

## **The Temptation of the Reader: The Search for Meaning in Boris Akunin's Pelagia Trilogy**

For more than a decade, Boris Akunin (the pen name of Grigorii Chkhartishvili) has been the king of the Russian detektiv scene. He announced his arrival with the publication of Azazel! (The Winter Queen) in 1998, the first in a series of, to date, fourteen novels featuring the detective Erast Petrovich Fandorin. Seemingly not content with one such series, two years later Akunin published the first in a trilogy of novels starring a Russian Orthodox nun, Sister Pelagia, as the sleuth. And in the same year came a third detective series in which the main protagonist is the British-born grandson of Erast Fandorin, Nicholas, who returns to contemporary Russia to trace his ancestors from the time of Catherine the Great.<sup>1</sup> What all three of these series have in common, and what distinguishes Akunin's detective novels from almost all of the manifold others which have flooded the Russian market in the post-Soviet era, is their combination of detective genre and historical novel.<sup>2</sup>

Although Akunin enjoys phenomenal success in terms of sales, critical reaction to his detective novels has been somewhat mixed. There are those who consider that the incorporation of both historical and intertextual reference into his novels makes for 'stylish detective fiction' and represents an 'intellectual' approach to the genre.<sup>3</sup> Others, however, are less enamoured, accusing the novelist of vampirically 'devouring' the Russian classics, of playing ideologically empty postmodern games or, paradoxically, of anti-Russian extremism.<sup>4</sup> Theoretically, of course, each and every work of art has the potential to provoke similarly contrasting responses. However, the impetus behind the current article is the belief that the polarization in reaction to Akunin's detective novels is an unavoidable, and perhaps even an intended, consequence of their construction. That is, the novels are composed in such a way as to complicate actively the reaction of the reader and their interpretation of the text and its possible meaning(s). Akunin is a writer who, thanks to narrative style and public engagement, bestows considerable status upon the figure of the author both within his works and on the Russian literary scene beyond: he is a media star and powerful cultural commentator who is frequently interviewed about his work and is not afraid to express his opinions

on contemporary Russian politics.<sup>5</sup> Equally though, he guarantees that the figure and experience of the reader is made a central component in his fictional texts. And it is this experience, and the interpretive richness and enjoyment that it comprises, which is the focus of the present article.

Most critics agree that detective fiction in the 'whodunnit' mode is a genre that invites and reflects the active participation of its reader.<sup>6</sup> The reader, like her fictional counterpart, the detective, is implicitly asked to consider clues, listen to testimony and construct hypotheses that will lead to the unmasking of the criminal. Moreover, detective fiction emphasizes the reader's expectation, present in any genre, of participating in an exercise of meaning-making: the obscured story of the crime – from which meaning (or truth) is temporarily absent – will be uncovered, and its full significance revealed, by the story of the investigation.<sup>7</sup> The reader envisaged in this article is one akin to Stanley Fish's 'informed reader' which he defines as being 'neither an abstraction nor an actual living reader, but a hybrid'.<sup>8</sup> This reader is initiated in the conventions of detective fiction as well as possessing a decent knowledge of Russian and world literature and she approaches detective fiction actively, keen to participate, to uncover possible meanings and, ultimately, the 'truth'. It will be argued that, in the Pelagia trilogy,<sup>9</sup> Boris Akunin invites the reader to use her abilities, not only to solve the crimes presented, but also to decipher other, perhaps deeper or more significant meaning(s), contained in the fictional narratives. However, much of the novels' appeal and sophistication derives from the manner in which they play with the 'contract between reader and author'<sup>10</sup> by simultaneously inviting active reader participation and appearing frequently to frustrate it. By means of this ambiguous dialectic between solicited activity and subsequently imposed passivity (through frustration), Akunin, it will be contended, can be seen to illuminate the sort of assumptions and expectations that accompany the act of reading, and not simply in the detective genre.

This article will consider the contradictory games that Akunin's Pelagia trilogy plays with the reader in three different, though related, interpretive spheres: historical reference; intertextual and metatextual reference; and the search for faith. The decision to analyse this trilogy is informed by the

fact that it has been relatively little studied to date compared to the more popular Erast Fandorin novels. Furthermore, its particular combination of stylistic devices (especially intertextuality and metatextuality), plots and themes make it, in the opinion of the author of this article, the most sophisticated of his three detective series. The discussion will illustrate how Akunin employs certain conventions of detective fiction to tempt the reader to prove her 'informed' or 'model' status by trying to establish meaning(s) in the text. However, it will also show how the novels repeatedly insist upon the pre-eminent status of the author figure as arbiter of knowledge within the text by ambiguating signification. In so doing, the Pelagia trilogy intriguingly and provocatively straddles the line often used to define postmodern (detective) fiction: does ultimate responsibility for meaning-making lie with the author or the reader? Are the postmodern games in which Akunin indulges in the trilogy ultimately 'empty' and devoid of meaning? Or are concepts such as meaning, knowledge and truth (not just in literature and art, but more broadly) nothing more than chimera by which the reader should not be fooled?<sup>11</sup>

#### *Pelagia's meaningful games with history?*

The particular combination in Akunin's novels of detective fiction and historical setting is one of the distinguishing features of his work in the Russian context. Internationally, however, 'historical crime fiction' is a widely recognized and increasingly popular subgenre.<sup>12</sup> Crime fiction's attraction to the use of historical setting can be traced to the parallels that exist between the figures of the historian and the detective. As Robin Winks explains:

The historian must collect, interpret, and then explain his evidence by methods which are not greatly different from those techniques employed by the detective, or at least the detective in fiction.<sup>13</sup>

Historical crime fiction also offers novel ways in which authors can fulfil the detective genre's demands for realism and verisimilitude in respect of temporal and historical setting. This is a game that Akunin clearly enjoys playing, although not always in a straightforward fashion. Moreover, as

the first section of this article will demonstrate, the incorporation of historical reference into crime fiction implicitly acknowledges the subjectivity of history as a 'discursive entity' that must be 'read as a text'.<sup>14</sup> Akunin's Pelagia trilogy, as will be discussed in the final section, also shows an understanding of the potential for historical crime fiction to have both an epistemological and an ontological dominant.

Our starting point, however, is an aspect ignored by previous critics of the subgenre: the manner in which Akunin's decision to write historical crime fiction permits him to exploit the 'active reader' convention of detective fiction in original and intriguing ways. Unlike the Erast Fandorin series, whose temporal location is always clearly announced, none of the novels in the Pelagia trilogy are at any point explicitly or exactly dated. This means that, more acutely than in the Fandorin series, Akunin does not just invite the reader to attempt to solve crimes but also to decipher various historical references and allusions to situate the novels' action specifically in time. It should be emphasized here that, it is not that the novels' temporal location cannot be established, but that the author asks the reader actively to construct this location for herself, rather than it just being given. So, for instance, in the first novel, Pelagiia i belyi bul'dog (Pelagia and the White Bulldog, 2000), she is told that the hotel in the provincial town of Zavolzhsk is called 'The Grand Duke', after Konstantin Petrovich who stayed there during a tour one hundred years previously. If the historically-informed reader can recall that Konstantin Petrovich was born in 1779, and was unlikely to have been on an official tour before the age of fifteen, this will allow her to date the action of the novel to some point in the mid-1890s. Similarly, in the final novel, Pelagiia i krasnyi petukh (Pelagia and the Red Rooster, 2003), the eponymous heroine refers to the Dreyfus affair in France. Rather than just telling the reader that the novel's action takes place in 1896, for instance, by means of this reference Akunin encourages the reader to establish herself as an active presence in the text and in the construction of its temporal location.

