary evolution. In other words, without Genis's "philological novel," the biographies of Boris Pasternak and Venedikt Yerofeyev would have never won literary awards, Dmitry Bykov's literary lectures would have never reached so many readers (and now viewers), and we wouldn't have so many popular internet channels dedicated to the close reading of literary texts.

This is not entirely because of Dovlatov—though his mega-popularity certainly played a role—but because of Genis himself as well. A widely renowned literary critic, the author of many intellectual bestsellers (together with Pyotr Vail and without him), a longtime host for Radio Liberty, Genis wrote not a literary biography, not an analysis of poetics, not a philosophical commentary, and not a memoir—he wrote the former, the latter, and everything in between, calling the final result a "philological novel." In his own preface to one of his editions of *Surroundings*, titled "Coastal Navigation," Genis writes that,

> Before beginning its task, a philological novel must ward off all traces of a biographical one. The dubious hybrid of a novel with non-fiction, a biographical novel familiarizes the reader with the protagonist's life, relaying his thoughts, feelings, and creations in his own words. ('Pushkin came out onto the porch'). In order to achieve success in this strange domain, one must either be level with the hero or else be his superior, which is very rare. A philological novel is concerned with something

> else—it unravels the tapestry that the author wove together with such artistry and diligence.

I don't quite agree with Genis. In my opinion, literary criticism is what concerns itself with "unraveling the tapestry." A philological novel, meanwhile, doesn't stop there: after unraveling Dovlatov's tapestry into the individual threads of the precise observations about devices that lurk behind his poetics, Genis weaves it together anew, but imbues the fabric with his own narratives and—more broadly—himself, his experience, and his understanding of his generation and diaspora. To put it into scientific language, a philological novel is a form of autofiction, where fiction is represented by philology, and everything stemming from the author is novelized. Novelized in the sense that Bakhtin put into the word: "The novel comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present; that is what keeps the genre from congealing. The novelist is drawn to everything that is not yet completed. He may turn up on the field of representation in any authorial pose, he may depict real moments in his own life or make allusions to them, he may interfere in the conversation of his heroes."[1] All of this is applicable to Genis's book.

Let's begin with literary criticism. By painting a multifaceted portrait of Dovlatov in the foreground, Genis, as if in this portrait's shadow, casually constructs a theoretical model of his aesthetics. The book's loose structure itself resists such concepts as "a theoretical model" and "aesthetics." A certain effort is required in order to make it out. Meanwhile, not only does Genis not hide this concept—he, in fact, with a didactic insistence repeats the main ideas, slightly varying the terminology and constantly providing new examples. Per my calculations, in this way, Genis's formula for prose, which "lets in chaos/emptiness," is repeated four times. This might irritate some people. But I find a particular attractiveness about this insistence: the spontaneity of *Dovlatov and Surroundings'* composition turns out to be conscious; the zigzags of authorial thought are actually subordinated to a strictly conceived trajectory. To use Genis's own metaphor, his essayist style constantly intersects with the theme of literary criticism rather than moving alongside it. If this theme were expressed directly, it would lose its complexity and devolve into an amalgam of ideas. But Genis proceeds from the assertion that "there *are* no ideas."[2]

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1 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), 27.

2 Alexander Genis, *Dovlatov and His Surroundings* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2023), 6. From now on, quotes from this book will be marked in parentheses.

For Genis, this last conviction, which is easily integrated into the context of poststructuralist philosophy and aesthetics, is likely a function of psychology rather than philosophy. According to Genis, the principled absence of ideas—or rather, the clear-eyed understanding of the fictitiousness of any ideological constructions—becomes a lifelong principle of "the last Soviet generation" (to use Alexei Yurchak's catchphrase), among whose number he counts himself, the generation for which Dovlatov became its voice.

