

## Andrei Bitov on “Russian Wealth”

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Great Russian thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Alexander Herzen, Mikhail Bakunin, Fedor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, and others) mused about the dilemmas of late imperial Russia. Some of them penned specific proposals as to what should be done—Herzen’s novel *What Is to Be Done?* (*Chto delat’*, 1863), Tolstoy’s philosophical tract of nearly the same title, *So What Are We to Do?* (*Tak chto zhe nam delat’*, 1886), and Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done* (*Chto delat’*) of 1902. In addition to listing the social ills that they desired to see eradicated, some social critics of the day identified as well what deserved to be protected—those aspects of Russian culture that characterized and enriched the nation. With the late-twentieth-century demise of the Soviet Union, these grand questions occupy the attention of great thinkers once again. Writers cum “public intellectuals” such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Bitov speak and write extensively on the Russia that they have inherited, about what has been lost (as well as jettisoned) over the last two centuries, and what has endured.

As an emblem of these polemics, which pursued Russia’s essence and the abiding question of “What is to be done?”, we might consider the two incarnations of a journal entitled *Russian Wealth* (*Russkoe bogatstvo*; translated also as *Russian Riches* and *Russian Treasures*). It was first published from 1876 to 1918 (until the Bolshevik Revolution). It was then “reincarnated” in the post-Soviet period, from 1991 to 1994. Populist editors of the nineteenth-century journal, Nikolai Mikhailovskii and Vladimir Korolenko, identified the wealth of Russian culture and civilization generally from “below.” For them, Russia’s treasure lay in the common folk (*narod*) who had forever fed and clothed the nation. This understanding was not lost in the reincarnation of *Russian Wealth* in 1991. Yet, the editor and publisher of the late-twentieth-century journal, Anatolii Zlobin, and his editorial board did not strive simply to replicate its populist predecessor from the nineteenth century. They considered Russia’s riches as emanating from “above” as well: “*Russian Wealth* is a major publishing innovation: each issue is dedicated to only one author, offering the reader works created in various genres.”<sup>1</sup> The editors strove to encompass the wealth of Russian *high* culture that had long been recognized in the pre-Soviet period by particular iconic Russian writers who had been graced by it. Two members of that pantheon, Russia’s national poet Alexander Pushkin (born in 1799) and Vladimir Nabokov (born in 1899), both of aristocratic heritage, bore witness to the decline and fall

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.booksite.ru//department/center/others.htm>

(respectively) of the Russian aristocracy. Yet, recognizing the contributions of high culture to the Russian “treasure-trove,” they gave testimony (figuratively and, at times, even literally) to the particular benefits of privilege for the arts.

Pushkin’s commitment to aristocratic privilege was decidedly more ambivalent than that of the famously disdainful Nabokov. At various times and in various ways Pushkin called into question the tacit acceptance of social inequality. Scholars have chronicled and have even attempted to reconcile the protean Pushkin with the arrogant aesthete, the dandy, and even the revolutionary. For example, inherent contradiction, which is at the core of Yurii Lotman’s understanding of Pushkin’s politics and aesthetics, characterizes Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1833) against the backdrop of the Enlightenment and the Decembrist revolt of 1825. Lotman states: “The proponent of enlightenment, the ‘intelligent man,’ will inevitably be a lover of freedom.”<sup>2</sup> Aristocratic privilege provides the opportunity for enlightenment. Yet, enlightened thinking must call into question the very system that provided that opportunity. Onegin’s political consciousness remains undeveloped because he chose not to avail himself of the opportunity granted him for enlightenment. Lotman concludes: “The fundamental characteristic of the artistic image of Onegin is the *superficiality* of his education.”<sup>3</sup> He squandered his aristocratic privilege.

Figuratively, “Russian wealth” connotes even more than the tangible artistic legacy of Russian culture, both high and popular. It is Russia and Russianness, from the beauty of the Russian countryside to that elusive spiritual connectedness of souls (in its layman’s understanding)—*sobornost’*. The term carries here the more social and political, rather than religious, connotation of an “organic union of believers in love and freedom.”<sup>4</sup> As for the symbolic significance of the Russian land itself, interpreters of Russian art have recognized the expression of Russianness in works of landscape artists such as Ivan Shishkin, Aleksei Venetsianov, Mikhail Nesterov, Isaak Levitan, and others. Their observations provided the impetus to the 2004 exhibit at London’s National Gallery “Russian Landscape in the Age of Tolstoy.” Thus, Russia’s treasures include the real and imagined expression of all that is uniquely Russian.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, writers such as Vladimir Nabokov mourned the loss not only of their “childhood,” but also of Russian culture, at least as they had experienced it. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* (originally published in 1951; revised in 1967), Nabokov laments the passing of the “*vie de château*” he and

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<sup>2</sup> Yurii Lotman, *Pushkin* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo SPB, 1995) 404.

