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Rethinking the Canon: Nonconformist Soviet Classics in Post-Soviet Perspective

Alexander Zholkovsky

I. The Problem of Reinterpretation

In the four-plus decades since Stalin's death, the Soviet literary canon has undergone a series of changes. Thus, Fedor Dostoyevsky, Konstantin Leontiev, and Apollon Grigoriev, seen in all their complexity, gradually resumed their pride of place in nineteenth-century literary history, while Gogol was allowed to be more of a conservative thinker and modernist stylist than during the period of High Stalinism. Twentieth-century literature welcomed back the early Vladimir Maiakovsky, then all of Aleksandr Blok (previously represented in the Soviet canon only by his *The Twelve*), and finally the entire Silver Age. The list of writers now rehabilitated, republished, and "recognized" included (in alphabetical order) Anna Akhmatova, Isaak Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, Ivan Bunin, Nikolai Gumiliev, Leonid Dobychin, Osip Mandelstam, Vladimir Nabokov, the Oberiu writers, Boris Pasternak, Boris Pilniak, Andrei Platonov, Aleksei Remizov, Vasilii Rozanov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Marina Tsvetaeva, Konstantin Vaginov, Mikhail Zoshchenko -- writers who had emigrated, been executed, or died in the Gulag, committed suicide, been banned, or otherwise fallen silent and thus, to use Roman Jakobson's apt formulation, had been in one way or another "squandered" by the Soviet system.

At the same time, members of the standard Socialist Realist set (such as Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Maiakovsky, and Mikhail Sholokhov) were pushed aside, and along with them such "controversial," even partially censored writers as Ilya Ilf and Evgenii Petrov, whose writing and opinions were now shown to possess some "Soviet" overtones. Various pre-revolutionary classics were also subjected to close scrutiny -- for instance, Leo Tolstoy, anointed by Lenin as "the mirror of the Russian Revolution." This "second-wave" revisionism deserves particular attention because it incriminates certain authors for their "Soviet" bent -- authors who, in their own time, suffered from Soviet literary, ideological, and often physical repression themselves and only recently had been integrated fully into the Soviet canon thanks to the efforts of liberal literary criticism -- be it Thaw-inspired, dissident, or Perestroika-style. Elements of "Sovietness" had been more or less apparent in the work of many authors (such as Blok in his later writings, Maiakovsky, Babel, Platonov, Bulgakov, Zoshchenko, Ilf and Petrov), while in others these strains came under scrutiny only after a

spate of specialized recent studies.

A telling sign of the fact that former nonconformists have been relegated to the ranks of Soviet "classics" now in need of de-mythologizing is the widespread absorption of these texts by the intellectual milieu, indeed, their cento-style quoting and other kinds of ironic treatment as mass-culture phenomena in the works of Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, Timur Kibirov, Tatiana Tolstaya, Viktor Erofeev, and other postmodernists. To paraphrase a well-known formula, the denizens of the dissident Parnassus, having already died once a tragic death at the hands of Stalinists, must now suffer a second, farcical annihilation in postmodern literary discourse. Making theoretical sense of these developments appears to be among the most acute problems facing literary scholarship today.

The intellectual tools of such reinterpretation include the concepts of: a common spirit of a cultural period (*der Zeitgeist*); the avant-garde's mutation into Socialist Realism (according to *Groys 1992*); Aesopian language (*Loseff 1984*); the art of adaptation (*Zholkovsky 1994*); the Stockholm syndrome (whereby victims appropriate their oppressors' ideology); analogies with classics censored in the nineteenth century, such as Pushkin; and so on. These approaches help identify the affinities, both deliberate and accidental, between official discourse and that of the opposition. The ambitious task is to state and correlate with the Soviet context not only, or rather, not so much the nonconformist classics' "abstract-humanist," "a-Soviet" worldview, as their various more specific attitudes (invariants of their poetic worlds, their strategies of self-presentation, etc.), which created quite complicated interrelationships of resistance-cum-symbiosis vis-a-vis the environment. Significantly, both the subjective life-creation scripts staged by the authors and the objective conditions under which they had to operate (see *Paperno and Grossman 1994*) shared many common ideological roots that may be traced back to the cultural soil of the Silver Age and even further back, into the nineteenth century: Russian orthodox communality (*sobornost'*), religious renaissance, Dionysianism, Nietzscheanism, intelligentsia's sense of guilt before "the people," nihilism (in the sense of *Frank 1977 [1909]*), devotion to the idea of "progress," and so on.

The received liberal view of nonconformist classics such as Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Pasternak, Bulgakov, Zoshchenko, and others presents them either as innocent victims of the regime or as its wise and perspicacious critics, forced to make unpleasant compromises with it, yet virtually untouched by its noxious ideology. Obviously, these two simplistic

versions contradict one another. Moreover, the first, "innocent" view, laced with the Aesopian spirit of protecting nonconformists from official attacks, carries within itself the seed of understanding their "Soviet" nature, while the second, "perspicacious" one inadvertently links up with the traditional Soviet view, which justly charged the future classics with varying degrees of ideological incorrectness, at times performing this task with solid professionalism and bringing to light their important creative idiosyncrasies (see, for example, *Gurvich 1994* on Platonov, where a political denunciation of the writer is based on an insightful analysis of his poetics that retains much of its value to this day). The ironic proximity of today's post-Soviet liberal reevaluations to their mutually contradictory Soviet-time assessments is a matter of record. This concurrence should not cause embarrassment. Rather, it is to be acknowledged, critically examined, and overcome through serious analysis instead of rhetorical evasion.