> Dovlatov de-conceptualized the Soviet regime. Strictly speaking, he vocalized what everyone already knew: the idea on which the country stood no longer existed. And he added something else: no other idea existed either, because there were no ideas at all.
>
> Cognition of this circumstance is what distinguishes the last Soviet generation from the preceding one. One juxtaposed just ideas to false ones—the other simply didn't believe in the existence of ideas. (6)

The situation, let's be honest, isn't particularly new: Chekhov's Nikolai Stepanovich worried about the lack of a "common idea," and Chekhov himself, as we all recall, was constantly hounded by criticism over his lack of ideology. Brodsky, whom Dovlatov loved so dearly, wrote about this as well:

> The truth is that there is
> no truth. This does not liberate
> from responsibility—it does the exact opposite:
> ethics are the very same vacuum that is filled by human
> behavior practically at all times;
> it's the very same cosmos, if you will.[3]

As we see, for Brodsky, just as for Chekhov, not only does the absence of truth not equate with moral relativism, but quite the opposite—it endows each personal ethical choice with a "cosmic" significance.

But today, Genis's deliberation on there not being any ideas "at all" rings somewhat different than it did at the end of the '90s. On the face of it, he and his

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3 Iosif Brodsky. 1989. "A Lecture at the Sorbonne." Transcript of speech delivered at the Sorbonne, Paris, France, March, 1989, accessed August 4, 2022, https://izbrannoe.com/news/mysli/iosif-brodskiy-vystuplenie-v-sorbonne/.

generation were wrong: not only has the clash of ideologies not gone anywhere, it has, in fact, intensified—and not only in the Russian-speaking world, but across the globe. Genis—the political journalist—has more than once had the pleasure of ascertaining this: having once and for all assumed a liberal position, he is time and time again forced to counter the frenzied attacks of Trumpists both in Russian-speaking America and in Russia itself. But strange as it may seem, these last years most clearly demonstrate that it is Genis, together with Dovlatov, who are right. "There are no ideas," but this has not made ideologies disappear—it's just that today, it is more obvious than before that the ideologies heeded by the masses (including the hordes of Trumpists) aren't about ideas at all—they're about something else entirely. They're about powerful emotions, about precognitive affects, about fears and phantasms.

Which is to say they're about the very thing that literature deals with.

This is why, according to Genis, Dovlatov's aesthetics are his ethical—and I'll add, political—strategy: in every short story, in each scene from his notebooks, he searches for an answer to the question of how to present a whole picture of a world that has lost "the universal principle that united, justified, and enabled opposition to it." Paradoxically, in Genis's understanding, Dovlatov himself simultaneously embodies the freedom from ideas and surmounts it, denying it the ability to transform into the "pulp fiction" of contemporary affective ideologies. Because for Genis and his protagonist, "wholeness" and "integrity" aren't empty words: "The writer is the last guardian of coherence in a world of disintegrated knowledge," insists Genis. "He gathers what others scatter. In putting it together, he winds up with something greater than its parts." The question of integrity isn't answered even with such precise ethical, psychological, and philosophical determinations of Dovlatov's position like "underground amorality," which manifests itself as "a lack of commonly accepted criteria that would allow any kind of appraisal;" the ability "to hold on to one's moralistic verdicts, accepting the world as it is;" the discrediting of a "great" history and the "pathos of historical second-ratedness;" "indifference, which nurtured such hopeless modesty that it may as well have been called meekness."

Genis solves the question of Dovlatov's "worldview's" wholeness/integrity in the space of Dovlatov's poetics. Poetics that, despite its apparent simplicity, is founded on contradictions that cannot be called anything but philosophical.

In Genis's book, Dovlatov, on the one hand, comes across as a realist who depicted only what he knew and saw, and who reveled in the precision of detail. But on the other hand, unlike "normal" realists (like Solzhenitsyn, for example), Dovlatov is invariably fascinated with the atypical, the strange, the

freakish: "Sergei told us that he would make his friends skip class to go to the square and look at the old man twitching his toe in a funny manner." Dovlatov absolutizes the precision of detail, and Genis proclaims an impassioned hymn to details, invoking the art of haikus and Kharms at the same time. And though it might seem that the absolutization of detail results in a fractured picture of the world, Genis reaches the opposite conclusion: "By equalizing all elements of creation, [Dovlatov's] peripheral vision made the fabric of reality whole".