Such interpretive invitations are reinforced by the use Akunin makes of the *roman à clef* technique of including in his fictional world barely-veiled doubles of actual historical figures.<sup>15</sup> Most

of these figures are taken from the historical period depicted. In the first and third novels, for example, the criminal mastermind is the Procurator of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church, Konstantin Petrovich Pobedin, who is clearly intended to represent the historical Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev, who occupied this same position between 1880 and 1905. Similarly, in Pelagiia i chernyi monakh (Pelagia and the Black Monk, 2001), the head of the government commission sent to study the economic miracle of the monastery at New Ararat is one Count Litte, an obvious double of Count Sergei Witte who served as Minister of Finance in Russia from 1892 to 1903.<sup>16</sup>

On the one hand, such references help to characterize the implied author as sufficiently historically educated as to be able to incorporate them. On the other, they reach out to an historically-aware reader who is capable of situating them correctly. Each reference functions as an implicit invitation to the reader to join a community of 'informed' readers – comprised of those who decipher successfully – and who can then bask in a (perhaps limited) sense of their own intellectual worth at being such history buffs. Indeed, Akunin at times seems keen to encourage this sense of interpretive superiority in as many readers as possible by emphasizing the historical privilege of almost any twenty-first-century reader. In Pelagia and the Black Monk, for example, the narrator describes the symptoms exhibited by the monks at the hermitage on Outskirts Island where a meteorite fell some six hundred years previously as being hair loss, dizziness, nausea and impotence. Twentieth-century scientific discoveries allow the contemporary reader to recognize these as signs of radiation sickness in a way that, from their nineteenth-century perspective, neither Pelagia nor the criminal Lentochkin are able. The reader is thus, at least temporarily, placed higher up in the hierarchy of historical knowledge than the fictional-world characters.

However, these apparently encouraging gestures towards the informed reader prove to be misleading. Akunin's implied author uses them to dupe the reader into a belief in her superiority whilst in fact underlining her ultimately inferior status. For all the historical allusions and references that the reader may be able to identify correctly, she is actually left with a negative and vague, rather

than a positive and specific, knowledge of the novels' temporal setting. She can really only ever say that the action is happening sometime after 1894 and probably before 1900.<sup>17</sup> One might argue that not knowing the exact temporal location of a novel's action should not be construed as a significant problem in the reader's relationship with the text or the implied author. Indeed, in many instances, approximate knowledge of the historical setting of a work is sufficient. In Akunin's trilogy, however, I would argue that it does impact upon the reader's standing in the text. The sense of superiority she gains from correctly-deciphered historical references and privileged temporal location becomes inextricably bound up with, and undermined by, a feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis the implied author, the narrator and the fictional-world characters. All of these figures presumably do know the exact date at which the action takes place, and therefore, in this regard, sit above the reader in the texts' hierarchy of knowledge.

Crucially, the issue of the trilogy's temporal location assumes greater significance when one considers how the ambiguous relationship it constructs between the reader and historical knowledge is reflected in the type of access that the novels allow to the resolution of their criminal plotlines. That is, as with the historical references, the stories of crime in the trilogy invite the reader to take an active role in their interpretation and resolution, only for her to learn ultimately that this is largely impossible and her efforts are in vain. The relationship thus established between historical reference and the stories of crime in turn poses questions regarding the epistemic quest undertaken by the reader. As the genre's conventions dictate, each of the three Pelagia novels features all manner of twists and turns in the plot, false suspects, red herrings, and multiple but intersecting crimes and culprits. On occasion, the reader is allowed briefly to experience the sense of getting ahead of the investigator, Pelagia, in understanding the significance of clues or recognizing suspects. In Pelagia and the White Bulldog, for instance, the generically-informed reader will recognize that the nun's accusation of Miss Wrigley simply comes at too early a stage of the novel for it to be correct. In Pelagia and the Black Monk, the use of multiple focalizers<sup>18</sup> in the first third of the novel means that by the time Pelagia is despatched to New Ararat the reader already has the benefit of three earlier

accounts not wholly shared by the detective. The reader therefore possesses knowledge about the suspicious behaviour of characters such as Brother Jonah and Lidiia Evgen'evna Boreiko to which Pelagia is not herself party.

In spite of such fleeting sensations of privileged insight, on the whole, the mysterious plots of Akunin's trilogy are so convoluted that the reader is never able to get ahead of the detective. This, in fact, is the lesson taught by all detective fiction. The dénouement of Pelagia and the White Bulldog, for instance, provides a particularly effective illustration of the passive status bestowed on the reader in the unravelling of the crimes. With an example of fine deductive reasoning, Pelagia persuades her boss, Bishop Mitrofanii, that it is Synodical Inspector Bubentsov who is responsible for the five murders. On the witness stand during Bubentsov's trial, Mitrofanii repeats this version of the story of the crimes almost verbatim and it is corroborated by details provided by Bubentsov's assistant, Spasennyi. And the reader, like all of the other listeners present in the courtroom, finds this account to be entirely convincing. However, when Pelagia then testifies (and proves with physical evidence) that, whilst the sequence of events surrounding the crimes is accurate, the actual culprit is Spasennyi himself, the reader is firmly put in her place and her previous efforts at deduction are made to seem hollow.

Although unusually emphasized in Akunin's trilogy, this configuration of the power relationship between the implied author, the reader and the detective is actually relatively conventional for the genre. Peter Hühn's analysis of narrativity and reading concepts in detective fiction centres upon the idea that the criminal's acts can be compared to those of an author because they 'write' clues which are then read by the detective. These roles thus become doubles of those played by the actual novelist and the reader. In considering the issue of the relative access to information (and solutions) enjoyed by these various participants in detective fiction, Hühn notes:

The real author (of the book) always makes it a point of honor to prevent the real readers from being able to read his presentation of the two stories before he permits them to do so. (...) Whereas within the novel the detective invariably proves the

superiority of reading over writing, the novelist very often (I suspect) succeeds in proving the reverse – the superiority of his or her writing over the novel-reader's reading skills.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Hühn chooses to consider the reader's inferiority in a largely positive light (as protection against the illusory power of reading), Akunin's enacting of it functions as a more profound warning. And this warning is sounded precisely by the clear links that Akunin establishes in the Pelagia trilogy between the reader's attempts to decipher historical references and her desire to actively participate in the unravelling of the story of the crimes. They suggest that Akunin not only problematizes the act of reading, but that he also problematizes the nature of knowledge itself, particularly historical knowledge.<sup>20</sup> The informed reader derives a sense of self-satisfaction from understanding the historical allusions, but she never arrives at definitive knowledge of an actual date. She attempts to 'read' the crime alongside the detective, but is ultimately taught that she can never arrive at its true 'meaning' without the aid of the detective and the author. Akunin's trilogy can, therefore, be considered to offer a warning, however implicit and playfully ironic, against any sense of confidence or superiority that the reader might invest in a belief in the successful outcome of her epistemic quest.

A similar note of caution is sounded by the uncertainty which the reader confronts when she attempts to decide whether it is intended that she ascribe meaning or meanings to the trilogy's historical setting and, by extension, to history more broadly. The temptation to do just that is clearly evidenced by a considerable body of critical reaction to Akunin, which has polarized around the question of whether the setting should be viewed as nostalgic or anti-nostalgic. Some critics believe that the author depicts pre-revolutionary Russia as an idyllic time of stability, order and gentility.<sup>21</sup> Others disagree and argue that the Russia illustrated by Akunin is 'definitely not attractive' or idealized.<sup>22</sup> On whichever side of the argument such critics stand, their views express the conviction that there is a need to read meaning(s) into Akunin's use of historical setting. Moreover, many of the opinions expressed in this debate reveal an implicit belief in the existence of an interrupted (or



uninterrupted) process of historical development in Russia. It might be posited that the depiction of historical settings in the particular context of detective fiction necessarily implies a teleological view of history. As a genre which is especially 'preoccupied with establishing linear sequences'<sup>23</sup> leading to an ultimate solution, detective fiction implicitly suggests that a certain point in the past leads to (or has something to reveal about) a given point in the present and in the future.<sup>24</sup> The Pelagia trilogy partially conforms to this teleological model by offering the reader resolved criminal plotlines, at least in the first two novels. And in a more specifically historical sense, it suggests teleology by illustrating a rural idyll which might, according to the nostalgics, still exist if the revolution and Soviet period had not intervened and where, for the anti-nostalgics, the corruption of Zavolzhsk merchants is an early precursor to the post-Soviet experience of oligarchs.