Such revisions have already been attempted and yielded valuable results, as applied to Bulgakov (see *Ikramov*), Mandelstam's later work (see *Freidin 1987* , *Gasparov 1996*), and a few other nonconformist classics. In this study, I will focus on three writers: Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko (both of whom were subjected to harsh attacks in the notorious 1946 speech by Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's cultural commissar, and the corresponding decree of the Party's Central Committee, dictated by Stalin himself; see *Zhdanov 1978*) and Boris Pasternak (world-famous for the 1958 official -- allegedly "popular" -- baiting that was unleashed upon him after the publication abroad of his *Doctor Zhivago* followed by the awarding of the Nobel Prize). I have written about each of the three, and it is to those items that the interested reader is referred for the sources of the generalizations that follow (*Zholkovsky 1996*).

I. Mikhail Zoshchenko (1894-1958)

1. Conventional interpretations

Zoshchenko scholarship is comprised of several monographs and various materials on his life and work (by scholars such as *Volpe 1991 [1940]*, *Chudakova 1979*, *Dolinsky 1991*, *Scatton 1993*, *Tomashevsky 1994*, *Groznova 1997*, *Carleton 1998*), collections of memoirs by his contemporaries (*Tomashevsky 1995*), and an ever-growing body of articles and book chapters (see especially *Popkin 1993*). A gradual movement away from critical reactions in the public press and toward more objective , scholarly approaches has generated a wide spectrum of interpretations, which can be roughly reduced to the four following

categories.

(1) The Accusatory Interpretation: Soviet Orthodox. According to this view (see *Voronskii 1994, Zhdanov 1978, Gurshtein 1994*), Zoshchenko, like his fictional characters, represents the retrograde, apolitical, at times even anti-Soviet ideology of *meshchanstvo* («petty bourgeoisie, lower middle class»). His satire of Soviet life's day-to-day flaws is not always ideologically correct, his plots revolve around banal realities of life in communal apartments, and his language reflects the vulgar, uncultured speech of the lower middle class. Zoshchenko occupies a marginal place in literature; despite his popular success, he is doomed to eventual obscurity as communal life recedes from everyday experience.

Zoshchenko, therefore, would be well advised to change his thematic bent, ideology, and style -- otherwise, he would risk the label of a class enemy, maligning the Soviet way of life. During the 1930s, he managed this to some degree: visiting and reporting on a Stalinist construction site (the notorious Belomor Canal, built by Gulag prisoners), writing "idea-driven" stories, using cleaner and simpler language, etc. However, by the 1940s, he showed his true face -- the mug of an anti-Soviet "petty-bourgeois" (a persona which came out in *Before Sunrise*, in "The Adventures of a Monkey," at the meeting with British students, and in his speech to the follow-up convention of Leningrad writers). For these anti-Soviet stances Zoshchenko paid the price of official condemnation, in 1943, 1946, and again in 1954.

(2) A Justificatory Interpretation: Aesopian. In this view (see e.g. *Chukovskii 1995, Volpe, Moldavskii 1977*), Zoshchenko was not an enemy of the state and people, but rather a well-intentioned fellow-traveler who, moved gradually further and further into the Soviet camp. His characters, plots, and language did not directly express his opinions, but were targets of his satire, which was necessary in the struggle for the new man and new society. Hence his narrative disguise and lowbrow skaz manner -- they concealed the true face of a noble satirist, which was entirely separate from the ugly mug of his petty, opportunistic characters -- the Zoshchenkovian types.

Zoshchenko's subject matter changed along with socialism's successes, but the hold of the past (on Soviet reality) is so strong that his creations will endure for a long while. As his style evolved, so did the directness of his authorial voice. However, Zoshchenko the storyteller towers above Zoshchenko the moralist, would-be spiritual healer and confessing Freudian exhibitionist. Zoshchenko's didacticism is part and parcel of the

similar common mistake of many Russian writers, among them Nikolai Gogol and Leo Tolstoy; the pinnacle of his work lies in the short stories of the 1920s and '30s and the *Skyblue Book*.

A particular variant of the justificatory view is the formalist (*Kazanski, and Tynianov 1928, Shklovsky 1976*). Avoiding ideological formulas, this view focuses exclusively on Zoshchenko's linguistic devices of parodic deautomatization of style, declaring discourse (*siuzhet*), not story (or plot, *fabula*) to be the only relevant aspect of Zoshchenko's writing and thus relegating his narrators and other characters to the role of *motivirovka*s -- props that naturalize his skaz narrative. Zoshchenko's place in the literary process becomes quite firmly assured, alongside such great reformers of style as Stern, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Leskov. However, the formalist school did not survive to witness Zoshchenko's later, "serious" work.

(3) An Academic Interpretation: Cultural-Sociological. This view combines elements of both justificatory approaches in the context of current scholarship, with an emphasis on various aspects of Zoshchenko's metacultural play with extant discourses. Sometimes it is his satirical stance that comes to the forefront of discussion. Thus Shcheglov (who develops the tradition of seeing in Zoshchenko a critical exposure of the new petty bourgeoisie) presents Zoshchenko as an ethnographer observing the Soviet way of life -- compiling an entire "encyclopedia of an un-culture" (see *Shcheglov 1997 [1986], 1999*). According to Cathy Popkin (developing the tradition of seeing in Zoshchenko a saboteur of Soviet clichés), the essence of the author's style lies in his "petty" plots -- his "poetics of insignificance," opposed to the official monumental aesthetic (*Popkin 1993*). Elsewhere (in the spirit of the formalist tradition), the emphasis is on the open-ended, almost Bakhtinesque polyphony and postmodern ambiguity of Zoshchenko's narratives, again dismissing the plots themselves as irrelevant (*Chudakova 1979, Carleton 1998*).