The flight from the typical toward the bizarre and absurdist injects Dovlatov's "realism" with an unexpected element of documentality, but it is a documentality with a Vaginovian twist, since it presupposes the destruction of the boundary between life and fiction: "People comprised the alphabet of his poetics. That's how it was: a person as a unit of text." "Dovlatov understood that he surrounded himself with his own victims, but he couldn't do anything about it. Even substituting someone's name for a fake one was agonizing for him—he equated it with becoming a co-author of someone else's work."

Genis compares Dovlatov's method with impressionism. I feel like this comparison is nevertheless imprecise. It would be more accurate to speak of late modernist minimalism or postmodern hyperrealism—both involve an intensive examination of life's details, revealing their artificiality, unnaturality, even pretentiousness. For Dovlatov, a sign of such aestheticism has always been the absurd—the Dovlatovian narrator marvels at the absurdity of the world, finding in it the purely aesthetic joy of the unexpected, but Dovlatov's protagonist can never resist the pleasure of augmenting the world's absurdity. However, Genis insists on the opposite effect of Dovlatov's aestheticism as well: "Dovlatov knew the price of the 'wondrous power of the absurd,' but he dreamed of the norm, which also 'evokes the feeling of wonder.'"

As we see, all we are left with is traditional realism's outer layer, what Roland Barthes called "the reality effect," masking the unconventional structure of a fictional character and a fictional world as a whole. This isn't only or so much a way of deceiving or retaining the reader. It is an inbuilt mechanism of control over the organic nature of the entire fictional construction. Precise detail requires an organic context; otherwise, it is rejected as a foreign body. "Realism" writ so is what Dovlatov and subsequently Genis call an author's "shackles," discipline, a stick, a paranoid striving for order, in this case buttressed by the banal but no less effective determination of "like or unlike."

If "realism" is responsible for the style of Dovlatov's prose, then its "content" is described by Genis in terms of absurdity, chaos, emptiness: "By portraying socialism as a national manifestation of the absurd, Sergei denied it primacy among socialism's other forms. Dovlatov showed that

all life was absurd, not just *Soviet* life. With that adjective out of the picture, the impression that there was something exceptional about our lot in life disappeared as well;" "The constancy of change, the Brownian motion of life, the incessant hum of chaos—working in the paper, Dovlatov found everything that made up his prose;" ". . . [*The Compromise*] is, like all of Dovlatov's books, about something else—it deals with the distribution of order and chaos in the universe."

I reproduce these passages of Genis's with pleasure both because they truly are accurate with regard to Dovlatov and because, in my opinion, it is exactly such a "dialogue with chaos" that is characteristic for postmodernism on the whole and for Russian postmodernism in particular. Genis discovered quite a significant turn that allows us to see the connection between this attention to chaos, absurdity, and emptiness with the characteristic Russian cultural tradition of longing for the organic wholeness of worldview. It is not accident that, as Genis puts it, Dovlatov inherits the central principle of his poetics directly from Pushkin: "the ability to reconcile contradictions without destroying them, but, in fact, highlighting them" (in my opinion, an excellent formula for postmodernist paralogism!). Genis formulates this principle while analyzing Dovlatov's *Pushkin Hills*, and now that this masterpiece is accessible in English thanks to an excellent translation by the writer's daughter,[4] I know what to give students to read about this book.