On many occasions, however, elements of the trilogy's presentation of the past encourage a view of history as more circular, or at least elliptical, than linear and end-oriented. The reader is repeatedly invited to identify parallels between the Russia of the 1890s and that of the 1990s and 2000s. So, for instance, in Pelagia and the White Bulldog, the reader is informed that Bishop Mitrofanii had warned Governor von Haggenu upon his appointment that free elections should not be introduced too swiftly in the region for fear that the people, out of a lack of readiness, 'will elect some tavern-keeper to be their governor if he rolls a couple of barrels of green wine out into the square for them...'.<sup>25</sup> Such a description is surely intended to prompt the reader to infer a reference not only to rates of alcoholism amongst the post-1991 electorate, but also perhaps to Boris Yeltsin's own problems with drink during his presidency. Similarly, the illustration in the trilogy of the role played by the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in the promotion of an ethnic Russian national identity and the primacy of Orthodoxy calls to mind the post-1990 situation of the Russian Orthodox Church and its influence in state affairs. In the first two novels of the trilogy, the primary impulse between this use of historical parallelism appears to be ludic, in the manner theorized by Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson. However, there are also times throughout, but particularly in the final novel, where it is intended more earnestly. Specifically, it is this use of parallelism, whereby one

chronological moment mirrors, rather than brings about, another, which understands history as elliptical rather than linear. As such, Akunin's novels conform closely to Hutcheon's description of postmodern fiction as 'suggest[ing] that to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive or teleological'.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this more open-ended vision of history becomes associated in the trilogy with an insistence, noted by at least one critic, upon the existence of a multiplicity of potential historical truths rather than a single grand narrative.<sup>27</sup>

The *Pelagia* novels employ a variety of narrative means to illustrate this open-endedness. For instance, the first novel, *Pelagia and the White Bulldog*, lacks a clearly delineated opening: it begins with points of ellipsis as if its first lines are the continuation of a story started elsewhere. Furthermore, the final word in the novel is 'and', followed by more elliptical points. This sentence is then completed by the first line of the second novel, *Pelagia and the Black Monk*, which also begins in ellipsis, as the description of the arrival of a desperate monk from New Ararat straddles both novels. Although *Pelagia and the Black Monk* is given a more definitive ending in terms of punctuation and the time lag between its action and that of the third novel, in fact the trilogy can be seen to move towards increasing open-endedness in terms of plot resolution. In the first novel, the reader is shown the conclusion of the court case against Spasennyi and informed that he is sentenced to hard labour for life. In the second, although Pelagia eventually unmask Lentochkin as the principal criminal, the novel closes without his being arrested and sentenced by a court. The clear implication is that his punishment will be divinely poetic because he is already in the advanced stages of radiation poisoning. The most obvious illustration of open-endedness comes, however, in *Pelagia and the Red Rooster* in which the master criminal, Chief Procurator Pobedin, is identified but suffers no punishment whatsoever and Pelagia disappears into a cave in the Garden of Gethsemane never to be seen again.

In terms of expressing the notion of the existence of alternative histories, Akunin makes effective use of the multiple criminal plotlines in each novel, whose frustration of the reader's

interpretive efforts has been referred to above. In Pelagia and the White Bulldog, although Pelagia is initially despatched to investigate the death of one prized dog, the plot soon comes to feature five complexly-related human murders in which the Holy Synod is implicated. In Pelagia and the Black Monk, the search for an explanation of the apparently spectral monk's appearances becomes bound up with an investigation of the legend of the meteorite and the deaths of the monks on Outskirts Island. And in the trilogy's final novel, the initial investigation into the murder of the false Manuila and the attempts on Pelagia's life give way to an exploration of the deeper mystery of the supposed prophet's identity and the nun's search for faith.

Furthermore, the performance of Akunin's narrator, most notably in the first two novels, functions as an implicit warning to the reader against the idea of investing too much trust in a single version of events, especially, although arguably not only in the context of the fictional text. This voice initially appears to belong to a first-person narrator who, as a character in the fictional world, is able to describe Pelagia and Mitrofanii whilst in church with them. On occasion, the narrator explicitly comments on the restricted access to information imposed by this position when, for example, he admits to difficulties in identifying one of the nuns at the Transfiguration Day ceremony 'at first glance from the back'.<sup>28</sup> However, it is subsequently difficult to reconcile such comments with the omniscient access this same narrator appears to possess into the inner thoughts and feelings of the fictional-world characters: descriptions of Mitrofanii's unspoken musings as well as of the emotions which Pelagia experiences abound throughout the trilogy. The fluidity of the narrator's position vis-à-vis the diegesis is an effective tool for feeding the reader's suspense: whilst at times this voice is highly informative, at others it leaves gaping holes in her knowledge of events by either refusing to divulge details or by pretending not to know them.<sup>29</sup> In anticipation of remarks to be made in the following section of this essay, this uneven and unpredictable narrative performance is reminiscent of the voices employed by Nikolai Gogol in his fiction.

However such narrative unreliability can be seen not only to play intertextual games but, in a more serious tone, to highlight what postmodernism considers the absurdity of a belief in a single-

authored account of history and the impossibility of historical truth. Indeed, the narrator supplements such implicit acts of self-reflexivity on the status of historical knowledge with one explicit gesture which undermines its supposed value. In Pelagia and the White Bulldog, at the beginning of a section describing the various conversations on the administration of the Zavolzhska region between Bishop Mitrofanii and Governor von Haggenu, the narrator informs the reader:

For those who are following our tale only in order to discover how it concludes, and who have no interest in the history of our region, it is permissible to omit this brief chapter completely. No damage will be caused to the elegant line of the narrative as a result.<sup>30</sup>

At such moments, the paradoxical position in which Akunin's trilogy places the reader in terms of her attempts to interpret the novels' historical setting and references is made absolutely clear. Conforming to Hutcheon's definition of 'historiographic metafiction', it incorporates historical events and actors as if to imbue them with significance but simultaneously demonstrates a playful 'self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs'.<sup>31</sup> As throughout the trilogy, the reader is here left wondering whether she should be earnestly engaging with the trilogy's problematized presentation of the historical past, or just enjoying the literary and intellectual games being played out.

#### Pelagia's games with texts

The type of games played with the informed reader by the Pelagia trilogy's historical setting are mirrored and reinforced by its exploitation of intertextuality and metatextuality. Akunin's use of these devices prompts two inter-related questions. Firstly, if they are intended to invite the reader to infer meaning, what are the possible interpretations suggested by their use? Secondly, do they simultaneously undermine any such invitation by implying that these meanings are primarily self-reflexive and parodic, rather than extending beyond the boundaries of the fictional text? Although the focus here will again fall upon the experience of the reader, it is worth noting that, to an even greater degree than the incorporation of historical references, the novels' use of intertextuality in

particular shines a spotlight on the attributes of both the implied and actual author. The impression which they help to create of Boris Akunin as an 'erudite' author of detective fiction in the mould of Umberto Eco is a key contributory factor to the situation in which the persona of the author on the Russian literary scene overshadows the reputation of any of his individual works.

Elena Baraban does not exaggerate when she describes Akunin as 'saturating his mysteries with allusions to literary classics'.<sup>32</sup> The Pelagia trilogy certainly makes no secret of the fact that, albeit in a quite different manner to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', which revolves around an absent and hidden text, it is 'comprised of borrowed texts'.<sup>33</sup> Akunin employs intertextuality on both a macro- and a micro-level, and the references can be either implicit or explicit. For example, at an implicit macro-level, the decision to make his investigators (Bishop Mitrofanii and Sister Pelagia) members of the church recalls examples from the Western canon of detective fiction such as G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown series, published between 1911 and 1936, the Brother Cadfael mysteries penned by Ellis Peters from 1977 until 1994, and crucially, given remarks to be made below regarding metatextuality, Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose from 1980. Although such nods to the Western detective canon are numerous, the majority of the intertextual references in the Pelagia trilogy are to works of Russian literature, and most frequently to those from the nineteenth century. On a macro-level, the first novel incorporates implicit intertextual references in its rural setting and genteel atmosphere to works such as Leskov's Soboriane (Cathedral Folk, 1872)<sup>34</sup> and Turgenev's Dvorianskoe gnezdo (A Nest of the Gentry, 1859). As its title make obvious, the second novel in the trilogy references Chekhov's 1894 story 'The Black Monk', amongst others. The religious or mystical plane in Pelagia and the Red Rooster calls to mind Bulgakov's Master i Margarita (Master and Margarita, 1966-7), whilst the title of Akunin's final chapter, 'The Gospel according to Pelagia', as a near copy of Bulgakov's 'The Gospel according to Woland', makes this association more explicit. The figure of Dostoevskii haunts the entire trilogy, making both implicit and explicit appearances on the level of language, character and plot; and Gogol is implicitly referenced throughout by means of the narrator's performance. Furthermore, on a micro-level, the trilogy features hundreds of references,

both implicit and explicit, to scores of works from the supposed 'Golden Age' of Russian literature as well as to the classical European tradition. To name but a few (amongst those that this informed reader can recognize), there are references to Nekrasov, Derzhavin, Karamzin, Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Garshin, Tolstoy, Dante, Shakespeare, Pascal, Rousseau and Gautier.