Scholars such as Volpe and Chudakova note Zoshchenko's gradual development toward undisguised autobiographical writing and a direct, personal narrative voice, but their place in Zoshchenko's poetics and in the overall spectrum of the era's discourses remains unclear. Theoretically, his previously cryptic discourse should be valued higher than his newfound forthrightness, yet historically, Zoshchenko's direct manner in *Before Sunrise* and its recent official banishment surround it with an aura of prestige. Some see a solution of this quandary in detecting cryptic meaning even in that supposedly plain stylistics as well, in particular, by dint of dissecting the person of the "author" of *Before*

Sunrise into a protagonist, a psychotherapist, and a narrator, and discovering complicated relations (including those of "censorship," in both the Freudian and the Soviet sense (see *May 1996*). Ambivalence is also found in Zoshchenko's toying with a Tolstoyan rejection of culture for the sake of "barbaric simplicity" -- now lauded by the author from a Soviet (or Tolstoyan, or Nietzschean, or medical) point of view, now mocked by him in an aesthetic (decadent, Serapionic, intelligentsia's) vein (see *Zholkovsky 1994*).

As for the historical fate of Zoshchenko, within this critical framework it has received a fairly optimistic forecast. Along the lines of both meta-Soviet content and meta-discourse form, Zoshchenko appears to offer an important reflection of his epoch. However, the longevity of his output is seen as depending on the preservation (or scholarly reconstruction) of the social and cultural context of his writing.

(4) An Academic Interpretation: Psychoanalytical . Here Zoshchenko's self-psychoanalytical novella is moved into focus, along with his authorial and human persona and its Freudian underpinnings. The subject matter of his works is accordingly rehabilitated, with special attention being devoted to the writer's childhood and its traumatic episodes, Oedipal and other sexual themes, problems with parental authority etc. (*Masing-Delic 1980, Hanson 1989, 1990, Hodge 1989*). Footbridges have been made to link *Before Sunrise* with the real author's life, his children's stories (*Hanson 1990*), some of his "Sentimental Tales" (*Siniavsky 1996*), certain stories on psychotherapeutic topics (*von Wiren-Garczyński 1967*), and the Nietzschean motifs of his earliest works (*Grose 1995*) -- but not yet with the main body of his humorous stories. This newest school of thought accepts Zoshchenko's esteemed place in literary history as a given, not to be questioned.

2. A Reinterpretation

The need for rethinking Zoshchenko's legacy is prompted by several factors. These include the restoration to *Before Sunrise* of its rightful place in the author's oeuvre; the passing of Soviet reality -- both the object of Zoshchenko's critical portrayal and the source of critical interpretations of his writing; and a general shift in distance and perspective. Over a hundred years after Zoshchenko's birth and forty since his death, the time is coming for the shaping of his "definitive" reputation.

Three principles underlie the proposed "final" interpretation (see *Zholkovsky 1996a,b,c, 1997, 1999*). The first insists on the

fundamental compatibility of those aspects of his work that are usually considered contradictory: his comic stories and his psychoanalytic autobiographical narrative; the author and his characters; his literary masks and his authentic self; his narrative style and his typical plotlines. The second liberates the writer to some degree from the deterministic embrace of his epoch: Zoshchenko deserves in this respect no less than his favorite authors Boccaccio, Gogol, and Maupassant, all of whom are viewed both as representatives of their country and time, and as classic representatives of the human condition in general. The third principle, on the contrary, establishes fundamental affinities between Zoshchenko and his interpreters, on one hand, and the official cultural tradition, on the other.

Even his most humorous pieces reveal Zoshchenko's rather gloomy philosophy of life, and his "petty-bourgeois" masks turn out to be defensive comic variations on the very same phobias which quite seriously torment the narrator of *Before Sunrise*, easily recognizable in the memoirs about the real author. The essential sameness of the situations, motives, poses, and character traits which become apparent in his comic stories when viewed through the prism of *Before Sunrise* once again corroborate the relevance of Gogol's well-known confession that in his humorous characters he pursued his "own personal trash," only "demoted from the rank of general to that of a foot soldier."

The existential core of Zoshchenko's worldview may be reduced to a fear before life's instability, a wary search for safety from dangers, and a thirst for peace and order. His famous skaz voice can then be identified as an ambivalent -- unreliable and evasive -- narrative by a doubting subject about an unreliable world. This change of scholarly optics is meant not as a total reversal of conventional wisdom about Zoshchenko, but rather as a corrective synthesis of the insights gathered by previous schools of Zoshchenko studies. Within the framework of this conference's particular problematic, it makes sense to examine more closely Zoshchenko's interrelationships with the Soviet epoch.

As usual, the eternal presents itself in temporal forms. One cannot live in a society and be free from it, although one of Zoshchenko's characters insists that "it wasn't the revolution that wore [him] down." Thus, the point is not to try and extricate the author once and for all from the long arms of the much feared social establishment in general and , in particular, from the cultural-sociological interpretations outlined above, which present yet another refined and inevitable form of institutionalized

social control over the writer.

The very nature of Zoshchenko's childhood traumas (both as the real author and the narrator of *Before Sunrise*) and his fear of violation of his personal boundaries by his parents and numerous siblings, predestined him, as it were, to become an ideal chronicler of the profoundly "Soviet" (especially, "communal-apartmental") theme of suppression of personality, individuality, privacy, etc. This early sense of insecurity was confirmed and exacerbated during the revolution, which heralded the end of the entire familiar orderly existence. To reestablish emotional equilibrium, Zoshchenko tried to accept the new order as just (since any order is better for him than chaos), and tried as best he could in his role of a benevolent satirist to help support and perfect it. Yet the Soviet "order" did not justify these hopes, and instead reaffirmed the author's worst fears; its phantasmagoric reality surpassed even Zoshchenko's boldest creative variations on his invariant theme of paranoid mistrust.

