

*Dystopias and catastrophe tales after Chernobyl**Eliot Borenstein***Haunting Russia**

A spectre is haunting Europe ...

– *The Communist Manifesto*

When Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously claimed that “a spectre was haunting Europe, the spectre of communism,” they established an evocative metaphor that inverted the temporality usually associated with these rather Gothic terms. Hauntings, after all, are typically understood to be the supernatural manifestations of a past that refuses to let go of the present; Marx and Engels envisioned a Europe troubled by the ghosts of its future.

When we turn to contemporary Russia, the obvious conclusion would be that the Russian Federation is haunted by the Ghost of Communism Past. Yet what looms large over today’s Russian literature is not communism per se, but the two separate strands of Marx’s and Engels’ *Manifesto*, one representing the ghosts of the past, while the other crystallizes anxieties about the future: dystopia and apocalypse.

It is not the mere presence of dystopia and apocalypse that supports any claim for the uniqueness of contemporary Russian fiction. Apocalyptic dramas (or more broadly, tales of catastrophe) have long been a staple of Western science fiction and action films, as well as producing such acclaimed mainstream novels as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, while dystopias have made the jump from politically tendentious cautionary tales (*Brave New World, 1984*) to one of the most popular genres in Young Adult (YA) fiction (*The Giver, The Hunger Games, Divergent*). But Russia has a privileged relationship to both these conceptual frameworks. First, because Yevgeny Zamyatin’s 1920 novel, *We*, all but invented the dystopian genre itself, decades before Huxley and Orwell brought it to the larger world stage. And second, because Stalinism provided ample fodder for both Russian and Western fantasies of totalitarianism.

Stalinism alone does not explain the importance of these themes in the Russian context. The eschatological roots of Russian culture run much deeper, and are shared, in some form or another, by many other Judeo-Christian traditions. But Russia has undergone repeated catastrophes in recent history that are easily assimilated to an apocalyptic framework, most notably the October Revolution, World War II, and the end of the USSR.¹ It is this last event that makes apocalypse and catastrophe so relevant to the current literary and cultural scene. Russia after the dismantling of the Soviet Union has the dubious honor of being perhaps the only country in the world that is both pre- and post-apocalyptic at the same time. Despite the absence of bloodshed that accompanied the event, President Vladimir Putin would eventually call the collapse of the USSR the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century” (“Putin deplores” 2005). This is obvious hyperbole, but it reflects the trauma inflicted by the dissolution of the only sovereign state in which most of its population had ever lived. Yet this collapse did nothing to allay apocalyptic sentiments; if anything, it inflated them dramatically.

For the Putin Era, the 1990s represent an apocalypse that was narrowly averted, a decade of Russia teetering on the brink. This characterization required little imagination on Putin’s part; the culture industry was hell-bent on creating just this impression of chaos while the 1990s were still a going concern (Borenstein 2008: 2–3). With the Soviet Union gone, the culture seemed to be searching for the next candidate to be a threat to its successor state’s very existence. The media, already sensationalistic, become sensation-seeking, and the better part of the 1990s is devoted to this quest for catastrophe. Much has been made of the trauma of the Soviet collapse, but the early post-Soviet preoccupation with the next big disaster suggests not just a posttraumatic repetition compulsion, but perhaps even the possibility that the dismemberment of the Soviet Union was not traumatic enough.²

Russian literature spent much of the first two post-Soviet decades reprocessing and refining anxieties about national trauma, impending catastrophe, and the possible reimposition of totalitarian structures. It should come as no surprise that a topic so entangled with eschatological temporalities defies attempts at categorization according to neat historical periods. For writers of Russian fiction, the post-Soviet apocalypse is heralded by an event that turned the key elements of Soviet science-worship into the stuff of nuclear nightmare: the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl Atomic Power Station. Chernobyl establishes a compelling pattern for late- and post-Soviet catastrophe tales.³ Modernity itself fails ordinary

people, destroying institutions, compelling mass evacuation, and threatening public health in mysterious and unpredictable ways. Most important, catastrophe is largely *invisible*: we see its results (death, societal breakdown), but the event itself is always offstage. World War II may have been the formative trauma for generations of Soviet citizens, but it was a different type of horror: ubiquitous, unrelenting, and impossible not to see. It is the intangible Chernobyl that introduced Russia and the Soviet Union to postmodern catastrophe.

An examination of selected works by Liudmila Petrushevskaya (b.1938), Dmitry Glukhovskiy (b.1979), Vladimir Sorokin, and Tatyana Tolstaya (b.1951) reveals a number of elements critical to recent Russian fictional imaginings of the near future. First, we see the reinforcement of the Chernobyl model in the writers most directly concerned with catastrophe (Petrushevskaya, Tolstaya, and Glukhovskiy). Second is the reassertion of a cyclical model of history, in which the often dystopian future is established as a repetition of a familiar past. Third, we find an insistence on the inexplicable, often metaphysical nature of catastrophe, divorced from easily identifiable politics or recent history. Fourth, most of the works examined here add a self-referential or metafictional element to catastrophe, either using an apocalyptic scenario to comment on the fate of Russian literature, or showing literature's vulnerability to the collapse of supporting institutions. Nor can we ignore questions of genre: to what extent do contemporary Russian works of mainstream fiction find themselves in dialogue with the traditions of Western and Russian science fiction, and to what extent do they keep their distance?