If the illusion of realism determines Dovlatov's style, and themes of absurdity, chaos, and emptiness dominate among his "signifieds," then how do we get the organic unity that is so tangible in each of Dovlatov's texts? Genis solves this problem particularly elegantly and convincingly. Per the logic of *Dovlatov and Surroundings*, Dovlatov's contradiction between "realism" and "chaos" is erased by the paradoxical nature of his prose's central character—the author himself. While the realist tradition bestows upon the author—typically situated beyond the text (endowed with "outsidedness")—knowledge of the truth, Dovlatov demonstratively embeds himself, with all his biographical viscera, into the very center of his own prose. At the same time, as Genis underlines, "Dovlatov turned out to be not only the strongest author of our generation, but the most beat up as well . . . Sergei assiduously made sure not to become higher than the reader. Like no one else, he understood the advantage of such a position." Genis diligently explains that

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4 Sergei Dovlatov, *The Pushkin Hills*, trans. Katherine Dovlatov (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2014).

> denying an author the right to judge his own characters means leaving him jobless . . . By becoming a literary position, an author's inaction becomes paradoxical. On the one hand, Dovlatov is the inevitable hero of all his short stories. On the other hand, he's not a hero at all. He doesn't even have a reflection in the mirror. By equalizing himself with the characters, the storyteller steps aside in order to let his surroundings say their piece.

Genis and Dovlatov both consciously muddy the relationship between the narrator, the first-person character, and the biographic author—by mixing these different forms of expression of authorial consciousness (a simple example: the protagonist bears the same first and last name that is written on the front cover), they subvert the hierarchy of authorial knowledge that looms behind these categories: Dovlatov's omniscient author loses his "final say," and this is emphasized by the constant defeats of his intra-textual doppelganger.

It is also worth remembering that Russian modernism has already treaded such a path. We need only recall Olesha's Kavalerov or Babel's Lyutov: there are no doubts about the contiguity between these characters and their creators or about their defeats in the fictional worlds of *Envy* and *Red Cavalry* respectively. As for Russian postmodernism—it begins in *Moscow-Petushki*, where the author/protagonist is so much lower than his readers that next to him, Dovlatov's battered superman seems a veritable giant.

What makes Dovlatov's author-hero different from these literary "siblings" of his?

The thing that Genis calls "the metaphysics of error."

Dovlatov's author-hero thoroughly lacks a martyr's halo, and the reader does not pity him because Dovlatov's extra-textual author revels in his defeats, saturating his texts with the poetry of error and imperfection. In one of the best chapters, which is specifically titled "The Metaphysics of Error," Genis shows how Dovlatov, merciless outside the text when it came to the typos and blunders of others, treasured the blemishes and slip-ups of his own autobiographical hero. "Dovlatov despised only the mistakes of others. His own, he not only tolerated—he cherished them. And he hated typos too, because he wanted to be the author of his own mistakes . . . For Dovlatov, a mistake is suffused in a halo of veracity . . . Any shortcoming—spiritual or physical—played the role of a mistake without which a person, as a character of fate and nature, would turn out unreal, false. Imperfection birthed personality. Error made it suitable for narrative." Doesn't this mean that there does exist some criterion of veracity? It would appear so. But it entails

precisely the obvious deviation from the norm, imperfection, which is so much more interesting than protocol, because it is individual, although in defeat rather than in victory. In other words, in "incompleteness."

The combination of "humbleness" and "the poetics of error" in the author character allows us to connect "realism" with "absurdity." And to connect them through the insoluble contradiction between the textual and extra-textual depictions of the author—as Genis notes, though, an irreconcilable contradiction happens to be the most natural. This paradoxical logic of authorial behavior extends beyond the boundaries of the text: Genis's Dovlatov, while assiduously destroying the prerogatives of authorial knowledge and judgment in the text, behaves in the exact opposite manner in real life: "Dovlatov was sooner a plenipotentiary writer in life than in literature. Hence his love for intrigue. Sergei was a brilliant taunter-miniaturist. Where others resorted to a crowbar, he employed such a sharp scalpel that he left no seams in his wake." In this way, this complex game between the author-hero and the author-narrator is joined by the myth that the author creates around himself beyond the boundaries of the text (what Tynyanov called the "lyrical hero").