That seems to be the way the personal and the societal, the temporary and the eternal are fused in Zoshchenko's writing. This artist of personal existential problematics also reflects his historical epoch, but not so much as a satirical chronicler of Soviet mores as a poet of fear, distrust, and ambivalent love of order. The existential core of Zoshchenko's personality, self-image, and poetics accounts for the curious ambiguity of the writer's position with regard to the Soviet state. He simultaneously fears it, clings to it, and wraps himself in an impenetrable narrative disguise. His ambivalent "(anti)-Sovietism" is the product of an "eternal," timeless fear, aggravated by powerful contemporary forces and frequently masked as a topical battle against actual temporary drawbacks.

Zoshchenko's "universal humanism" has an unexpected bearing on the relationship between the author and his infamous "petty-bourgeois" characters—his *meshchane*. If we ignore the derogatory connotations of this word, which the Soviet ideo-mythology (as well as its Aesopian dissident variation) had co-opted from the Romantic/Decadent/Futurist tradition, it turns out to be a Russian counterpart of such respectable notions as "middle class," "everyman," and the like. In Zoshchenko's (as well as Freud's and Kafka's) version, this is a man overcome by fears, anxieties, Angst, terrified by parental and other authority figures, yet seeking their approval, dreaming of security, order, peace, quiet -- ultimately, death.

III. Boris Pasternak (1890-1960)

1. Conventional Interpretations

Pasternak, who achieved poetic renown before the revolution and international acclaim for his prose by the end of his life, thanks to *Doctor Zhivago*, the Nobel Prize, and the ensuing political persecution, received much more thorough scholarly attention than Zoshchenko. This complicates the task of schematizing his reception.

(1) The Accusatory Interpretation: Soviet Orthodox. At various times Pasternak was now subjected to official attacks, now acknowledged by the state as more or less "one of our own" -- an acceptable fellow-traveller. For decades, the main criticism lodged against the writer was his distance from "topicality" -- his dreamy "country-house dweller's" stargazing refusal to realize "which millennium is there in the street." However, after his novel's publication abroad in 1957, Pasternak was accused of blatant anti -- Soviet tendencies in his portrayal of the Revolution. In the USSR, *Doctor Zhivago* was not published (until perestroika) and only those of Yuri Zhivago's poems relatively free of Christian thematics were able to find their way into print (see *Cornwell 1986*). Later, some perestroika-era critics dismissed the novel as artistically helpless, promoted by dissident and Western literary critics solely for political purposes.

(2) The Justificatory Interpretation: Aesopian. Both Pasternak and his favorable Soviet-era critics (see e. g. *Siniavskii 1978*) presented his relation to the state as one of free, unantagonistic creative interaction. The book of poems *My Sister -- My Life* (1922), which propelled Pasternak to the front ranks of contemporary poetry, was read as an artistic counterpart of the Revolution, although the subtitle "Summer 1917" suggested, somewhat Aesopian-style, the embrace of the bourgeois-democratic February rather than a craving for the Bolshevik October. The mid-1920s saw a conscious compromise between the poet and the official party line, particularly in Pasternak's reworking of revolutionary themes in his own idiosyncratic key (the longer poems "A Lofty Malady," "The 1905," "Lieutenant Schmidt"). In early '30s (beginning with the book of poetry *A Second Birth*), Pasternak embraced socialism even more openly, though not entirely without reservation; this shift was accompanied by a deliberate stylistic simplification in his writing. This period marked Pasternak's greatest intimacy with the state, in the persons of Bukharin and even Stalin (to whom Pasternak addressed his 1936 poem, "The Artist").

In the years that followed, Pasternak gradually distanced himself from the

official literary fold, gave up his semi-official status as Russia's leading poet (this title shifted to "the greatest, most talented" Maiakovsky, as a result of Stalin's inscription on the letter addressed to him by L. Iu. Brik), and began to work on his "dissident" novel. Some affinities with the official discourse remained noticeable in his patriotic war poems, yet even these were not always accepted for publication, and this bond was ruptured once more with the advent of cultural reaction in the late 1940s. Later on, hopes engendered by the Thaw and the partial publications in the mid-1950s came up hard against the wall of official, supposedly "nation-wide" condemnation in the wake of the Nobel Prize scandal. All of this strengthened Pasternak's newly acquired Orthodox faith, skeptical view of the Soviet system, and gallant hopes for redemption before the tribunal of the world's public opinion and posterity.

(3) The Approbatory Interpretation: Western and Post-Soviet. This view fulfilled Pasternak's hopes and the dreams of his nonconformist, previously secret admirers many times over by turning *Doctor Zhivago* into a banner and its author into a martyr of the struggle against Soviet totalitarianism.

(4) An Academic Interpretation: Structuralist. Focusing primarily on the analysis of Pasternak's poetry, this interpretation (formulated in articles by *Tynianov 1969, Jak obson 1969, Siniavsky 1978, Lotman 1978, Nilsson 1978, Pomorska 1975, Zolkovsky 1984, 1985*) does not follow an ideological bent, although it aims essentially at identifying the philosophical core of Pasternak's style, and in the Soviet context was inevitably laden with Aesopian-dissident pragmatics. Pasternak is portrayed as a poet whose unusual imagery and diction express the unity of existence in all of its various aspects -- magnificent and petty, abstract and concrete, faraway and familiar, natural and cultural, joyful and tragic -- and to do so, forge an innovative poetic language that is in accord equally with Christian teachings and twentieth-century physics.