Perestroika and Petrushevskaya: the process of elimination

Excrement should have been easy enough: she was to take a few pages from one of the books and go on those, and then throw this all out the window ... But the girl soon showed the signs of her spoiled upbringing. She was unable to defecate onto the pages as she was supposed to.

– Liudmila Petrushevskaya, “Hygiene.” (Petrushevskaya 2009: 32)

Perestroika inaugurated a new Soviet temporality, in which the previous two decades get characterized as Stagnation (*zastoi*), that is, time that functions as anti-time. Technically, time does pass, but it does not progress. By contrast, Perestroika was part of a trinity of Gorbachev-era buzz words, including the famous “glasnost” and the now-forgotten “uskorenie” (speeding up). Time was *supposed* to accelerate. Though

Perestroika ends up being as ideologically distant from Stalinism as possible, with the benefit of hindsight, its temporality looks rather like that of the Thirties: the fast-paced period between 1986 and 1991 is something of a Five-Year Lack of Plan. The pace of change during those five years was staggering, especially by contrast to the previous twenty. And it was Perestroika that intensified the latent strains of apocalypticism that already characterized Soviet culture: suddenly, the news went from all good (record-setting harvests, fabulously productive widget factories) to all bad (an earthquake in Armenia, nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, and rumors of coups and takeovers popping up at regular intervals). But it came to an end with a clumsy coup attempt and the December 1991 meeting that signed away the Soviet Union as if it were the unwanted issue of a no-fault divorce.

Though apocalypse and catastrophe had never been entirely absent from Russian literature in the twentieth century, Perestroika made the end times timely. Among the many writers to dip their toes into the apocalypse's proverbial lake of fire, it was Liudmila Petrushevskaya who, in just two deceptively simple short stories, gave catastrophe its literary respectability. Petrushevskaya's bleak tales from the late 1980s earned her a reputation as a writer of *chernukha*, the dismal neonaturalism that would come to dominate first high and then low culture in the Perestroika and post-Soviet period (Borenstein 2008: 7–23). Such a characterization is accurate thematically, even if it is based on an oversimplification of the author's tone (Petrushevskaya's biting humor sits uneasily within this framework). Petrushevskaya's stories of catastrophe, while technically straying from her familiar urban realism in favor of speculative fiction, could be understood as simply the distillation of the pessimism of so much of her fiction from that time. Indeed, this pair of stories contain such familiar Petrushevskian elements as family infighting, gross corporeality, and domestic claustrophobia. But "Hygiene" ("Gigiena," 1990) and "The New Robinson Crusoes" ("Novye Robinzony," 1989) deploy these tools to a different end (in every sense of the word). Straddling a thin line between context-heavy contemporary realism and a fairytale eternal present, Petrushevskaya gives her readers two visions of a world whose horizons are rapidly collapsing.

"Hygiene" tells the story of the multigenerational family "R," who wake up one morning in their apartment to find a bald young man at the door, explaining that their unnamed city has been struck by a lethal epidemic. The few survivors will all look like him (bald, pink skinned, with large eyes). Soon the young father starts making forays into town, looting and

killing offstage in order to bring home meager provisions. The grandfather makes plans to eat the family cat, but then discovers the toddler granddaughter kissing the cat's bloody mouth, which had just been chewing on an infected mouse. The girl is locked away in a room to slowly die, but it is the rest of the family who quickly succumb to the disease. When the bald young man returns, the only living person he finds is the now bald, pink-skinned little girl.

By contrast, "The New Robinson Crusoes" is something of a travel narrative. Here the unnamed family has escaped an unnamed catastrophe thanks to the foresight of the father (whose exceptional caution has led them to leave the city before everyone else). The family moves to the countryside and takes up farming, but also builds a backup shelter in case of a new disaster. Repeatedly, they move from one refuge to the other, always aware that there are hungry hordes behind them who may one day overtake them.

All of the action in "Hygiene" takes place in one small apartment, while "The New Robinson Crusoes" describes the title family's continuing dislocation as they search for a safe, isolated enclave where they can farm without fear of imminent attack by unseen refugees fleeing an unnamed disaster. But this apparent spatial difference unites the two stories more than it divides them, for each one responds to catastrophe with self-imposed isolation. In fact, the stories could swap titles with remarkable ease. The title "Hygiene" refers to both the advice given to the main characters (keep clean, stay away from mice) and the strategy taken by the authorities (quarantine), but as the story progresses, it takes on the broader connotations of avoiding any possible contact with disease carriers. That same strategy of avoidance is adopted by the new "Crusoes," for whom the latecomer refugees are essentially dangerous carriers of violence. As for "Hygiene," this story actually has a more solid connection to the genre invoked by the other: the "robinsonade" is typically an adventure tale about a person or persons stuck on a desert island. "The New Robinson Crusoes" has more "adventure" than "Hygiene," and includes certain essential familiar tropes (urbanites learning to work the land and make their own tools). But the quarantine established in "Hygiene" turns the family's very apartment into its own version of a desert island, requiring no less ingenuity than that shown by the "new Crusoes" (elaborate pulley systems for providing food and removing excrement, for example). Each family is trying to survive a metaphorical shipwreck. But if the modernists in the century's early decades could hope to overcome the "shipwreck of the nineteenth century" through the (re)construction of a new,

modern(ist) world, Petrushevskaya's stories leave little room to hope for renewal.⁴