<sup>3</sup> Lotman 404. Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> See Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, “*Obshchestvennost’*, *Sobornost’*: Collective Identities,” *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1880–1940*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 26–27.

members of his class lived: "The kind of Russian family to which I belonged—a kind now extinct—had, among other virtues, a traditional leaning toward the products of Anglo-Saxon civilization ... I learned to read English before I could read Russian."<sup>5</sup> He describes, as well, French tutors and music lessons, a devoted mother who taught him to cherish the past, use his imagination, and appreciate "all games of skill and gambling" (42). Nabokov depicts (or projects) his "master's idyll" in his descriptions of others on the family estate. He represents his father as just and beloved by the male peasants of Vyra. The peasant women on the estate, he recalls, led a similarly content existence: "Through the window one could see kerchiefed peasant girls weeding a garden path on their hands and knees or gently raking the sun-mottled sand. (The happy days when they would be cleaning streets and digging canals for the State were still beyond the horizon)" (80). Despite Nabokov's rose-tinted gaze on manor life, his lament on the death of "Russia," or his reference to the Soviet abuses to come, the belief in an elemental Russian way of life has endured. Russian writers and intellectuals, in an ever more globalized new Russia, continue to mourn the loss of "Russian wealth," which they now recognize as existing in the Soviet era as well.

It would seem that no Russian can reject every aspect of the Soviet past. Even Viktor Pelevin, Russia's arch-postmodernist, departs in his novel *Omon Ra* (1992) from his more typical portrayal of the irrelevance of "value." Without irony, his cosmonaut heroes embrace Soviet notions of valor and self-sacrifice. Omon and his friend Mitek come to realize that their childhood dream to fly to the moon requires the "ultimate sacrifice." They learn that the Soviet Union does not have the technology or resources for the round-trip journey. But in order to save face with the West, the government will send a group of astronauts on a suicidal one-way trip. Omon and Mitek accept their fate for the sake of the "greater good." A cynical government exploits the idealism of Russian youth.<sup>6</sup>

As another example of the undervalued "wealth" of the Soviet Union, we might note the nostalgia that some might now experience viewing Ilya Kabakov's installation representing the Soviet-era communal apartment (*kommunalka*). The Russian culture that Kabakov's *You've Got Something Boiling, Ol'ga Grigor'evna* evokes could not be considered part of the Russian or Soviet treasure-trove in any strict sense. In the late Soviet period, the artist took as his subject Soviet kitsch. Only a truly countercultural interpretation, favoring "rubbish" over high culture, could have identified in his paintings a "rich" Soviet culture. However, Eastern Europeans of various "strains" might now recognize in the post-Communist version of Kabakov's installation of a Soviet communal apartment a lost connection—the shared experience of what the Croatian ex-

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<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 79.

<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Simmons, "Fly Me to the Moon: Modernism and the Soviet Space Program in Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra*," *The Harriman Review* 12.4 (2000): 4–9.

patriot writer Dubravka Ugrešić terms the “East European trauma.”<sup>7</sup> As difficult as living conditions might have been under Communism, many who lived it cannot help but react to the loss of a shared past life and sense of communality with nostalgia.

Still other writers, artists, and cultural historians engage the Russian/Soviet past from another perspective; not simply as Russian wealth or with an ambivalent sense of nostalgia. Within their purview of a broader Russian heritage (*nasledie*), we must include, they insist, violence and misery as well. For instance, some landscape artists who conveyed the nation’s wealth in emblematic vistas (Shishkin, Polenov, Kuindzhi, Levitan) recognized, even if they did not depict them, tensions and incongruities. Isaak Levitan was struck, while painting his *Vladimirka Road* (1892), with the realization that it was the road that convicts were forced to march on their way to Siberia. Prominent, and senior, among contemporary writers who confront the disparities within the Russian inheritance is Andrei Bitov.

Andrei Bitov’s creative life has spanned Soviet censorship in the period of stagnation and the current “freedom” of the pen (albeit with the new limitations set by the “censorship” of the marketplace). If Bitov, in his creative writing and cultural commentaries, has recognized the underbelly of the Russian past, he was born into the tradition of the wealth of Russian high culture: “My big family didn’t have to keep up with the latest to consider itself cultured. Its tastes were independent and distant from the times: the most contemporary writer was Leonid Andreev, the most recent composer—Rachmaninov.”<sup>8</sup> Although it may be difficult to identify direct autobiographical references to Bitov’s own life, the writer continually confronts issues and philosophical questions that reflect the concerns of his class and generation. In fact, many of his most significant works qualify as “poetic autobiographies,” which, according to William Spengemann’s definition, are defined more by autobiographical *intent* (to define or explore the self) than the inclusion of autobiographical elements.<sup>9</sup> The reader can extrapolate from Bitov’s exploration of self to a consideration of the stewards and practitioners of Russian high culture.

A hallmark of Bitov’s poetics is his penchant for intertextual ties to works of the Russian literary canon. In so doing, he reminds the reader of a multivalenced legacy. While paying homage to Russia’s great books, Bitov reminds the reader of inherited cultural maladies. It is a practice we recognize early on in Bitov’s writing. In 1968, in the story “The Idler” (“Bezdel’nik,” published in the

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<sup>7</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (New York: New Directions Books, 1996) 36–38.