The inclusion of this layer in Dovlatov's aesthetics is justified by Genis's chosen method of analysis: when quotes from Dovlatov's texts enjoy the same status as personal recollections of how Dovlatov acted in this situation or that, how he carried out his intrigues, how he insulted others and was insulted himself. Moreover, Genis often prefers the latter kind of argument to arguments scooped out of Dovlatov's texts. It is illustrative how Genis shields from view his analysis of *The Émigrée* with his own tales of immigrant life in the '70s and '80s, limiting himself to a single miserly verdict: "As a whole, *The Émigrée*, Dovlatov's most immigrant-focused book, doesn't work—it resembles a comedy screenplay too much". And I'm ready to bet anything that any reader of *Surroundings* would more vividly remember the story of how Dovlatov, Vail, and Genis himself decided to publish the *Russian Playboy* than the analysis of sexual motifs in Dovlatov's works.

Nevertheless, the main argument in support of Dovlatov's aesthetic philosophy as proposed by Genis isn't the analysis of specific texts or recollections, but the philological novel itself as a whole. I don't mean the stylization, though specific fragments of Genis's book truly do read as if written by the book's subject. For example, I love the following "Dovlatovian" description birthed by Genis's quill: "The ride itself was captivating enough. The car didn't have any windshield wipers, and our new boss would intermittently remove his suede cap and use it to wipe off the windshield, resignedly stretching out the window."

But most importantly, Genis's book is written in accordance with the very principles that he discerns in Dovlatov's poetics. Two layers of Genis's text—one memorial, the other dealing with literary criticism—engage each other in a productive and irreconcilable contradiction. If we view the memorial layer as central to *Surroundings*, with its brilliant portraits and scenes, honed by the precise details to the biting sharpness of anecdote, then all the literary criticism performs the role of something foreign, thereby meaning chaotic—unorganized material. This is exactly how Tatiana Tolstaya read the book, after which she rebuked Genis for needlessly "diluting an engrossing novel about his own life with the philology of an experienced essayist."[5] Conversely, I consider the philological layer central to this book, and, in my view, all the funny stories about Dovlatov and his other acquaintances provide the necessary "noise," especially since at the heart of these stories—as in Dovlatov's texts—is always a scene featuring absurdity or the paradoxical mix of order and absurdity. But in any case, this recreates the dynamic balance—discovered by Genis in his analysis of Dovlatov and his prose—between "the cult of the detail" (achieved by Genis in the form of the conclusiveness of his critical analysis) and the chaotic, absurd image of human "surroundings" (substantiated by Genis's seemingly spontaneous manner of writing). These two layers are in constant contention with each other. In this way, the philological idea of the fictional world that for the sake of its wholeness has allowed into itself the complexity of chaos is seemingly contradicted by the discussion of "the mystery of Dovlatov's boozing: vodka made his world maximally straightforward." Genis the literary critic savors the precision of Dovlatovian details, while the memoirist recalls the relish with which Dovlatov wove his web of light intrigue. Genis deliberately inserts disorder into his well-balanced conception and in doing so, endows it not so much with an intellectual conviction, but an aesthetic one.

Like Dovlatov, Genis scrupulously makes sure not to stand taller than his characters, not to demonstrate knowledge to which they are not privy: "All events in my life have been contained. I cannot recall anything monumental. Which is what gives me the courage to remember . . . Likely my most significant metaphysical distress comes from the cognition of the insignificance of any experience." Genis refers to himself in the indirect way, first and foremost carefully fixating his congruence and incongruence with Dovlatov, but invariably pulling away from any judgment. The image of the author is formed in the intersecting reflections of myriad mirrors, be they Dovlatov, his characters, or Paramonov,

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5 Tatiana Tolstaya, "A Cat and Surroundings," *Obshchaya gazeta*, July 28, 1999.

Sinyavsky, Brodsky, Vail, Naum Sagalovsky, or even the Jewish cowboy Shamir, about whom nobody knows anything. And, those rare moments that Genis talks about himself in the first person are the very episodes that most look like Dovlatov's own style.