Moreover, Petrushevskaya's vision has no room for a panoramic overview of worldwide destruction; by sticking to her traditionally smaller canvas (the extended family), she approaches global catastrophe entirely through synecdoche. For Petrushevskaya, all apocalypse is local. This small scale lends her stories an immediacy and a verisimilitude that might be difficult to sustain in a narrative that paid attention to world affairs. But by the same token, Petrushevskaya rejects the hyperrealism of conventional disaster narratives, in which continued references to the destruction of familiar landmarks (the White House in *Independence Day*, the Statue of Liberty in *Planet of the Apes*) as well as to the realia of the current moment aspire to a faux-documentary commitment to the "reality" of the fictional narrative. Petrushevskaya eschews place names and keeps time-bound references to a minimum ("The New Robinson Crusoes" briefly mentions an abandoned "Party office"). This level of abstraction has no doubt made them relatively timeless (as opposed to other now nearly-forgotten dystopias and catastrophes of roughly the same period, such as Alexander Kabakov's *No Return* (*Nevozvraschenets*, 1989) and Yuri Polyakov's *Demville* (*Demgorodok*, 1993)). Only the subtitle to "The New Robinson Crusoes" alludes to a greater scope: calling it "A Chronicle of the End of the 20th Century" allows for word play in both Russian and English (does "end" refer to calendar years, or to the downfall of an entire era?).

Each of the two stories in its own way conveys the collapse of culture and civilization. "The New Robinson Crusoes" finds its educated refugees from a dying city forced to learn agriculture from ignorant peasants, while "Hygiene" starts with the breakdown of basic human relationships (the family's treatment of the infected girl; the husband's rapid adaptation to a world that requires him to commit murder) and the casual destruction of the artifacts of high culture. As the above epigraph notes, the girl was supposed to use pages torn out of books when she had to defecate, but could not bring herself to do so. Her failure may well be a matter of a toddler's limited agility, but it can also double as an inadvertent ethical stance. It is telling (and understandable) that there is no handwringing on the adults' part when it comes to destroying the family library, but, as we shall see below, the fate of books is no indifferent matter to catastrophe tales. In this case, the needs of the body are put above the demands of the mind or spirit, but the resulting triumph of materialism is grim. When the previously rejected altruist returns to the apartment days later, he finds only

the “black mounds” (Petrushevskaya 2009: 35) that used to be the story’s adult protagonists, before discovering the surviving girl (the same girl who refused to desecrate her parents’ books). Her recovery from illness is a rare moment of optimism in this bleak tale; certainly, if the fact that not every single person dies constitutes a “happy end,” the bar has been set depressingly low.

Yet the bleakness of both of Petrushevskaya’s story is undercut by small, but important examples of exceptional human kindness. The girl’s recovery is also a rare moment of sentimentality in “Hygiene,” in that the story’s most innocent, positive characters (the girl and the bald young man) are the ones who survive. By the same token, the “new Robinson Crusoes,” while ostensibly valuing the family’s survival above all else, repeatedly add to their ranks, because they find themselves incapable of denying help to those who need it. In turn, the moral superiority of the survivors (however slight that superiority may be) cannot help but color the readers’ unconscious assumptions about those who succumb. Petrushevskaya’s catastrophes prove surprisingly biblical: the ark has room only for the righteous.

Tatyana Tolstaya’s *The Slynx* (2000): the idiocy of village life

When it’s forbidden to read books everybody takes care of them, they wrap them in a clean cloth and are afraid to breathe on them. But when reading is permitted, then they’ll probably break the spines or rip out pages! They’ll get it into their heads to throw books. No! You can’t trust people.

– Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx* (2003: 259)

Petrushevskaya’s “The New Robinson Crusoes” gestures in the direction of a future that returns to the past. Surely any scenario that depopulates the cities and consigns their population to subsistence farming can safely be considered “backwards-looking,” and all the more so in a nominally Marxist country. But this is a move to a presumably universal past, a move that follows logically from the situation in which the characters find themselves. Moreover, Petrushevskaya’s stories are set either mid-catastrophe or in the immediate aftermath; the characters themselves are in no position to think about the future in any terms other than day-to-day survival.