On the one hand, it is possible to view this aspect of the novels as generically conventional, given Hanna Charney's claim that intertextuality is 'a hallmark of detective novels in general'.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the sheer number and variety of Akunin's intertextual references takes his use of the device beyond what might be considered the norm for this, or indeed any, genre. So what intentions for the reader's interpretive experience can be identified behind this intertextual saturation? Firstly, whatever the nature of the intertextuality, one of its primary consequences is to establish a 'horizon of expectations'<sup>36</sup> in the mind of the reader. The references to Chesterton, Peters and Eco, for instance, encourage the generically-informed reader to expect that Akunin's novels might share certain features with these earlier works: perhaps an illustration of the mystical or metaphysical attitude that religious figures bring to the supposedly rational art of detection; or a depiction of the tensions which exist between the spiritual life and the more secular realm of criminal investigations. More simply, by implicitly alluding to writers such as these, as well as to Agatha Christie<sup>37</sup>, Akunin is arguing for the legitimacy and reputation of his own work to be considered on a par with these highly-regarded forebears.

Secondly, as with the historical allusions, the many references to other texts lay down a challenge to the implied reader to test her literary knowledge against that of the author. If she is successful in identifying a good number of the implicit references, she is rewarded with membership of the imagined community of not simply 'informed' readers, but Akunin's 'ideal' readership. At the same time as this achievement creates the illusion of being (almost) on a par with the author, it also fosters a feeling of superiority over those readers whom she imagines are not as capable. However, this is a contest that no reader (apart from Akunin himself perhaps) can ever likely win. It would be impossible – as well as undesirable in terms of the act of reading – to attempt to identify all of the

various references. The terms of the game being played between author and reader thus become somewhat disingenuous and any sense of equality or superiority experienced by the latter is shown to be hollow.

Turning more specifically to the issue of which, if any, meanings can be read into the trilogy's intertextual references, a first possibility is that they are intended to function as additional 'clues' for the active reader. The informed reader is invited to use her knowledge of the referenced texts in order to throw additional interpretive light upon the contents of Akunin's novels. These clues rarely, if ever, relate specifically to the story of the crime itself; that is, the reader who deciphers these clues is no closer to solving the crimes than any other. However, this reader is arguably rewarded with a deeper sense of the novels' potential significances. For example, the implicit allusions in Pelagia and the White Bulldog to Leskov's Cathedral Folk tempts the reader into equating Akunin's performance with Leskov's perceptive portrayal of the changes occurring in nineteenth-century rural Russia and his refusal to propound simple ideological tenets. The intertextual bridge built across to 'The Black Monk' in the second novel suggests not only that a similar debate around questions of religious faith, scientific reason and psychiatric health is being staged in both works, but that the behaviour of Akunin's Lentochnik references the megalomania of Chekhov's protagonist, Kovrin.<sup>38</sup> And the references in Pelagia and the Red Rooster to Bulgakov's Master and Margarita, as well as to various of Dostoevskii's novels, reinforce the idea already present in the plotline that this is a work whose ambitions reach well beyond the conventional limits of a detective novel.

One broadly-shared interpretation of Akunin's decision to adorn all of his detective series, not just the Pelagia trilogy, so liberally with intertextual references is that it seeks to associate the 'mass' genre with the 'high' Classical literary tradition. Indeed, it is arguably this aspect of his work, more than their inclusion of historical references, which motivates the use of epithets such as 'intellectual', 'erudite' and 'stylish' that are more commonly associated with 'high' literature.<sup>39</sup> For many years scholarly criticism of detective fiction demonstrated an almost obsessive preoccupation with the relationship between 'popular' but 'low' detective fiction and 'high' literature. In his critical

writing, G.K. Chesterton, for instance, is typical of those who feel the need to invoke this perceived division when he argues that a 'detective story [is] a perfectly legitimate form of art'.<sup>40</sup> Although traces of this hierarchical paradigm persist,<sup>41</sup> since the 1980s there has been a welcome move towards considering such terms as nothing more than constructs which, according to Brian McHale, should not be reified and turned into pseudo-objects.<sup>42</sup> It is in this light that Akunin's use of intertextuality should be seen: rather than attempting to shift the 'mass' genre of detective fiction into the space occupied by 'high' literature or the 'classical tradition', it is better considered to collapse and thereby demonstrate the redundancy of such literary categories.

A further, more original reading of the trilogy's use of intertextual reference, albeit one related to the question of literary hierarchies, would be to suggest that it invokes and interrogates the myth, and its consequences, of the Soviet reader as the 'samyy chitaiushchii v mire' ('most active reader in the world').<sup>43</sup> This myth, as Stephen Lovell makes clear in The Russian Reading Revolution, can be reduced to two assertions:

first, that in the Soviet Union people read a lot and that they would read more as society progressed further towards Communism; and second, that the printed word was capable of uniting people and instilling in them the core values of Soviet society.<sup>44</sup>

The Pelagia trilogy invokes this myth because, as asserted above, by means of its intertextuality, it appears to reach out to the informed reader and flatter her by reinforcing the idea of her vast literary knowledge. Indeed, by means of its determined, almost exaggerated, inclusion of such a high number of intertextual references, all of Akunin's work in this genre seems to suggest that Russian literature is one of the few, if not the only, literatures in the world that could put such 'literary' detective works on the market. Akunin's intertextuality might thus be seen to function as an implicit reminder of the desire of the Soviet authorities to use literature to create a new reader and thereby inspire some sort of a cultural revolution. Is the reader therefore being prompted to view Akunin's particular approach to the detective genre as harbouring similar transformational aspirations?<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the flattening out of distinctions between 'low' and 'high' modes enacted in Akunin's trilogy is possibly intended to



be a modern refraction of the situation which, Lovell suggests, pertained in the Soviet Union after 1932. Lovell argues that, after this date, the notion of a specifically proletarian culture was abandoned and what Soviet society was left with was:

a truly 'middle-brow' culture which tried to preserve the 'high' values and relative cultural homogeneity of a bourgeois educated public (such as the English reading classes in the second half of the eighteenth century) with the scale of a mass public.<sup>46</sup>

Without wishing to categorize Akunin's trilogy as 'middle-brow', his use of intertextuality certainly suggests a similar mixing of an 'educated' and a 'mass' public.<sup>47</sup> By extension, this device then interrogates the manner in which the myth of the most active reader served, by means of a model of cultural unity and homogeneity, to conceal real socio-cultural divisions and inequalities during the Soviet period.<sup>48</sup> Can the Pelagia trilogy therefore be considered to function as an implicit warning about the possible return to such homogeneity in the post-Soviet era, where the bestseller lists have frequently been populated by largely derivative detective novels? At the same time as it seeks to collapse distinctions between 'high' and 'low' by forcing a supposedly 'low' genre out of mediocrity, Akunin's work can be seen, paradoxically, as an attempt to counteract the considerable uniformity in the work of other contemporary Russian detective writers.

To some extent, the interpretations of Akunin's intertextuality advanced up to this point can all be viewed as rather 'modernist', insofar as they attribute constructive meanings to its use. However, certain aspects of this device, as well as the trilogy's exploitation of metatextuality, caution against the validity of such interpretive assertions. Rather, what they demonstrate is that the meanings derived from intertextual and metatextual reference are, as with the historical allusions, far more elliptical, much less definitive, elusive even than those suggested above. Indeed, these devices permit the trilogy to evince a playfully sceptical and parodic attitude towards the possibility or validity of the existence of any meaning which extends beyond the fictional text. First of all, as Sofya Khagi has claimed in relation to the Erast Fandorin series, the trilogy's use of intertextuality can be seen to embody the claim made by postmodern historicism that the past has been entirely

effaced as a retrievable artefact and replaced by texts.<sup>49</sup> The Pelagia novels' status as works substantially composed of a variety of other literary texts undermines any claim that can be made for their extra-textual referentiality by enacting Fredric Jameson's assertion that 'popular culture can now only refer to other cultural signifiers whilst reality outside pop art has entirely retreated'.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Akunin's use of both intertextuality and metatextuality is designed to ensure that the reader is kept aware of the texts' fictionality and of the notion of 'art as device'.