As for *Doctor Zhivago*, its structure is viewed alternately as either intentionally "irregular" (*Siniavsky 1989*) or deliberately traditional, in the spirit of Dickens (*Scheglov 1991*), or on the contrary, as consummate in its contrapuntal complexity (*B. Gasparov 1989*) and allusive symbolism (*Smirnov 1996*). Structural-poetic readings of Pasternak are joined by intertextual ones, which reveal the density of his links with Russian and European literary tradition, particularly with Silver Age culture (*Smirnov 1985*).

(5) An Academic Interpretation: Biographical. Pasternak's life and

work, richly documented with the publication of his two autobiographies, correspondence, philosophical notes, and memoirs by his contemporaries (*E. Pasternak and Feinberg eds. 1993*), have been covered in several biographical studies (*Fleishman 1990, Barnes 1989, Evg. Pasternak 1989*). In particular, the author's various creative turns and quests (beginning with his rejection of music and philosophy in favor of literature and ending with changes in his literary style) and his interrelationships with Soviet ideology and authorities, religion (Judaism, Russian Orthodox Christianity), creative figures (his father -- the artist L. O. Pasternak, Skriabin, Maiakovsky, Tsvetaeva, Rilke), and women (lovers, wives, correspondents).

Some of the episodes in Pasternak's life have been correlated with his poetics. For example, his traumatic fall from a horse at the age of thirteen has been seen as a prototype of various later 'falls,' withdrawals, and artistic transitions (*Fleishman 1977, B. Gasparov 1995, Zholkovsky 1991*). For the most part, however, the biographical Pasternak scholarship remains isolated from the structural-poetic approach. Thus, Pasternak's famous telephone conversation with Stalin about Mandelstam (1934) comes out in greater and greater detail and receives various ratings on the scale of civic courage, but is not generally viewed as yet another display of the poet's overall existential stance.

1. A Reinterpretation

Today, as Pasternak's work and various biographical materials about him enjoy widespread publication, while the circumstances of his life and corresponding personal and political biases recede into the past, a comprehensive view of his poetry, prose, and life-creational image becomes possible (see *Zholkovsky 1994, 1999a*).

The deeply existential nerve of Pasternak's discourse appears to be rooted, as with Zoshchenko, in childhood experience: a tense opposition between, on one hand, a joyful sense of belonging, bordering on self-disparagement, to some organic, "familial" whole headed by an authoritative paternal figure, and, on the other, a gifted personality's urge to shine and distinguish itself, rejecting the pressure of the norm, environment, and authority. The first tendency may be viewed as a feminine and Christian element, which can be associated with the figure of Pasternak's mother (who sacrificed her own artistic career for that of her artist-husband); the second could be interpreted as more traditionally masculine, Oedipal, heroic, "Maiakovskian," oriented toward self-

identification/competition with the father.

Under the influence of the former ("passive," "endogamous") tendency, the actualization of the latter ("aggressive," "exogamous") generally takes place in terms of giving and self-abnegation ("passivity") and often cleaving to a new family unit. The departure from the embrace of the former whole is usually preceded by a gradual realization of that whole's alienness and its suffocating coercion. In fact, the very inevitability of escape turns out to have been inherent in the exaggerated idealization that surrounds the sense of being merged with the current whole. This idealization is then transferred onto the next alternative whole, in order to muster the energy needed for rejecting the old and adhering to the new and thus complete the passage.

A characteristic manifestation of the utopian familial unity with the whole - a leitmotif running throughout Pasternak's entire personal and creative journey -- lies in the title image of the book *My Sister -- Life*. Its lyrical plot is an ecstatic paean to the unrequited love of a woman, who had in real life rejected the possibility of intimacy and marriage with the poet, realizing that his passion was directed not so much at her as at the surrounding world ("The run of willow groves/ Where I sent [my] letters"), at poetry and the miracle of his own gift. The "sister" metaphor concisely emblemized Pasternak's tendency to exaggerate kinship, for, on one hand, it precociously declared his beloved (and all of "life" along with her) as the closest of kin, and on the other, was but a figure of speech glossing over the practical impossibility of a real -- incestuous -- union.

This problematic of "endogamy/exogamy" formed the central theme of Pasternak's life and work. It permeated his relationships

-- with Jewishness and Judaism, which he was close to by birth (and which allows endogamy) but rejected during the course of his life;

-- with the entire Pasternak clan, for one of whose representatives (his cousin Olga Freidenberg) he felt an unfortunate youthful infatuation, and from which, in particular, in the person of his father, who emigrated from Soviet Russia and converted to Judaism, he distanced himself;

-- with the women he loved, at first with "familiar" ones (the Jewish Olga Freidenberg, Ida Vysotskaia, Elena Vinograd, E. V. Lur'e-Pasternak) and later with those "from a different circle" -- half-foreign, Russian (in the sense of non-Jewish), even Soviet (Z. N. Neigaus-Pasternak, Olga Ivinskaia); their unions often began with a symbolic "sibling-like"

relationship (sometimes with no hint of sexual intimacy) and ended in alienation or rupture;

-- with Pasternak's idols (Skriabin, Cohen), fellow writers (Maiakovsky), and artistic movements (Modernism, Futurism), whom/which he first embraced exuberantly, imitated, emulated, and collaborated with, but then rejected with equal vehemence, often blaming his initial allegiance on peer pressure (e. g. in the case of Futurism);

-- with the epoch's ideological discourses: Pasternak's repudiation of Jewishness gradually led to his sense of kinship with Russian soil, socialism, and Stalin, whom the poet has portrayed as his double and even as a sort of father figure impregnating him with poetic ideas (in one poem, thanks to Stalin, the lyrical persona "grows heavy like a sponge," which is a recurrent Pasternak metaphor for poetry), while Pasternak's subsequent rejection of this sort of collaborationism takes place under the aegis of Orthodoxy (and is, once again, accompanied by rejection of Judaism);

-- and even with Christianity, from which Pasternak never turned away, but to which in the end he clung only in a very narrow sense, as he died unreconciled with life -- his chosen "sister" (*Ozerov 1993*).