After Petrushevskaya, other Russian writers would set their works at a remove of one or more generations, and posit a catastrophic or dystopian future that was anything but progressive; in these cases, however, the slide into the past is more a matter of national history than it is of technological

sophistication. Here these writers reveal their distance from the conventions of science fiction: a self-consciously postapocalyptic or dystopian novel that situates itself within this generic framework would work hard to make the posited future seem socially, historically, and technologically motivated. That is, for such a text to work as science fiction, the path from “today” to the “future” would seem at least plausible, if not probable. Tatyana Tolstaya has entirely different concerns.

Even more than Petrushevskaya, Tolstaya was an unlikely writer to turn to postapocalyptic fiction. She came to fame in the 1980s with a set of mostly short stories unfolding in everyday settings, exquisitely crafted miniatures whose appearance would soon become a rare treat. Throughout the 1990s, Tolstaya split her time between Russia and the United States, and her essays, book reviews, and opinion pieces appeared with far greater frequency than her fiction. She had been working on her first (and, to date, only) novel long enough to raise doubts about its existence, let alone its completion. When *The Slynx* (*Kys*) finally appeared in 2000, it was a publishing event that matched the year’s overall millenarian expectations. The novel’s setting, 200 years in the future after an unexplained catastrophe, could almost be a sly nod to the author’s own career trajectory.

The Slynx takes place in a town built on the ruins of Moscow, now called Fyodor-Kuzmichsk after its paramount leader. As a result of the Blast (*Vzryv*), most of the population is plagued by Consequences, mutations presumably caused by radiation. The few survivors of the pre-Blast world (known as the Oldeners, or *Prezhnie*) are virtually immortal – they can be killed by accident or violence, but otherwise they neither age nor die. The protagonist is Benedikt, who has the prestigious job of transcribing the few old books to survive the destruction of the old world. He would rather have been a more literal keeper of the flame – no one knows how to make a fire, so the person responsible for keeping a fire going is particularly respected. That the two choices are complementary is in itself significant.

The world of *The Slynx* is a postapocalyptic variation on the feudal system in general, and the Russian feudal past in particular. The lowest order in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk (a name that is almost as ungainly in Russian as it is in English) are serfs, literally lorded over by the town’s masters. Kudayar Kudayarovich Kudayarov, the “Head Sanituriion” (*Glavnyi Sanitar*), leads a law-enforcement organization redolent of both Stalin’s terror and Ivan the Terrible’s *oprichnina*. Everyone in town is terrified of the legendary “slynx,” an animal whose Russian name is a combination of “lynx” and the equivalent of “Here kitty-kitty.” The lynx supposedly stalks the northern

woods, but danger lurks much closer to home. Benedikt marries into Kudayarov's family and reluctantly helps him stage a coup, realizing too late that the Head Sanituriion represents the greatest danger to his world.

Russian critics are divided as to whether or not *The Slynx* constitutes an "anti-utopia" (a term that, in Russian, is even broader than the much-misused "dystopia" in English). And with good reason: as Natalia Ivanova (2001) and Mark Lipovetsky (2001) argue, *The Slynx* is much more concerned with commenting on the Russian intelligentsia and traditional Russian logocentrism than it is in serving as a political cautionary tale. The temporal gap between *The Slynx* and the novel's initial readers is the same as that posited by Zamyatin in *We*, but the functions of these two novels could not be more different (Clowes 2011: 37). Even an allegorical reading of *The Slynx* fails to point to any reasonably probable alarming future. Instead, *The Slynx* fits more comfortably within the broader genre that spawned both utopia and dystopia: satire.

And yet the impulse to distance *The Slynx* from dystopia (or anti-utopia) is worthy of examination in and of itself. Reading *The Slynx* as a dystopia threatens the novel with its own distinct belatedness. Ironically for a book that posits a backwards-looking future, *The Slynx* as dystopia could easily be dismissed as a dissident relic of the Cold War and Soviet times: such classic dystopias as *We* and *1984* were nourished on the fear of a totalitarian threat, while Russian literature in the Yeltsin years had been taking a much-deserved rest from decades of ideological burdens. If we also recall that Tolstaya's original inspiration for the novel was the Chernobyl disaster, then *The Slynx* is not just untimely; the book is quite simply overdue. Nor does appealing to the broader realm of science fiction help Tolstaya's case. The semiliterate narration was prefigured by Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), while neither radiation-induced mutation nor an ignorant reverence for the printed page is remotely novel (cf. Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s 1960 *A Canticle for Leibowitz*). The mutations themselves cannot hold up to the slightest scrutiny, and the Oldeners' immortality is utterly nonsensical, at least within a science fictional framework.