For example, not only is the narrative voice in the novels unreliable, it is also ludically self-conscious and keen to point up, and reflect upon, its own performance. In what is clearly an implicit nod to the style of Gogol's narrators, Akunin's storyteller frequently highlights the fictional illusion of the supposed simultaneity of action and narration through comments such as:

Before Sister Pelagia sets out for the estate of the general's widow Tatishcheva, we need to offer certain explanations concerning the local geography, without which anyone who has never been to Zavolzhsk will find it a little difficult to believe everything that occurred subsequently (...).<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, the narrator is often keen to draw the reader's attention to her expectation that he will perform his storytelling duties skilfully and reliably. He announces with some fanfare in the first novel that, in revealing why the photographer Poggio's exhibition did not take place, it is necessary 'to take everything in the right order, because every little detail is important, even if at first sight it seems absolutely insignificant'.<sup>52</sup> And yet, having made a show of this obligation, as we have seen above, the narrator is frequently unreliable: he breaks his own rules, jumbles details up, and occasionally misses out important information altogether.

But it is not just the narrator who ironically reflects on the processes and status of literary fiction in the Pelagia novels. On repeated occasions, characters within the fictional world provide playful metatextual commentary upon the value of literature in a manner which interrogates the standing of Akunin's novels themselves. In Pelagia and the White Bulldog, for instance, during a description of the extensive contents of Mitrofanii's library, the reader is informed that the only type

of reading which the Bishop avoids is fiction because it is 'of little value'.<sup>53</sup> Pelagia disagrees and claims that 'since the Lord had implanted in the soul of man the desire to create, He was the best judge of whether there was any sense and benefit in the writing of novels'.<sup>54</sup> Later in the same novel, the commentary concerns crime fiction more specifically as Mitrofanii criticizes Dostoevskii for making 'his own task too easy when he had the proud Raskolnikov kill not only the repulsive old money-lender, but her meek, innocent sister as well'.<sup>55</sup> This intertextual reference thus serves a metatextual purpose by encouraging the reader to think that Akunin's trilogy will not repeat the same mistake.

More acutely ironic comments on the ultimately elusive nature of literary representation are to be found in Pelagia and the Black Monk. This second novel features the character Lev Nikolaevich, whose name and patronymic are playfully shared with both Prince Myshkin from Dostoevskii's The Idiot (1869) and with Tolstoy. His introduction is shrouded in mystery: he tells Lentochkin that he used to be a patient in the psychiatric asylum and reveals a passion for the works of Dostoevskii. Without knowing whom she is actually observing, Sister Pelagia then witnesses this same man heroically retrieving a kitten with little thought for his own safety. Later on, having rescued her from an attack by Brother Jonah, he introduces himself to Pelagia as Nikolai Vsevolodovich, using the name and patronymic of Stavrogin from Dostoevskii's Besy (The Devils, 1872). It is in this guise that he attempts to force himself upon Pelagia and reacts extremely angrily to her revelation that she is a nun. She is saved by the arrival of Dr Korovin who then informs her that this man is, in fact, one Laert Terpsikhorov, an actor from St Petersburg who, in the absence of any personality of his own, inhabits the most recent dramatic role he has played. Besides the various ludic nods provided by this network of intertextual references built around this character, he is also the source of important metatextual commentary. The fact of having a character in a literary fiction – Akunin's novel – presented as an actor who, initially unbeknownst to anyone, assumes the identity of a series of other literary fictional characters (Prince Myshkin, Stavrogin and finally Makar Devushkin from Dostoevskii's Bednye liudi (Poor Folk, 1846)) functions as a highly effective expression of the continual self-reflexivity of

literature. It is like a sort of hall of mirrors in which one literary figure generates another almost in perpetuity. As such, it implicitly suggests that the constant refraction of one literary text through another results not in any definitive interpretation, but in a sense of ever-deferred meaning.

#### Metatextuality and the search for faith

By far the most powerful metatextual image in the trilogy is that of the cave in the final novel, Pelagia and the Red Rooster.<sup>56</sup> This is also the image which most effectively expresses the notion of the temptation extended to the reader to find meaning and the potential for the ultimate frustration of this quest. As such, it functions as a symbolic representation of the reader's experience of the whole trilogy, but most particularly of this third novel. The cave is presented as a potentially crucial element in both Pelagia and the reader's quest for knowledge. Its first manifestation in the narrative is in rural Russia during the period that Pelagia accompanies the civil servant Sergei Sergeevich Dolinin in his efforts to identify the 'false prophet': she enters it alone having been told by a witness that it is from here that Manuila initially appeared. Subsequently, when Pelagia undertakes her trip across the Holy Land in search of this same man, the cave in the Garden of Gethsemane is established as the location most likely to provide solutions to the various mysteries which the case involves. Indeed, when Pelagia first enters this cave in Jerusalem it is so as not to interrupt a conversation with Manuila, which she hopes will give her answers to the questions accumulated during her investigation. It is thus cast as some sort of potential end point, or dénouement. However, not only are these answers not forthcoming, but over the course of the two following days both Manuila and Pelagia re-enter the same cave, each carrying a red rooster under their arm, and disappear, never to be seen again. Therefore, having seemed to offer the hope of some sort of final resolution, this cave ultimately appears to thwart any search for definitive meaning undertaken either by the fictional protagonist or by the reader. Pelagia does not learn whether this prophet is actually false or not; and the reader does not discover what eventually becomes of either character.

Moreover, both the cave in Jerusalem and the one in Russia, it is suggested, function as wormholes through time and space. When Pelagia enters the 'Devil's Cave' in Russia, she finds herself trapped by a landslip and struggles to find a way out. When she does escape, she is surprised to find that, in spite of feeling that she has spent several hours in the cave, only half an hour appears to have elapsed. Pelagia's confusion is then exacerbated when she witnesses a man deliberately setting off the landslip which has trapped her and which she has previously heard from inside the cave. In a similarly irrational manner, it is suggested that Manuila has arrived in nineteenth-century Russia from the Jerusalem of Biblical times by entering the cave in the latter and exiting via the cave in the former. And his intention upon entering the cave in the Garden of Gethsemane is to attempt to return to his own time, some nineteen hundred years previously. Pelagia initially hopes to dismiss her experience as a dream, but gives up attempting to understand 'what was inaccessible to reason',<sup>57</sup> and instead turns to prayer. The interrogation of the nature of the fictional world enacted by the caves consequently lends Akunin's trilogy attributes identified as belonging to the metaphysical detective story.<sup>58</sup> The caves also function metatextually because, like them, the novels in the trilogy offer the reader what Pelagia calls an 'opening from one world into another'.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, as labyrinthine structures which refuse to reveal ultimate and definitive meaning, just like the library in Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose,<sup>60</sup> they become the perfect image for a postmodern and metaphysical insistence on an absence of teleology or resolution.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, in spite of the various clues which this image of the cave provides to the ultimate elusiveness of knowledge, it nevertheless tempts the reader into an interpretive act which potentially reveals the trilogy's most profound meaning. One explanation for Akunin favouring intertextual references to Dostoevskii throughout the trilogy, and Bulgakov particularly in the final novel, is that these two authors most effectively indicate that the presentation of the Pelagia novels as detective fiction is the greatest of all Akunin's red herrings. In fact, their presence suggests that rather than being crime fiction solely, his work is intended to explore the question of the individual's journey towards religious faith.<sup>62</sup> Most strikingly in Pelagia and the Red Rooster, but actually

throughout the three novels, it is possible to view the heroine's actions not only as a series of criminal investigations but as a spiritual undertaking. From the very first moments of her introduction, Pelagia's suitability as a nun is called into question. We are told that her physical appearance is 'quite shameful and impermissible for a nun'<sup>63</sup>; she is extremely clumsy in her habit and is described as 'not a nun, but a walking disaster with freckles'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, she is portrayed as being far more at ease with herself when she discards her habit and adopts the disguise of the secular Polina Andreevna Lisitsyna, as if this were her true identity. The issue of Pelagia's relative comfort in these two roles is not merely superficial but obviously linked to the conviction of her faith. Early in the third novel, in pleading with Mitrofanii to be allowed to continue with her investigative work, Pelagia makes it clear which of her two roles she thinks is the more useful and effective:

"You see, sir, when I see evil-doing triumph, and especially when someone innocent is accused... (...) Or someone is threatened by mortal danger... It feels here" the nun pressed one hand to her heart – "as if a little ember catches fire. And it burns, it will not let me be until truth and justice are restored. In keeping with my vocation, I ought to pray, but I cannot. Surely what God requires from us is not inaction and futile lamenting, but help – such as each of us is capable of."<sup>65</sup>

A while later, when Pelagia asks the Bishop for permission to accompany Dolinin on his Interior Ministry investigation, Mitrofanii urges her to consider whether she would be truer to herself if she were not a nun. He suggests that her real metier is detective work and that to deny her God-given gift of solving human mysteries is sinful. She insists that she wishes to remain a Bride of Christ; but her justification is based on a desire not to break her vows, rather than a more rooted sense of the rightness of her calling.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, having reiterated her determination to remain a nun, during the course of her work with Dolinin, and not for the first time in the trilogy, Pelagia experiences sexual attraction towards a member of the opposite sex. Even when she gets to the Holy Land, Pelagia still appears to be a woman more drawn to reason than to faith. Travelling across the country and seeing what she knows are some of the region's most famous Biblical sites, the reader is told that Pelagia

'was not really moved: although she muttered a prayer, it was mechanical, it had no soul. Her thoughts were too far away from the divine.'<sup>67</sup>

However, the very intentions with which Pelagia sets out to the Holy Land signal something of a shift outside the realm of conventional detective fiction: she has not gone in search of a criminal (as has Berdichevskii in the parallel plot line) but is tracking a potential victim, Manuila, in an effort to prevent his death. And her journey across the Holy Land certainly comes to resemble something less like a detective's pursuit and more of a pilgrimage: as the novel reaches its climax, Pelagia moves not only geographically nearer to Manuila, but also closer to an acceptance of faith. As she waits for him to turn up at the Garden of Gethsemane on the appointed day, she has absolute trust in the fact that he will arrive. Not only that, but she also begins to recite a prayer to herself, almost unknowingly. No longer mechanical, the narrator now describes how 'the act of prayer simply arose of its own accord, without any involvement of her reason'.<sup>68</sup> That evening, Pelagia follows Manuila into the cave seeking answers to her questions. There, she witnesses him convert the assassin Iakov Mikhailovich, who has spent the entirety of the novel trying to kill Manuila under orders from Chief Procurator Pobedin. The following evening, having realized that he needs a red rooster to perfectly recreate the conditions under which he apparently travelled from the Jerusalem of Biblical times to 1890s Russia, Manuila enters the cave again and disappears. The very next day, Pelagia herself buys a red rooster and does the same: she leaves behind the earthly realm of criminal investigations and reason to enter another world in which she needs to walk towards the light of true faith. In so doing, she appears, therefore, to have followed the terms of Manuila's earlier plea to Pobedin:

I told him that the Church was quite unnecessary... Everyone should follow his or her own path. Concerning God I told him that He had been necessary before, in earlier times, to instil the fear of God into people. But now something else is needed – not glancing over your shoulder at the wrathful Almighty, but listening to your own soul.<sup>69</sup>

Pelagia, the sceptical nun whose calling appears for so long to be towards the rational, quasi-scientific field of detective work gives it all up and follows a man who believes he is the son of God to

a spiritual, otherworldly realm. This realm might, according to various veiled allusions encountered through the novel, alternatively or additionally be that of death.<sup>70</sup> Either way, the novel thus becomes not a work of detective fiction but a demonstration of the ultimate need for a higher, spiritual faith to replace the inadequacy of merely earthly preoccupations.

Or does it? In precisely the type of circular interpretive movement encouraged by the labyrinthine spaces and narratives of postmodern fiction, the reader is implicitly warned about the instability of this, and indeed any, attribution of meaning. Alongside the cave, the other symbol that looms large at the end of the trilogy is the all-important red rooster. It is this creature, the reader has been informed on multiple occasions, which is the crucial factor facilitating access through time and space to another world. Moreover, its real significance, she has earlier been told, derives from the fact that it is an early Christian symbol – predating the cross – used to represent the son of God. Thus, when Pelagia disappears into the cave in the Garden of Gethsemane, the red rooster under her arm appears to be the most eloquent expression of her commitment to faith. However, there is no evidence of such a meaning in sources outside the novel to substantiate such a claim. It therefore becomes Akunin's final joke at the informed reader's expense. She is repeatedly encouraged to ascribe value and significance to – or, in other words, to place her own faith in – a symbol which, in the final reckoning, proves to be utterly self-referential and ironic. As such, it functions as the perfect image of the entirety of the reader's experience throughout Akunin's Pelagia trilogy – one of being constantly tempted into acts of interpretation and meaning-making which repeatedly result in ludic dead-ends.

### Conclusion

The games that the three Pelagia novels play with the informed detective-genre reader's quest for knowledge suggest that they are best viewed as examples of postmodernist metaphysical detective fiction. The trilogy actively acknowledges that detective fiction is conventionally designed, by means of its illustration of a detective in search of the solution to a crime, to tempt the reader into



mimicking such behaviour in her epistemological quest for interpretation and meaning. The particular mixture concocted by Akunin of historical setting and countless intertextual references invokes the image, and invites the participation, of an especially informed and model reader. And yet, simultaneously, by 'deliberately, flamboyantly, ironically (...) doubl[ing] its precursors'<sup>71</sup> the trilogy reveals the membership of any such group of select readers to be ultimately illusory. Whilst not perhaps as profoundly ironic and subversive as Eco's The Name of the Rose, Akunin's novels nevertheless pose progressively more serious questions about the meaning of history, the nature of knowledge, the act of reading and the mysteries of being. Like all metaphysical detective stories, the Pelagia trilogy can be most accurately considered to be works which, in the words of Kevin J.H. Dettmar referring to James Joyce's story 'The Sisters', 'lures the reader into a specially designed trap: the reader reads like a detective a tale which cautions against reading like a detective'.<sup>72</sup> Therein lies its sophistication and fascination.

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Akunin is also the author of the series Zhanry (Genres), which to date covers: children's literature, the spy novel, the fantastic and quest. In 2007, Akunin released the first in a new cycle, Smert' na brudershaft (Brüderschaft with Death), in which each of the ten novellas showcases a different cinematic genre. A number of his detective novels have been made into television serials and / or films and he has also worked on a theatrical adaptation of Azazel'.

<sup>2</sup> The first Erast Fandorin novel takes place in 1876 whilst the most recent, Okhota na Odisseia (The Hunt for the Odyssey), is set in 1914. The Nicholas Fandorin novels are the only series to feature a parallel time-line: Nicholas is situated in contemporary Russia whilst his ancestors are active in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The rather more vague temporal setting of the Pelagia trilogy, and its consequences, are

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an issue to be discussed in the main body of this essay. Leonid Yuzefovich is the other notable Russian crime writer whose novels are set in the historical past: the series he initiated in 2001 features a detective who is modelled on Ivan Putilin, Chief of Police in St Petersburg from 1866 until 1892.