The courage of such an experiment is remarkable: it is the same as testing a new medicine on yourself. If the conception is false, then Genis's book will disintegrate into bits, the surroundings will fall away from Dovlatov . . . but they don't. The construction is sound. As proof of the *organic nature* of *Surroundings*, I can quote Lev Losev:

> [Genis's book] has one more fascinating attribute that I cannot explain. When you read it from top to bottom, you are in constant disagreement with it: here is an imprecise observation, there an unconvincing comment, this is poorly worded, and this is said brilliantly, but unnecessarily, just for the sake of a pretty turn of phrase . . . But, however many times you sit down to read *Dovlatov and Surroundings*, regardless of where you start, even on a random page, you are immediately engrossed, and tearing yourself away is impossibly difficult.[6]

The experiment that Genis has conducted also has its own literary significance. It renews the tradition of modernist metafiction. In metafiction, the process of writing the book itself, its composition (as a rule, pointedly spontaneous and incomplete)—this is the most holistic model of creation, personality, and fate. Shklovsky's experiment of literary criticism fused with the novel is particularly relevant, especially such books as *Zoo, or Letters not about Love* and *The Third Factory*. Shklovsky, in turn, indisputably paid heed to Rozanov's experiments, which he had studied carefully. The only difference is that, per Shklovsky's interpretation, Rozanov departed from literature toward maximally concentrated autobiographical daily routine and the everyday "stuff." Shklovsky, meanwhile, took autobiographical "stuff" as ready material, but alienated it through literary criticism. But for both of them—as for Genis—the central artistic principle of metafiction is in full force, the principle explained by Shklovsky as *constructive oxymoron*.

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6 L. Losev, "Alexander Genis. 'Dovlatov and Surroundings,'" *Znamya*, November 10, 1999.

In Rozanov's works, for example, the oxymoron is based "on the discrepancy between thought or experience and their circumstances."[7] In Shklovsky's own rendition, it is between the romantic type of the authorial identity[8] and the academism of the enunciated theory. Turning to closer models, one may be reminded of Sinyavsky's *Strolls with Pushkin* and Katayev's *My Diamond Wreath*. Characteristically, both books were severely criticized in various circles of the Soviet and post-Soviet *intelligentsia*, precisely because they disrupted the conventional relationship between the literary critic and the classic (Sinyavsky), and the memoirist and the great heroes of memoirs (Katayev). In other words, these relationships took on the form of an oxymoron: the literary critic cannot speak of the classic's emptiness and frivolity, and the memoirist does not have the right to place himself on a level with great martyrs. Meanwhile, in both cases, literariness was presented as the "substance of existence," to use Platonov's phrase, equalizing the author and the hero and abolishing any hierarchy that may have existed in the setting. In this way, literariness was presented as a specific version of the modernist utopia of freedom.

Genis relies on the "memory" of this genre and the "memory" of the modernist aesthetic, but he radically changes its semantics: his whole book is also about freedom, but freedom that is attainable by means contrary to the modernist transfiguration of life's husk into a self-reliant and individual literary mythology. Genis wrote a book about freedom from the individual project of fate and literature; freedom that is attainable through deliberate mistakes and conscious receptiveness to unorganized and chaotic material, which is produced from minute to minute by the long-indiscernible intertwining of life and literature. At the same time, the idea of literariness itself is transfigured as well: it ceases being proof of the power of authorial imagination and intellect, it emerges as the result of the author's refusal to assume a godlike position in the text and the subject's rejection of the pursuit of order in life; it creates not a limitless universe, but a thin film at the point where precise perception and the ordinary absurdity of existence intersect.

I wrote about *Dovlatov and Surroundings* exactly twenty years ago, but having reread it, I find that many of my judgments have aged well, and I have no desire to renounce them. Especially in the English translation. Curiously, though he was considered the most successful writer of the Russian

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7 V. Shklovsky, *On the Theory of Prose* (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), 237.