Such niggling complaints do Tolstaya an injustice, and that is precisely the point. Tolstaya teases her readers with familiar dystopian tropes, but refuses to make them add up to anything so simple. Both utopias and dystopias have a long-established epistemological masterplot that combines Plato's Allegory of the Cave with the myth of Prometheus (Morson 1981: 88–90). Traveling to utopia is a journey to wisdom, and returning from utopia necessitates the often vain attempt to keep the flame

of wisdom alive, bringing it back in the hopes of sharing it with others. Dystopia is also the story of the acquisition of wisdom, but with conspiratorial overtones: it is wisdom that is being deliberately hidden by a regime built on lies (or hoarded, like the stoker's flames in *The Slynx*). Within the fictional framework, the wisdom acquired in utopia is usually experiential or discursive; that is, it can be transmitted dynamically, through demonstration or oral speech. Dystopian wisdom tends to require access to static media that are better suited to preservation – in particular, books. This focus on preservation is something dystopias share with postapocalyptic fiction more broadly (since catastrophe all but obliterates history). Hence the reverence for the printed word, raised almost to the level of fetish: the illuminated manuscripts of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*; the lost book containing the word “I” in Ayn Rand's *Anthem*; the complete works of Shakespeare in *Brave New World*; Goldstein's admittedly falsified counterrevolutionary tract in 1984; and virtually every book ever printed in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Dystopias are an extended plea on behalf of the printed word, while utopias are books to end all books.⁵

The Slynx revisits the book-as-fetish only to interrogate it. Previous dystopias essentially treat old books as taboo: the fact that they are forbidden elevates them to virtually totemic power. Books also leave room for optimism, raising the possibility that postapocalyptic survivors might learn from them and rebuild the best of the past. In other words, postapocalyptic dystopias can recapitulate the power and danger that books usually get only through the apparatus of censorship. In *The Slynx*, all books are banned, but in both senses of this polysemous word; they are too dangerous to be entrusted to ordinary people in their homes, but too precious to be damaged, destroyed, or entirely forgotten (Agamben 1998: 28). When the inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk fear the presumably radioactive danger of “Oldenprint” books, Tolstaya is subverting the traditional prometheanism that the book embodies for the dystopian tradition: the light these books bring may well be deadly.

Like Zamyatin's *We* (*My*, 1921), *The Slynx* repeatedly refers to its own status as text, but in a much less direct fashion than D-504's journal.⁶ The book's chapter titles come from old-fashioned pronunciations of all the letters in the Russian alphabet (including those removed by the Soviet orthography reform of 1917–18). In form, *The Slynx* is a *bukvar*, a book used to teach children the alphabet, and, by extension, literacy. Benedikt himself is repeatedly accused of illiteracy by the “Dissident” Lev Lvovich, in terms that recall the novel's form: “You don't know

your ABCs”; “You haven’t learned the alphabet of life. Of life, do you hear me?” Benedikt is appalled: “Do you know how many books I’ve read? How many I’ve copied?” But Lev Lvovich is unrelenting, and hurls an accusation that crystallizes the role books have acquired in post-Blast Moscow: “You don’t really know how to read, books are of no use to you. They’re just empty page-turning, a collection of letters” (Tolstaya 2003: 227).

Books can be preserved for future generations, but the preservation only pays off if one assumes that they will reach an audience who can understand them. One of the most familiar clichés of Russian book reviews asks whether a book “will find its reader.” Transposed into the terms of *The Slynx*, that question becomes: can the book be truly understood as something other than mere words? Will the future reader have the intellect, spirit, and context to do something with it, other than protect or destroy it? These are not abstract questions for Tolstaya, or for her own post-Soviet milieu. The Soviet Union, which prided itself on reading more than any other country, had yielded to a Russian Federation that changed the status of reading forever.⁷ On the one hand, more books were in circulation, but most of them were the sort that intellectuals could not take seriously; meanwhile, “serious” books were published in ever smaller print runs, with competition from mass-market books (not to mention film, television, the internet, and gaming) diminishing the chances that such a book could make a difference.

The Slynx reproduces the idolatry of a logocentric, book-worshipping culture; even Pushkin is reduced to a literal wooden idol. The surviving Oldeners speak the language of the Soviet intelligentsia, and their endless preoccupation with completely irrelevant concerns (party cards, dissidence, whether or not “the West will come to our aid”) renders them laughable. Lev Lvovich’s accusations against Benedikt are completely on target: after gaining unfettered access to Oldenprint books, all Benedikt wants to do is alphabetize them, resulting in a pages-long list of titles and authors whose humor and pathos come from their senseless juxtaposition. Like post-Soviet Russia, Fyodor-Kuzmichsk turns out to be awash with books, but these books can do no good for anyone. Scriptures here are not sacred; instead, they are the textual equivalent of the golden calf. The books are taboo, in Freud’s sense of the term: objects of both worship and terror, they are the final form taken by the unexamined elitism of the intelligentsia: the repression of all culture.

**Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* (2010):
last books and neverending stories**

... two grey humped figures emerged from behind the corner of the building he and Daniel were in. They made their way slowly across the courtyard, as if they were searching for something. Suddenly, one of the creatures stopped and raised its head, and Artyom felt as if it was looking directly at the window at which he was standing. [...]

“Librarians?” he whispered with alarm, also squatting so as not to be visible from the street.