Pasternak's "fraternizing" view of life relates directly to his assimilationism and collaborationism, as well as his understanding of creativity. The phenomena of adaptation, mimicry, imitation, twinship, kinship, belonging, blending, fusion, which preoccupy Pasternak and his alter ego, Yuri Zhivago, are equally applicable to existential ("adaptationist," "opportunist") and aesthetic ("mimetic") problematics. The acceptance of socialism as a "harness" (in the poem "I want to go home, into the hugeness. . . ") is simultaneously so difficult and so convincing (*Zholkovsky 1994*) because it reproduces his deep-rooted paradigm of "exaggerated kinship." Perhaps it is precisely this conviction that "life and I are cut from the same cloth," as well as the deliberately naive, hyperbolic expression of this union, that harbors the secret of Pasternak's remarkable survival -- both as person and writer.

Pasternak succeeded particularly well in projecting his central utopian metaphor into the sphere of poetic language, arguably the most lasting element of his legacy. Here the principle of universal fusion and fraternization produced a wealth of verbal (phonetic, grammatical, syntactic, lexical, collocational) techniques, poetic constructions, montage collisions, sculptural and visual effects, and intertextual overlays

(Zholkovsky 1985, 1990) . Yet, a subversive historical analysis of Pasternak's values and ethical stances does not have to stop here. Despite all the dazzling achievements in the poetic sphere, the fundamentally utopian nature of his central trope relegates them to romanticism, which the poet himself denied vehemently yet could never fully exorcise in all its lofty deceptiveness -- for, traditionally, romanticism is synonymous with poetry. Moreover, the deception often turns out to be not only lofty, but also a survivor's saving grace, in the most practical sense.

Both his poetry and, in a wider sense, Pasternak's entire life and work constitute an impressive test case of survival in most dangerous times -- survival based not so much on fear, disguise, and defensive measures (as with Zoshchenko) but rather on openness and fraternization, exaggerated at times to the point of utopianism, at times even to coy, chameleon -- like blending with the collective whole -- to "cloying sweetness," and thus, in a sense, a disguise after all. Despite their inevitable similarities, the conflicts and compromises that these two nonconformist classics made with the Soviet system remain distinct. Zoshchenko wants the powers that be to provide "order," but then, he constantly snickers behind their backs and even rebels from time to time. Pasternak seeks "kinship" with the establishment ("as a kinsman will I enter my native tongue"; "not as one of spongers did I squeeze my way into a different family"), but then, despairing of it, finds his new spiritual family in Russian Orthodoxy.

IV . Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966)

1. Conventional Interpretations

In the course of her long life (longer than Zoshchenko's and Pasternak' s), Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) accumulated an entire spectrum of different receptions which do not fit neatly into the schema delineated above . Yet , some common format is needed in order to undertake a comparison among the three classics.

(1) The Accusatory Interpretation: Soviet Orthodox . With its origins in the well-known contraposition of Akhmatova and Maiakovsky (*Chukovsk ii 1973*), supported by Maiakovsky's own public attacks, this interpretation presents Akhmatova as a decadent "poetess" presiding over her salon, sealed off in a hermetic private world -- an internal emigre, as it were, arrogantly ignoring the wider concerns facing the Soviet masses. Such criticism halted the publication of this already renowned poet for over a decade (from the second half of the 1920s through the end of the '30s). After a partial return to print (1940-46) thanks to her patriotic verse of

the war years, Akhmatova (along with Zoshchenko) became the object of Stalinist baiting as an anti-Soviet figure (*Zhdanov 1978 [1946]*), although the accusations were dredged up from her old, prerevolutionary writings, while the notorious characterization of her as a whore-nun was borrowed from Formalist scholarship (*Eikhenbaum's 1969*). After Stalin's death, the official view of Akhmatova gradually shifted in the direction of rehabilitation and inclusion in the Soviet literary canon, in the spirit of heretofore suppressed "justificatory" readings.

(2) A Justificatory Interpretation: Aesopian. The officially permissible defense of Akhmatova rested on her refusal to emigrate ("I am not with those who abandoned their land. . . ." [1922]), her inspiring poetry written during the Leningrad blockade ("Courage" [1943] and others), and the series of pro-Soviet poems which she was forced to write in 1950. In this, as well in the positive image presented by her lyrical heroine -- a stoical Russian woman, Akhmatova's defenders were able to appeal to the national-patriotic element of official ideology, especially evident by the beginning of the 1940s.

(3) A Cultist Interpretation: Biographical. At first in the West, and later, with the onset of glasnost, in Russia as well, a rich and ever-growing body of memoirs about Akhmatova has appeared (see *Chukovskaya 1997, Naiman 1991, Ostrovskaya 1988, Vilenkin 1990, Luknitsky, Vilenkin and Chernykh 1991, Kralin 1990, Polivanov 1994*), along with biographies, often dictated by herself -- in personal interaction, with the help of autobiographical texts, or through intermediaries (*Haight 1976, Reeder 1994, Losievskii 1996*). In these texts, Akhmatova emerges as a heroic figure who stubbornly resisted Soviet pressure (which included the execution of her former first husband, Nikolai Gumiliev, and repeated arrests of her third husband, N. N. Punin, and her son, L. N. Gumiliev); secretly crafted officially unacceptable poems ("Requiem," "A Poem Without a Hero"); and in the personal sphere, became a colorful, paradoxical figure -- ascetic and willful, majestic and witty, altruistic and narcissitic, who presided over a persecuted cultural tradition, imperiously dominated a small circle of unofficial admirers and helpers and, and masterfully controlled her image-making.