8 On Shklovsky's Romanticism, see B. Paramonov's essay "Mozart in the Role of Salieri," in *The End of Style*, ed. B. Paramonov (Moscow: Agraf, 1997), 20–54.

Third Wave of immigration in life and was disassembled into quotes and aphorisms after his death like a new Griboyedov, Dovlatov hasn't evoked serious scholarly interest from Slavists. Dovlatov has found a place on Netflix, but not in dissertations and scholarly journals. Notably, Genis's book is only the second book about Dovlatov in English.[9] The explanation must lie in Dovlatov's in-betweenness—in the 1990s, he seemed an insufficiently critical realist, and in the 2000s, he was insufficiently postmodern. So Genis's book is very timely—the conception it explicates allows us to reconsider our ossified understanding of both postmodernist canon and of the place that the modernist tradition has in contemporary culture. It also organically folds into the "anthropological turn" in literary criticism, with the one caveat that the anthropology created by Genis bears a predominantly artistic character.

From the perspective of anthropology, the culture of the Third Wave of immigration is united by the figure of Dovlatov much more than by Brodsky (Brodsky was a deity, says Genis). As Genis recalls: "Sergei inserted his friends into every one of his texts, not just the ones in the paper. It is difficult to find an acquaintance of his about whom he didn't write anything. He tried to make the immigration intimate by making it his home. Purposefully framing the myth of the Third Wave as a family narrative, Dovlatov employed phantoms. He came up with a particular newspaper genre: 'Instances.' These tiny, unsigned notes were published as real-life events."

As in other cases, Genis takes an isomorphic path in relation to his protagonist, and, in Dovlatov's footsteps, he insistently blurs the border between reality and text. In justifying his title, he places portraits of the inhabitants of Dovlatov's surroundings next to the protagonist—characters who are not only real, but also quite famous. However, in Genis's rendition, they act like literary characters who have stepped out of their books' pages directly into the real world: Boris Paramonov "most resembles not Russian writers themselves, but their characters—all of them at once, in fact, from Gogol's old-world landowners to Svidrigailov, from Oblomov to the Karamazovs." Vagrich Bakhchanyan, "who is accompanying this book like old man Shchukar in *Virgin Soil Upturned*," had something to say on this matter too: "'A superfluous person—that sounds prideful.'" Lev Losev "scrupulously and ably cultivates the image and mannerisms of a pre-Revolutionary professor, which itself seems like a quote from an Andrei Bely memoir;" and Sinyavsky, "as the years went by . . .

9 The first was Jekaterina Young, *Sergei Dovlatov and His Narrative Masks* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

began more and more to resemble as creature out of Slavic mythology—a leshy, a domovoy, maybe a bannik. He fostered this resemblance, and he enjoyed it immensely. When he gifted me a copy of *Ivan the Fool*, one of his last books, he inscribed it: 'The leshy says hi.'"

I believe that in this way, Genis achieves the same effect that Dovlatov did: he simultaneously makes the Third Wave of immigration more intimate and more mythological. On the one hand, *Dovlatov and Surroundings* is the best possible memorial to a generation of immigrants who left the Soviet Union on a Jewish visa and created a new Russian literature abroad. On the other hand, it is a house, filled with joyful and dramatic life, whose doors are open to all who wish to enter. The fact that Genis's philological novel is coming out in English today is proof of this project's success.

When all is said and done, Genis's book is an inexhaustible source of *optimism,* which is in such deficit both in Russian and in immigrant culture. Describing the immigrant context of the '70s and '80s, he emphasizes: "Everything that happened here was a strictly private affair. Unsurprising, considering how few of us there were . . . Under such conditions, literature returned to its roots—an unprofessional, private activity. Books printed in tiny numbers were written for our own—both friends and enemies." Today, literature is going through a similar state of things both in Russia and in the diaspora, with the sole difference that today's private affair of literature is taking place on the fields of the internet, on Facebook, and its surroundings. And if many are wont to view this situation as the end of literature, Genis's book convinces us of the opposite: by returning to its private riverhead, literature does not die—on the contrary, it is born anew. And with time, it turns out that behind what initially seemed too simple actually lurks a hidden complexity, while what at first appeared too complex and esoteric has the possibility of becoming wildly popular. You just need to wait twenty years.