– Dmitry Glukhovsky, *Metro 2033* (Glukhovsky 2010)

What more appropriate antagonists could there be for a transmedia project that includes novels, interactive web sites, and video games than mutated, bloodthirsty librarians? Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* shares Tolstaya's vague postnuclear scenario, her preoccupation with human degeneration, and her transposition of old or current cultural trends into an imaginary future. Its connection to books and literacy, however, is more ambiguous. *Metro 2033* in all its myriad formats is a thoroughly digital phenomenon, ranging from first-person narrator to first-person shooter. Initiated on the author's blog before its expansion and publication as a book, *Metro 2033* has migrated from platform to platform: audiobooks, eBooks, paper books, comics, and, most famously, video games (now on PC, Xbox, and Steam). It has spawned sequels (*Metro 2034*, with *Metro 2035* on the way), made its way through film development hell, and served as the basis for an expanded set of fictional publications: the multi-authored novels and short stories published as “The Universe of Metro 2033” (59 volumes and counting).

Though the franchise began in prose, its continual transmedia metamorphoses undermine both traditional logocentrism and Romantic notions of the autonomous author. The online versions of the books appear long before their print publication, giving the chance for readers to comment, make suggestions, and contribute to the franchise's world-building project (through art and music). By contrast, Tolstaya's novel has won a great deal of acclaim, but one would be hard pressed to find *Slynx* fan-fiction.

Set only twenty years after a nuclear holocaust (as opposed to *The Slynx's* 200), *Metro 2033* offers more possibilities for the survivors to encounter the remains of the past. The premise is appealingly simple: the survivors of the war have taken refuge in Moscow's vast metro system, devolving into clans centered around the various stations. Under constant threat by

mutated rats and the mysterious Dark Ones (“*Chernye*”), about whom little is known, they live in a state of continuous military readiness. The novel’s hero, Artyom, was rescued from a rat attack as a small child and raised by a man at the VDNKh station. Now an adult, Artyom meets a mysterious man named Hunter (“*Khanter*”), who sends him on a quest to stop the Dark Ones. After a series of adventures and misadventures, Artyom finds his way to Ostankino Tower, from where he can fire missiles at the Botanical Gardens and destroy the Dark Ones forever. In a twist straight out of Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* (1985), Artyom learns that the Dark Ones meant no harm, but his discovery comes too late.

On the whole, *Metro 2033* is much less book-haunted than *The Slynx* – among the many aspects of the novel that could be considered a critique of contemporary Russia is the portrayal of the surviving humans as a largely postliterate society. When the possibility of a powerful, virtually magic book is raised two-thirds of the way through the novel, one could easily dismiss it as just another talisman to be collected in a tale whose structure owed much to video games long before it was adapted into one. The hunt for a particular book (or “*Book*”) owes as much to the novel’s concern for Moscow architecture as to anything else: the *Book* can only be found in the Russian State Library. Whether the Library itself has become a source of magic, or whether its mystique is a function of the survivors’ ignorance remains unclear. Most of the information about the Library is provided by Artyom’s traveling companion, Daniel, who approaches his topic with all the reverence of a cargo cultist: “The card catalogue,” said Daniel quietly, looking around with reverence. “The future can be foretold using these drawers. The initiated know how. After a ritual, you blindly pick one of the cabinets, then randomly pull on a drawer and take any card. If the ritual is properly performed, then the name of the book will foretell your future, provide a warning, or predict success.”

But Daniel’s attitude towards the Library proves justified, at least as far as the feral Librarians are concerned. They clearly have paranormal abilities, and when they gut Daniel with their bare claws, they somehow read his mind and ventriloquize his words. Typically, Glukhovskiy seems to want to have it both ways: to affirm the magic while also indulging in bathos. As Daniel dies, he gives Artyom a “bloodstained pasteboard rectangle ... the card Daniel had taken out of the card catalogue drawer in the vestibule. The card read: ‘Shnurkov, N.E., Irrigation and the prospects for agriculture in the Tadzhik SSR. Dushanbe, 1965.’ They come to the Library in search of a book that tells the future, but only find a bibliographic reference to a maximally irrelevant relic of the past.”⁸

Like Tolstaya, Glukhovsky uses his end-times scenario for satirical purposes, transforming the Moscow metro system into a microcosm of Russian historical, political, and intellectual trends. Here, too, the search for verisimilitude pays few dividends; the bands of survivors at the various stations display an unlikely sense of history and irony. The ring line (the metro's outer belt, which connects with all the other lines) is managed by a coalition of trading partners who call themselves the "Hanseatic League." The red line is controlled by unreconstructed communists (naturally); the remaining scientists and intellectuals are called "Brahmins"; a religious retreat run by fanatics is called the Watchtower; and the majority of metro society is in conflict with fascists who actually call themselves the Fourth Reich. The agenda behind *Metro 2033*'s taxonomy is not a realist one, nor is it, strictly speaking, science fictional; realism would put a premium on the postcatastrophic order's psychological and political plausibility, while science fiction would apply similar principles in the name of "world-building." This is not to say that *Metro 2033* does not "work," but it works according to the principles of its author's satirical worldview and agenda, as well as the canons of computer games.