(4) An Academic Interpretation: Structural, Thematic, Biographical. Emerging from the pioneering articles written by fellow-poets and friends Mikhail Kuzmin, Nikolai Nedobrovo (*Nedobrovo 1983 [1915]*), and Osip Mandelstam, and the seminal monographic studies undertaken by Formalist scholars (*Eikhenbaum 1969 [1923]*), this approach was further developed by scholars such as Zhirmunsky,

Toporov, Timenchik, Scheglov, Verheul, Emert (*Emert 1992*), Kelly (*Kelly 1994*), Holmgren (*Holmgren 1993*), and others. Characteristically, it combines formal analysis of Akhmatova's poetry (language, lyrical and compositional devices, her repertoire of literary poses, and the influence of literary forbears -- both poets and prosaists, in particular, the tradition of the Russian novel) with an exposition of her crucial existential themes: time, memory, meta-literaturiness, faith, stoical endurance, and (gender) role-manipulation). Recent studies have also focused on Akhmatova's reception by readers and critics, and her life's journey.

Nevertheless, a scholarly biography of Akhmatova that would proceed from an comprehensive understanding of her creative and human personality and of her strategies of self-representation and symbiosis with Soviet environment remains to be written. Such an objective understanding, however, can be gleaned already from the wealth of information collected within the framework of the various extant interpretations, but it must needs -- as in the case of Zoshchenko and Pasternak -- rise above the prejudices of a bygone era inherent in those interpretations (*Zholkovsky 1996d, 2000*).

1. A Reinterpretation

The hidden existential leitmotif of Akhmatova's personality, in all of its different manifestations (early and late, poetic and day-to-day, public and private, calculated and spontaneous) was the consistently "feminine" strategy of gaining power through weakness. Her indomitability, inscrutability, her full and unquestionable control over herself and her environment hid behind a manipulative game of self-presentation -- simulated frailty, self-sacrificial victimhood, modesty, dissociation from her body, passions, individuality. She convincingly played a woman lost in the crowd, settling for a bare minimum, for mere memories and imagination.

This strategy, so keenly noted already in *Nedobrovo 1915*, probably stemmed from childhood traumas. From a young age, Akhmatova witnessed her mother's powerlessness and suffering at the hands of an unfaithful husband, and apparently made up her mind to erect an impenetrable psychological shield of indifference and self-control in the future (*Reeder 1994*). Not surprisingly, perhaps, as an adult, Akhmatova repeatedly found herself in the role of an abandoned woman (in her relationships with Gumiliev, Shileiko, Punin, and Garshin), and had to mobilize all her resources of invulnerability. Socially, this defensive strategy served her well, preparing her for the life of an unpublishable

poet, endlessly scrutinized and attacked, surrounded by informers, and simultaneously for that of a wife, mother, and friend to arrested loved ones.

Akhmatova's "steeliness" ("Those who are not iron have all died") and at the same time, her "femininity" (as the pointedly macho Soviet culture generally demanded less of women) allowed her to retain a greater measure of independence from official pressure than many others. Her concessions to Soviet discourse, made in 1950 in an attempt to secure her son's release from the Gulag, were minimal and openly opportunistic, as opposed to the sincerely pro-Soviet texts and gestures by Pasternak, Zoshchenko, and even Mandelstam, particularly during the 1930s. Yet even Akhmatova could not escape the pervasive influence of the times.

Like her lyrical persona, firmly shut off from love and all manner of outside intrusion, Akhmatova's literary and personal image was of a woman who exuded authority and exercised power through immunity to wants and desires. This image, a product of consummate self-presentation, offered an easily recognizable, albeit ennobled and de-ideologized, version of the "real" Soviet man: free of private property and personal desire, ascetic to the point of masochism, sharing the common fate, conspiratorially laconic, tight-lipped, hardened in his self-discipline, loyal to his duty and a few authoritative figures, ready to submit to a higher will. This image combines aspects of the ordinary Soviet citizen's defensive mechanism, necessary for survival under totalitarian pressure, and its reverse aggressive-authoritarian side, which immediately surfaces as the common prisoner gets a chance to turn into a Gulag guard, mafia don, Soviet boss, miniature Stalin.

One interesting aspect of Akhmatova's affinity with official discourse was her programmed conservatism, an orientation toward the past, love for monuments, marble, frozen poses, her image as "empress," and the ever-growing traditionalism of her verse (*M. Gasparov 1993*). These conservative-monumental attitudes echoed Stalin's "Culture Two" of the 1930s to early 1950s (*Paperny i 1985*), when the stabilized Soviet system finally wanted to see itself decked out in imperial regalia and sculpted in marble.

To be sure, the point is not to try to implicate Akhmatova in ethically dubious concessions to the regime or responsibility for repressive cruelties. In practical terms, her "Soviet-ness" came through, on the contrary, as determined resistance to the state and an ability to "keep silent, like a partisan under interrogation." However, on the verbal,

symbolic plane -- the only area in which she wielded real power -- she was clearly given to issuing decrees on cultural matters ("Each of the Soviet Union's two-hundred million citizens must read this book [The Gulag Archipelago]"; "Dostoyevsky is our number-one writer"; and so on) and imposing harsh sentences, to the point of ostracism, on those who failed to meet her ideological or personal standards ("That man no longer exists for me!").