1

# The Last Soviet Generation

## 1

These days, both young and old are trying their hand at writing memoirs. The hunt is on for a non-fictional reality. Memory fever is running rampant. Perhaps uncertainty about the past is a reaction to the death of a regime. In a single hour, everything important became unimportant. Words and job titles lost their value. Take the foremost Soviet poet, who became a chicken farmer in his new life. Just like the last Roman emperor, if we are to believe Dürrenmatt.

The black hole occupying the space formerly inhabited by an entire nation pulls in all of its surroundings. Those loath to share the government's fate write memoirs to distance themselves from it. Unsurprisingly, this is easier for those who never glued themselves to it in the first place. Taking pride in his marginality, the memoirist chronicles the history of the curb—the periphery. Previously, memoirs would be written to appraise the past; now, their purpose is to ascertain that the past happened at all. To confirm that we had a history—our own history, not one shared by all.

"A good memoir," wrote Dovlatov, "always has a second plot (beyond the author's own life)."

In my case, the second plot just happens to be the author's own life—my life. I was born in February of 1953. My birth certificate says March 5th. The registry offices were open that day—Stalin's death was announced later. The Soviet regime began thirty-six years before my birth and ended thirty-six years after—with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Born in the middle of the era, I feel myself less a witness of history than a refugee from it. All events in my life have been contained. I cannot recall anything monumental.

This does not bother more confident authors than me. John Cage—the one who made the audience listen to silence at his concerts—wrote, "I have nothing to say, and I am saying it, and that is poetry."

I can't make that lift. I enjoy the absurd, but only that of others. I myself am a slave to coherent narrative. I find it uncomfortable to dwell on details that don't have much significance even for me. Though these very details, as you find out sooner or later, are the threads that make up the tapestry of life.

Likely, my most significant metaphysical distress comes from the cognition of the insignificance of any experience. I was top of my class in university, which wasn't difficult—the women teaching us loved me. Also, there were only three representatives of the male sex, including me, in the entire group. One was a remarkably pimpled poet, and the other, conversely, became an officer after graduating from the philology department. I, meanwhile, was a hippie, a straight-A student, and a fireman. I came to exams in tarpaulin boots. My hair hung down from under my service cap all the way to my military shirt. In short, there were things far more entertaining than me in our somber little institution. Regardless, instead of accepting me into the graduate program, which had been the object of my dreams, they took in a lanky general's daughter who, like everyone else at the time, wrote in melancholic verse. There was nothing left for me to do in Riga, so I left for America. Many years have passed, and the whole story seems—and is—thoroughly unimportant. What is there for me to envy? A dissertation titled "Sholokhov in Latvia?" The general-father himself, who turned out to be an albatross in the newly independent Latvia?

But that's not my point. If the drama of my student years lost its significance the second that I happened to be on the other side of the ocean, then how insignificant will all our other affairs seem when we find ourselves on the other side of life—especially if there *is* no other side?

So, I decided to write a book about Dovlatov. You write books about other people when you have nothing to say about yourself. That's not exactly the case here. In fact, I'm writing this book fully expecting to talk about myself. It's just that Dovlatov is a massive character. Literally as well as figuratively.

Vail[1] and I once went over to Sharymova's,[2] who was renowned as a lightning-fast cook. Tired of bumbling around on an empty stomach, we came over with a block of frozen cod. We arrived just at the end of the festivities, which our appearance imbued with a second wind. Obliging the hostess to retreat to

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1 Pyotr Vail (1949–2009) was Alexander Genis's longtime friend and coauthor.

2 Natalia Sharymova emigrated from the Soviet Union to New York, where she worked as a photographer.