As with *The Slynx*, Glukhovsky's debt to Chernobyl is obvious, but there is a crucial difference. *Metro 2033* situated itself within a particular Russian science fiction tradition, first borrowing from it, but then pushing it forward. The world of *Metro 2033* includes the now-ubiquitous "stalkers," men who venture out of the subway system for valuable goods and intelligence. The inspiration is, of course, the Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic* (*Piknik na obochine*, 1971) and its adaptation by Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker* (1979). Though "stalker" is originally an English word, its use in Russian is quite specific (lacking, for example, the connection with sexual predation). When adopted by Glukhovsky for what turned out to be the first international transmedia hit to come out of the former Soviet Union, the stalker becomes a fixture of post-Soviet science fictional adventure, as ubiquitous as the robot was to Golden Age American science fiction. The example of *Metro 2033* inspired another transmedia project that has grown even bigger than Glukhovsky, a work of stalker-like salvage and bricolage that combines all the primary tropes of post-Soviet, postapocalyptic entertainment: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is a set of Ukrainian made, Russian language first-person shooters that have also become a successful series of novels and comics. Returning to the primal scene of Soviet catastrophe, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* unapologetically "borrows" the basic scenario outlined by the Strugatsky brothers and Tarkovsky, but with a crucial difference: now the "zone of exclusion" into which the

stalkers venture is not the byproduct of an alien incursion, but the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. The postapocalyptic future looks more and more like a nightmare reconstituted out of the Soviet past.

Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006): word and deed

I look at the fire. And see *The Idiot* and *Anna Karenina* in flames. I have to say – they burn well.

– Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik* (2011: 115)

Tolstaya and Glukhovsky turn their novels into palimpsests of Russia's history or, perhaps more pointedly, they implicitly argue that the Russia in which they live is itself a palimpsest. In Tolstaya and Glukhovsky, the past is both dead *and* ever-present: their future worlds are littered with the debris of history, and contaminated by irrelevant ideologies as invisible and deadly as the radiation that poisons their environment. Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* draws its satirical power from the simultaneity of the present and the past, but is not, strictly speaking, postapocalyptic or postcatastrophic. In a novel that much more clearly fits the category of dystopia, Sorokin invents a world that has either avoided catastrophe or constitutes the catastrophe itself.

On the surface, *Day of the Oprichnik* renders literal the banal conception that Russian history is doomed to repeat itself. Every Russian leader whose policies begin to look repressive is suspected of being the second coming of Stalin or the third coming of Ivan the Terrible (with Stalin as the second). At the very least, Stalin and Ivan the Terrible are convenient shorthand. Sorokin, who had already resurrected Stalin (after a fashion) in his scandalous 1999 novel *Blue Lard* (*Goluboe salo*), casts his net back further, to Ivan's time. Now the future of Russia is modeled on Ivan's notorious *oprichnina*, the period from 1565 to 1572, when a premodern secret police (the *oprichniki*) enforced violent and repressive policies over a large swath of Russian territory. Rather than resort to a standard dystopian plot (focusing on a repressed citizen trying to be free) or a close portrait of a tyrant, Sorokin complicates matters by telling the story entirely from the point of view of one of the secret policemen themselves. Komyaga is neither rank-and-file nor is he the paramount leader of the oprichniks, and his story (like that of its structural model, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 1962 *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* [*Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha*]) unfolds over the course of a day that presumably differs little from any other work day. Komyaga does not encounter a mysterious and alluring woman who seduces him to the

other side (as in Zamyatin, Orwell, and countless other dystopian novels), nor do his sometimes gruesome tasks oblige him to reconsider the oprichnik system and his role in it. The novel is dystopian only for the reader; for Komyaga, life is precisely as it should be.

As a secret policeman responsible for rape, torture, and murder, Komyaga is a sadist, but that sadism seems to be a function of his work, and of his love for the postmodern medieval order that he upholds. His country is ruled by a tsar, and protected from the West by a Russian version of the Great Wall of China established after the time of the “White Troubles” (presumably, the 1990s). The social system is clearly feudal, with an aristocracy that is, like Ivan the Terrible’s, always vulnerable to persecution by the oprichniks, and servants whose docility and peasant speech mark them as essentially serfs. Yet despite these obvious medieval models, the novel’s setting is far more futuristic than any of the others discussed in the present chapter: the advanced technology, including human/machine interfaces, is borrowed from cyberpunk fiction. Tolstaya and Glukhovsky present backwards-facing social orders that fit seamlessly within a demolished technological base, but Sorokin shows that modernization and authoritarianism are just as good a match.