A telling case in point is Lidia Chukovskaya's decade-long (1942-1952) excommunication from Akhmatova's circle, an action never openly motivated, yet not subject to appeal (some witnesses explained it by Chukovskaya's refusal to join in unrestrained praise and kowtowing to Akhmatova). According to Chukovskaya (*Chukovskaya 1997*), who felt herself to be utterly blameless, Akhmatova awaited her repentance and had prepared a gracious gesture of forgiveness -- a very Dostoyevskian trait. This scenario, in which a senior, inquisitorial figure uses silent treatment, mystery, and authority to bring the junior one to the miracle of a full and grateful moral submission, appears most clearly in Dostoyevsky's "The Meek One" ("Krotkaia") and may have originated in his own experience of having been sentenced to death and then spectacularly "pardoned" by the Emperor. Indeed, the link between Akhmatova and the "cruel talent" of her "number-one writer" have already been brought up in scholarship (*Emert 1992*).

On the whole, Akhmatova ends up a great poet of the Soviet period -- one is tempted to say, a great Soviet poet -- but, unlike Maiakovsky, not as a herald of official slogans but as a keen portrait-painter capturing the deepest hidden qualities of Homo Sovieticus. This contradicts the facts of her life no more than Ovid's exile by Emperor Augustus prevents him from being considered one of the three greatest, most representative poets of the Augustan Golden Age. Nor does this mean that Akhmatova's poetry and her image are exclusive products of her time, to be shelved as its relics. However, while noting their universal human relevance, one should bear in mind that at least half their value lies in its brilliant exposition of that variant of the human condition which is known as siege mentality and was so fully realized in Soviet life.

V. Conclusion

One cannot deny significant symbiosis between non- (or rather, semi-) conformist classics and the reigning Soviet culture. Boris Groys' analysis of the legacy of Bakhtin presents a profound analogy to the cases

examined above:

[B]akhtin's 'polyphony' is generally seen as a protest against the 'monologism' . . . of Stalinist ideology. . . . Yet Bakhtin . . . insists . . . precisely on the totality of the carnival, whose pathos consists of destroying the autonomy of the human body and its very existence... Liberalism and democracy . . . elicit Bakhtin's harsh disapproval. . . . Bakhtin's descriptions of the carnival . . . stem from the experience of the Revolution . . . [and] the atmosphere of Stalinist terror. . . . [But] Bakhtin's goal was in no way to criticize [them] . . . but to explain them in terms of timeless ritual action. . . . Obviously, Bakhtin was not a Stalinist. But even less was he an anti-Stalinist. . . . The aesthetic justification of the epoch was one of the fundamental themes of Russian culture at the time. . . . [T]he totalitarian way of thinking in the 1930s was, in its own way . . . represented even by those who did not share the Apollonian illusions of power over the world, but were ready for a Dionysian sacrifice. (*Groys 1989*)

The main conceptual thrust of this discussion applies to our authors as well, despite certain disparities that require corrections -- some common to all three as a group, others specific for each one of them. All three authors can be seen as partaking of and expressing Soviet atmosphere not only in their obvious -- and inevitable -- external behaviors, but also in their deeply rooted creative and existential stances. Indeed, it is on the level of these stances that one can detect unexpected similarities and instructive differences among them.

For instance, despite the dissimilarities among their images, each of the three tends to hide behind some stylistic and representational mask, which can be partially accounted for by general artistic laws and conventions but owes much more to Aesopian strategies of self-preservation. Zoshchenko takes on the likeness of a half-educated storyteller, Pasternak becomes a naive yet inspired celestial being, Akhmatova appears as a fragile and unassuming woman. In this way, all three manage to assume the protective coat of weak, "unthreatening" and hence excusable foibles: one is uncultivated, another naive, the third vulnerable.

These weaknesses, however, while skillfully "play-acted" for defensive purposes, were not mere fabrications, but rather reflected real "lacks" in each writer. Zoshchenko's and Akhmatova's strategies and disguises present two different, in fact, opposite -- comic and tragic -- responses to one and the same problem: fear, while Pasternak's mask and his entire

quest for kinship is an attempt to overcome his sense of separation, yielding to the temptation of "joining in." All three share an orientation toward the "folksy soil" of the common people: Zoshchenko seeks a healthy existential, physical, and stylistic simplicity; Pasternak yearns to merge with nature and the common folk and generally to "fall into an unheard-of simplicity"; Akhmatova makes herself out to be a simple girl, modest to the point of facelessness, whose identity dissolves in the collective "we." This longing for simplicity agrees both with Soviet ideological postulates and with their sources in the populist leanings of pre-revolutionary progressive intelligentsia.

The three examined authors unquestionably belong among the literary classics of their time. The above analysis and comparison did not aim to debunk their legacy, but attempted rather, as (Ilf and Petrov's) Ostap Bender might put it, to pinpoint their place under the sun. As a result, they emerge as great Soviet writers, who have truly and profoundly reflected their epoch. However, the success of this reflection lies not in some miraculously obtained immaculately objective critical perspective on Soviet life, but on the contrary, in their too-close-for-comfort intimacy with that reality -- with its fears, temptations, and contingent survival strategies.

With their brilliant ability to express so much that was endemic to the Soviet experience and the mentality of Homo Sovieticus, these authors inspired particular love and loyalty in several generations of Soviet readers, who identified with them strongly. One hopes that a new understanding of these nonconformist classics will help to solve a most difficult problem, which Evgeny Shvarts's Lancelot (in his play *The Dragon*) prophesied for the "post-draconian" future over fifty years ago: "to slay the dragon in each of them" -- in writers, in readers, in every one of us.

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