<sup>3</sup> Olga Slavnikova considers Akunin to be responsible for the development of a 'cult of stylish detective fiction'; Olga Slavnikova, 'Tysiacha vtoraiia noch', Vremia, September 2002, <http://www.vremyamn.ru/cgi-bin/2000/1005/11/4.html> (accessed November 7, 2011). E.G. in Nezavisimaia gazeta compliments Akunin on the stylistic games and nuanced plots he incorporates into the Fandorin series; 'Chernaia koshka, belyi bul'dog', [http://exlibris.ng.ru/izdat/2000-04-27/5\\_petit.html](http://exlibris.ng.ru/izdat/2000-04-27/5_petit.html) (accessed November 7, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Natalia Ivanova criticizes Akunin for his use of Russian classical literature in an article in Druzhba narodov from 2000 ('Zhizn' i smert' simulakra v Rossii', Druzhba narodov, 8, 2000 <http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhba/2000/8/ivanova.html> (accessed November 7, 2011). Both she and Aleksandr Ageev are critical of the games that Akunin plays with the classics; see Aleksandr Ageev 'Golod 31: Prakticheskaia gastroenterologia chteniia', in Russkii zhurnal, May 17, 2001, <http://www.old.russ.ru/krug/20010517.html> (laccessed December 14, 2011). On his LiveJournal blog in 2011, Akunin claims to have been investigated by a government committee following an accusation from a member of the public that his novel Ves' mir – teatr contained extremist statements. It was decided in late October 2011 that no prosecution would follow: Nezavisimaia gazeta, October 2011, <http://www.ng.ru/society/news/2011/10/27/1319720805.html> (accessed December 14, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Akunin has been particularly outspoken about the Mikhail Khodorkovskii trials and the disputed parliamentary elections in December 2011. His Livejournal blog, mentioned above, is also a key factor in the public visibility solicited and enjoyed by Akunin.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Porter expresses this idea effectively when he states: 'the relationship between an author and his reader that obtains in detective stories is that of a problem setter to a problem solver'. In The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction, New Haven, CT, 1981, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that detective fiction plots represent a search for meaning or 'truth' is one shared by many different critics. See, for instance: G.K. Chesterton, 'A Defence of Detective Stories' (1901) in Howard Haycraft, The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays, New York, 1946, pp. 3-6 (p. 4); Martin Priestman, Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure in the Carpet, Basingstoke, 1990, p. 50; Peter Hühn, 'The Detective as Reader:

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Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction', Modern Fiction Studies, 33, 1987, 3, pp. 451-66 (p. 453).

Tzvetan Todorov argues that the story of the crime in detective fiction is 'l'histoire d'une absence' (the story of an absence); see 'Typologie du roman policier', in Poétique de la prose, Paris, 1971, pp. 9-19 (p. 12). Srdjan Smajic defines the detective's quest as 'an epistemological adventure in which sense perception leads to knowledge of the truth' in Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science, Cambridge, 2010, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> See Fish, 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', in J. Tompkins (ed.) Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post Structuralism, Baltimore, MD, 1980, pp. 70-100 (p. 87). Alternative, but similar, notions of this figure include the 'implied reader' (Wayne Booth, Wolfgang Iser), the 'model reader' (Umberto Eco), the 'super-reader' (Michel Riffaterre), and the 'ideal reader' (Jonathan Culler).

<sup>9</sup> The three novels which comprise the trilogy are: Pelagiia i belyi bul'dog (Pelagia and the White Bulldog, 2000); Pelagiia i chernyi monakh (Pelagia and the Black Monk, 2001); and Pelagiia i krasnyi petukh (Pelagia and the Red Rooster, 2003). All three novels have been translated into English by Andrew Bromfield.

<sup>10</sup> George N. Dove 'The Detection Formula and the Act of Reading', in Ronald G. Walker & June M. Frazer (eds.) The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Literary Theory, Macomb, IL, 1990, pp. 25-37 (p. 29).

<sup>11</sup> My reading of the Pelagia trilogy here chimes with Olga R's approach in her analysis of two of the Erast Fandorin novels. Referring to Akunin's inclusion in his novels of an historical / cultural layer, literary reminiscences, intertextual reference and mind games, Sobolev claims: 'This multi-layered approach creates a polyphonic artistic space, so characteristic of postmodernist writing, and suggests the possibility of an extensive dialogue with the audience on various cognitive levels.' Olga Sobolev, 'Boris Akunin and the Rise of the Russian Detective Genre', Australian Slavonic and East European Studies, 18 (1-2), 2004, pp. 63-85 (p. 68).

<sup>12</sup> Historical crime fiction is a popular subgenre with numerous practitioners, including: Umberto Eco in The Name of the Rose (1980); Anne Perry in her two series featuring Thomas Pitt (1979 - ) and William Monk (1990 - ), both of which are set in the Victorian era; and by C.J. Sansom in his novels starring the lawyer Matthew Shardlake (2003 - ) who lives in Tudor England. For a discussion of other authors of historical crime fiction as well as the various types of historical crime fiction and the subgenre's relationship to postmodernism, see John Scaggs, Crime Fiction, London, 2005, pp. 122-143.

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<sup>13</sup> The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence, ed. Robin Winks, New York, 1968, p. xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Cobley, Narrative, London, 2001, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> In anticipation of remarks to be made later in this article, it should be noted that this roman à clef technique is also one favoured by postmodern works as a means of indicating the ontological instability of the fictional world. See Brian McHale, Constructing Postmodernism, London, 1992, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Akunin is not averse, however, to including more anachronistic roman à clef clues. In Pelagia and the Red Rooster, for example, the well-known philanthropist bankrolling the rebuilding and repopulation of Sodom is George Sairus, a clear reference to the contemporary billionaire financier George Soros.

<sup>17</sup> The potential pitfalls inherent in this type of negative knowledge are illustrated by Elena Baraban who mistakenly identifies the temporal setting of the Pelagia trilogy as the 1860s. See Elena V. Baraban, 'A Country Resembling Russia: The Use of History in Boris Akunin's Detective Novels', The Slavic and East European Journal, 48, 2004, 3, pp. 396-420 (p. 400).

<sup>18</sup> The term 'focalizer' is taken from Susan Lanser, The Narrative Act, Princeton, NJ, 1981, pp. 141-7, which she defines as follows: 'A focalizer may be what is usually called a "point of view" character", or s/he may be a more nebulous and silent presence in the text. In both cases the focalizer is the presence – the recorder, the camera, the consciousness – through whose spatial, temporal and/or psychological position the textual events are perceived' (p. 141). The three focalizers in Pelagia and the Black Monk are Lentochkin, the Chief of Police from Zavolzhsk, Colonel Lagrange, and the public prosecutor, Matvei Bentsionovich Berdichevskii.

<sup>19</sup> Hühn, 'Detective as Reader', p. 459, p. 464.

<sup>20</sup> Discussing his work, Istoriia rossiiskogo gosudarstva (The History of the Russian State), in a 2007 interview, Akunin makes clear the problematic nature of historical truth when he says: 'то, что происходило в девятом веке, никто из историков достоверно не знает, поэтому я могу здесь фантазировать, как взбредет в голову'. <http://www.womanhit.ru/stars/interview/657461-boris-akunin-ya-blagodaren-svoim-kritikam.html> (accessed October 17, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Elena Diakova, for example, considers the novels to be set in the 'sam[ai]a dostoin[ai]a epokh[a] russkoi istorii' (the most worthy era in Russian history) and the location of the Pelagia novels, specifically, to be the 'ideal'no upravliaemyi rossiiskii gorod' (ideally-governed Russian town) of Zavolzhsk. See, Elena Diakova, 'Boris

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Akunin kak uspeshnaia otrasl' rossiiskoi promyshlennosti', in Novaia gazeta, No.45, July 2, 2001. <http://2001.novayagazeta.ru/society/13197.html> (accessed November 8, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> See Elena Rabinovich, 'Detektiv napominaet nam, chto pochem', Kriticheskaia massa, No.1 (2002). <http://magazines.russ.ru/km/2002/1/erab.html> (accessed November 8, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> S.E. Sweeney, 'Locked Rooms: Detective Fiction, Narrative Theory, and Self-Reflexivity', in Walker and Frazer (eds.) The Cunning Craft, pp. 1-14 (p. 4).

<sup>24</sup> The existence of such linearity and teleology in detective fiction is witnessed by Dennis Porter's statement that, 'detective fiction is preoccupied with the closing of the logico-temporal gap that separates the present of the discovery of crime from the past that prepared it.' See Porter, The Pursuit of Crime, p.29.

<sup>25</sup> Boris Akunin, Pelagia and the White Bulldog, p. 121 / p. 190. References to all three novels are taken, in Russian, from the collected edition published in Moscow by Astrel' in 2010 and, in English, from the Andrew Bromfield translations, published by Phoenix in 2007, 2008 and 2009. The first page reference is to the Russian; the second to the English.

<sup>26</sup> Linda Hutcheon, The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, London, 1988, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> Baraban, 'A Country Resembling Russia', pp. 399-400.

<sup>28</sup> Boris Akunin, Pelagia and the White Bulldog, p. 15 / p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, the narrator never reveals to the reader the details of the 'great grief and terrible suffering' endured by Pelagia before becoming a nun. In Pelagia and the White Bulldog, the reader is told that Pelagia leaves Mitrofanii's aunt's house for some reason and 'returned in a state of great thoughtfulness' (p. 86 / p. 133); but she is never told what prompts this state of mind. And in Pelagia and the Black Monk, the narrator feigns ignorance about the true identity of Pelagia's alter ego, Polina Andreevna Lisitsyna, even though this has been unambiguously established in the first novel.