Like them, Sorokin includes numerous nods to present-day realia and ideological debates; indeed, he goes further, by including Western “Radio Liberty”-style broadcasts of dissident thinkers with names that are obvious in-jokes to the Russian reader: Mikhail Ryklin’s *Derrida in Moscow* becomes Rykunin’s *Where Did Derrida Dine?*; Boris Grois’s argument about Russia as the subconscious of the West is transformed into “Borukh Gross ... babbl[ing] about America, which has become the subconscious of China, and about China, now the subconscious of Russia, and about Russia, which has still not become even its own subconscious” (Sorokin 2011: 122). But these writers and thinkers are now as irrelevant as the book about Tadzhik irrigation in *Metro 2033*, albeit for different reasons: faced with an organized, brutally repressive state apparatus, all that these men and women can offer is words, hence the book-burning scene during Komyaga’s visit to a clairvoyant. In direct contradiction to the Romantic slogan from Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*, 1940) “Manuscripts don’t burn,” Komyaga notes, “In general, books burn well. Manuscripts go like gunpowder” (Sorokin 2011: 115). Komyaga is initially discomfited to see the classics go up in flames:

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky’s *Idiot* is burning. It started with the ends, now the cover is smoking. The clairvoyant again signals the servant. He

tosses another book on the fire: Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; it lies there awhile, then suddenly flares. I watch, bewitched.

"What you looking at? You never burned books?"

"We burn only harmful books, Praskovia Mamontovna. Obscene and subversive books."

"And you think these are useful?"

"The Russian classics are helpful to the state."

"Dovey, books should only be practical: about carpentry, stove-building, contracting, electricity, shipbuilding, mechanical engineering, artificial hearing, on weaving and sheaving, on casting and basting, on foundries on boundaries, on plastic and mastic."

I don't argue with her. I'm wary. She is always right. (2011: 114)

The clairvoyant's dismissal of fiction would appear to be the inverse of Tolstaya's book-worshipping world after the Blast, but it also reinforces some of *The Slynx's* satire of traditional Russian logocentrism. Tolstaya's future presupposes a cult-like obsession with the preservation of the printed word, even if this is at the expense of deriving any real value from a book's contents. Sorokin simply takes matters to their logical extreme by doing away with novels entirely. Books are not the last hope for a post-dystopian future. They are just words on paper, no match for the cudgel or the fist.

In imagining a clearly repressive future, Sorokin revives the traditional anxieties of dystopian fiction. This works not only because of the writer's talent, but because he, unlike Tolstaya and Glukhovsky, clearly has a contemporary target in mind, and a possible political future to beware. *Day of the Oprichnik* is a Putinist dystopia, a book whose resonance is made possible by the increasing centralization of power and an incipient cult of personality. Dystopia works best when it has a specific contemporary scenario from which to extrapolate. Fortunately for Sorokin (but unfortunately for his readers), the reflexively conservative policies of Putin's third term made *Day of the Oprichnik* timely.⁹ The constant emphasis on Russia's "traditional" values and the pernicious influence of a decadent, liberal West combined with a wide range of laws bent on cordoning off the Russian Federation from its perceived enemies (restrictions on dual citizenship, foreign adoptions, foreign investment in media outlets, and even the physical location of servers under the ".ru" and ".rf" internet domains) are all trends consistent with the spirit of Sorokin's *Oprichnik*.¹⁰

Dystopian and postapocalyptic fiction has proven to be quite productive in the post-Soviet literary landscape. Tolstaya, Glukhovsky, and Sorokin

link anxieties over the fate of the world with fears about the fate of fiction. In doing so, they have deployed pessimism about the future of Russia in the service of optimism about the future of literature. The intelligentsia's fears about the decline of what the American publishing industry calls "literary fiction" easily lent themselves to apocalyptic expression. Yet stories of the end times have proven consistently popular. Dystopia and the apocalypse can function as the perfect synthesis of "high" and "low," since they have worked on both sides of this cultural divide for decades, if not centuries. The same intellectuals in the early 1990s who agonized over Russia's literary future would have been hard-pressed to come up with a scenario in which Tolstaya and Sorokin could be considered best-selling authors. Tales of humanity struggling to survive have been a boon to highbrow writers struggling to survive.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of apocalypticism in Russian history and culture, see Bethea (1989).
- 2 On the post-Soviet trauma, see Oushakine (2009) and Shevchenko (2008).
- 3 For more on the cultural ramifications of the Chernobyl disaster, see Petryna (2013) and Phillips (2004).
- 4 On shipwrecks as a common metaphor for modernity, see Cavanagh (1997: 13–17).
- 5 This trend can be traced back to one of the earliest European utopias, Tomasso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1602). The citizens of Campanella's perfect society are educated by reading and rereading the sum of the world's important knowledge, which has been literally set in stone on the city's walls. The City has only one book, which they call "Wisdom" (Campanella 1899: 221).
- 6 D-503 turns his own manuscript into something of a fetish object, though with less reverence and more metaphysical confusion, in *Wz*. See Borenstein 1996: 678–80.
- 7 On the transformation of Russian reading habits in the new market economy, see Menzel 2005: 39–56.
- 8 Here Glukhovskiy echoes Walter M. Miller Jr.'s *Canticle for Leibowitz*, in which the banal notes of an atomic scientist take on the status of holy writ after a nuclear holocaust.
- 9 As early as 2012, Sorokin lamented that his book was becoming far too relevant (Aleksandrov 2012).
- 10 The parallels are not lost on Russian commentators, who have repeatedly invoked Sorokin's novel in connection with Putin's policies. See, for example Arkhangel'skii (2014).