<sup>30</sup> Boris Akunin, Pelagia and the White Bulldog, p. 113 / p. 177.

<sup>31</sup> Hutcheon, The Poetics of Postmodernism, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Baraban, 'A Country Resembling Russia', p. 411. Baraban is far from the only critic to note and discuss Akunin's use of intertextuality. See also: T. Prokhorova & V. Shamina, "'Dekorator" Akunina, ili fenomen kolleksionirovaniia v proze postmoderna', Voprosy literatury, 5, 2008, pp. 185-200; Sergei Dubin, 'Detektiv, kotoryi ne boitsia byt chtivom', Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 21, 2000, pp. 412-14.

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<sup>33</sup> S.E. Sweeney, 'Purloined Letters: Poe, Doyle and Nabokov', Russian Literature Triquarterly, 24, 1991, pp. 213-37 (p. 216).

<sup>34</sup> The allusions to Leskov, albeit in the Fandorin series, have previously been noted by Andrei Ranchin in 'Romany B. Akunina i klassicheskaia traditsiia: povestvovanie v chetyrekh glavakh s preduvedomleniem, liricheskim otstupleniem i epilogom', Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 67, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Hanna Charney, The Detective Novel of Manners: Hedonism, Morality, and the Life of Reason, London, and Toronto, 1981, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> H.R. Jauss, Towards an Aesthetics of Reception, trans. T. Bahti, Minneapolis, MN, 1982, p. 23. Jauss explains: 'The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced'.

<sup>37</sup> The genteel rural setting of Akunin's trilogy calls to mind Agatha Christie's Miss Marple novels, as does Pelagia's penchant for knitting, a pastime shared by her English predecessor.

<sup>38</sup> Akunin complicates this potential interpretation by giving the director of the psychiatric hospital in Pelagia and the Black Monk the name Korovin. This is an obvious mutation of Chekhov's character's name, which also implies an ironic undermining by its relationship to the Russian word 'korova' (cow).

<sup>39</sup> The title of Alena Solntseva's article in Vremia in December 2000, 'Massovaia literatura mozhet byt' vozvyshennoi', is a clear expression of this view. See Vremia, no. 182, December 6, 2000. <http://www.vremya.ru/print/4196.html> (accessed November 16, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Chesterton, 'A Defence', p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Evidence of the persistence of this division is provided by Joel Black, for instance, who refers to the role played by one 'low' work and one 'high' work in the introduction of the term detective in Britain in the nineteenth century. See, The Aesthetics of Murder: a study in romantic literature and contemporary culture, Baltimore, MN, 1991, p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> McHale, Constructing Postmodernism, p. 164.

<sup>43</sup> I am grateful to Philip Ross Bullock for initially suggesting this potential interpretation of Akunin's intertextuality.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Lovell, The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras, London, 2000, p. 21.

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<sup>45</sup> In a 2011 interview with Rossiiskaia gazeta, republished in Daily Telegraph, Akunin notes that the reader has 'surpassed my boldest expectations' by reading his novels in such numbers. He also argues that the popularity of the Erast Fandorin novels can be ascribed, in part, to the reader's desire to be more like his literary hero and to Fandorin's positive attributes: 'I think Russia would be a much better place if more people were like Fandorin'. See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/rbth/culture/8432287/Russian-literature-Interview-with-Boris-Akunin.html> (accessed October 17, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Lovell, The Russian Reading Revolution, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> As Olga Sobolev states: 'Akunin's work suggests an attempt to create a new type of literature: an aesthetic and intellectual novel, which erases the distinction between the professional and the non-professional reader, and so occupies a new cultural niche.' In 'Boris Akunin and the Rise of the Russian Detective Genre', p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> In After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture, Mikhail Epstein writes 'These attempts to homogenize Soviet society created a new culture of mediocrity, which was equally far from both the upper and lower levels of a highly stratified Western culture. In the Soviet Union, this middling level was established even earlier than in the West, and the levelling process provided the ground for postmodern development' Amherst, MA, 1995 p.205.

<sup>49</sup> Sofya Khagi, 'Boris Akunin and Retro Mode in Contemporary Russian Culture', Toronto Slavic Quarterly, 2005. <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/13/khagi13.shtml> (accessed November 16, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Durham, NC, 1991, p. 20.

<sup>51</sup> Pelagia and the White Bulldog, p. 23 / p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138 / p. 217.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17 / p. 20.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17 / pp. 20-1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119 / p. 187.

<sup>56</sup> A cave does feature in the second novel of the trilogy but is not as obviously linked to the idea of elusive meaning. In Pelagia and the Black Monk, the heroine enters the cave on Outskirts Island in pursuit of Lentochnik who is collecting precious metal from the meteorite which has fallen into it. With its walls lined with the skeletons of monks who have previously lived and died there, the cave shares features with the ossuary in

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Eco's The Name of the Rose which links the church with the Aedificium. It is a chamber of seemingly fantastical dimensions but does not pose the same ontological questions as the one described in the trilogy's final novel.

<sup>57</sup> Pelagia and the Red Rooster, p. 589 / p. 103.

<sup>58</sup> In yet another potential intertextual reference, the phrase 'metaphysical detective story' was coined by Howard Haycraft in 1941 to describe the plotting and intentions of G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown series. In terms which can be applied to Akunin's novel, Jeanne C. Ewert argues that 'metaphysical detective fiction abounds with examples of other, unfamiliar universes and of the uneasiness produced when boundaries between universes are violated'. See Ewert, "'A Thousand Other Mysteries": Metaphysical Detection, Ontological Quests', in Patricia Merivale & Susan Sweeney (eds.) Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism, Philadelphia, PA, 1999, pp. 179-98 (p. 189).

<sup>59</sup> Pelagia and the Red Rooster, p. 585 / p. 98.

<sup>60</sup> The intertextual reference to Eco is strengthened by the fact that, upon returning to Zavolzhsk, she reads a treatise on caves from Mitrofani's library authored by Adalbert whose other works were destroyed during a fire in a monastery – the fate which befalls the library in The Name of the Rose.

<sup>61</sup> McHale suggests that spaces such as labyrinths (Eco), libraries (Eco and Borges) and law courts (Kafka) are 'typical of an entire postmodernist topology', p. 157. Charles Jencks argues that '[Postmodern space] suspends normal categories of time and space, social and rational categories which are built up in everyday architecture and behaviour, to become "irrational" or quite literally impossible to figure out.' See, Charles Jencks, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, New York, 1984, p. 124.

<sup>62</sup> In her reading of one of the Erast Fandorin novels, Koronatsiia (Coronation), Olga Sobolev considers that novel's deviation into the realm of social criticism and an examination of identity to render its classification as detective fiction 'fleetingly suspect'. Sobolev 'The Rise of the Russian Detective Genre', (p. 77). A similar, if less 'fleeting', charge could certainly be laid at the feet of Pelagia and the Red Rooster.

<sup>63</sup> Pelagia and the White Bulldog, p. 15 / p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15 / p. 17.

<sup>65</sup> Pelagia and the Red Rooster, p. 522 / p. 23.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 554-5 / pp. 61-2.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 721 / pp. 260-1.



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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 807 / p. 361.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 842 / p. 405.

<sup>70</sup> For example, the treatise on caves which Pelagia reads mentions 'special caves' which connect 'the fleshly world from the non-fleshly world and every soul passes through them twice: when it enters into flesh and when it leaves the flesh after death' (Pelagia and the Red Rooster, p. 598 / p. 114). Furthermore, Pelagia belatedly realizes that the heartfelt prayer she recites whilst waiting for Manuila is that 'for the transition from the earthly life to the Eternal Dwelling' (ibid., p. 807 / p. 361).

<sup>71</sup> Ewert, "A Thousand Other Mysteries", p. 179.

<sup>72</sup> Kevin J.H. Dettmar, 'From Interpretation to "Intrepidation": Joyce's "The Sisters" as a Precursor of the Postmodern Mystery', in Walker & Frazer, The Cunning Craft, pp. 149-65 (p. 156).