<sup>8</sup> “Autobiography,” in Andrei Bitov, *Life in Windy Weather: Short Stories*, ed. Priscilla Meyer (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1986) 18.

<sup>9</sup> William Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

collection *Apothecary Island*), a young Soviet man faces the numbing reality of a scheduled life of uninteresting work. His fantasy life, often fed by alcohol, leads to censure from the boss, and in the end the idler refuses to defend himself. Allowing his mind to wander, not tuning in to his boss's offer of a last chance, Alesha ensures his dismissal. The short text echoes a myriad of Russian classics and their heroes. Alesha's uncreative office work recalls Gogol's "The Overcoat," while his sense of alienation and of being unappreciated suggests that Alesha is a twentieth-century version of the nineteenth-century's "superfluous man." Alesha experiences his own version of Raskolnikov's memory, in *Crime and Punishment*, of the beaten mare, with the twist that, although in Alesha's version onlookers come to the horse's aid, the symbolic significance of this "literary" happy resolution has no effect on his personal dilemma—he is still unable to achieve his goal of getting a sick-leave pass from work. Alesha is also drawn to the free and mysterious "Islands" of St. Petersburg, just as Raskolnikov was. The connection to Raskolnikov is then mediated by association with another frequenter of the Islands, Nikolai Apollonovich of Andrei Bely's apocalyptic novel *Petersburg* (1916). Furthermore, the tension between fathers as representatives of the system and sons as "revolutionaries," depicted in *Petersburg* and descending from Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, reverberates in the idler Alesha's arguments with his own father. And the ties to the past and the heritage of Russian literature do not end there. Whether these allusions recall positive or negative representations of Russian society, they all belong to the Russian "treasure-trove," which Bitov himself attributes to a kind of collective unconscious of Russian literature and culture.<sup>10</sup> The heritage of Russian literature provides a richer context for the story. It reverberates with a wealth of perspectives on classic themes.

Bitov's monument both to Russian high culture and to intertextual allusions as a poetic device is, undoubtedly, *Pushkin House* (*Pushkinskii dom*, 1978).<sup>11</sup> First published in the United States in 1978 and in its entirety in Russia only in 1989, the novel continues to receive considerable critical attention. The narrator of *Pushkin House* identifies its iconoclastic genre as a "museum novel" (*roman-muzei*). The novel is a figurative museum—a concatenation of extra-textual allusions, mostly to works of Russian literature. The book's title suggests from the start the significance of Russian literature for the novel. Pushkin House, the former Customs House in St. Petersburg, houses the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian (formerly Soviet-Russian) Academy of Sciences. It is also a museum. Yet, Bitov's "Pushkin House" exists on the abstract level as well, much as Andrei Bely's novel *Petersburg* (1916) refers to both the city and the *idea* of the city. *Pushkin House* likewise conjures up the mythology of the Imperial capital. Bitov recalls and laments the faded majesty of the city, in sharp contrast to Bely's condemnation of its imperial splendor. On the first page of the novel,

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<sup>10</sup> Priscilla Meyer, "Introduction," in Bitov, *Life in Windy Weather* 7.

<sup>11</sup> Andrei Bitov, *Pushkin House*, trans. Susan Brownsberger (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1990). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

Bitov describes Leningrad as “desolated,” isolated, and “in dialogue” with no one. The city is imagined as a letter, “which had once been addressed by Peter ‘to spite his haughty neighbor’ but now was addressed to no one and reproached no one, asked nothing...” (3). *Pushkin House* concerns the interconnections of Russian literature per se as much as it does the relationship of the protagonists to Russian literature.

To recall the dense fabric of intertextual ties in *Pushkin House*, we need only consider briefly the overall structure of the novel. The titles of the prologue and three sections invoke famous works of Russian literature: Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?* (*Chto delat’?*, 1863), Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (*Ottsy i deti*, 1862), Mikhail Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time* (*Geroi nashego vremeni*, 1840), and *The Bronze Horseman* (*Mednyi vsadnik*, 1833) by Pushkin. Events within the sections reflect major themes from the works they allude to. Thus, the plot unravels slowly, and the (initiated) reader’s attention is constantly deflected by associations that suggest alternative meanings.

Bitov’s dialogue with Russian literature and its embodiment of high culture occupies center stage in *Pushkin House*. However, the story reveals to an equal or even greater degree disturbing elements of the common Russian heritage. The protagonist of the novel, Leva Odoevstev, represents the latest generation in a long line of Russian scholars. His line, the intelligentsia, traditionally preserved the legacy of Russian high culture. Yet, his parents’ generation betrayed that responsibility in cowardly reaction to the violent assaults of Stalin’s henchmen. Leva’s grandfather, a renowned linguist, was denounced in the Stalinist purges, arrested, and imprisoned in the gulag. Leva’s parents disowned his grandfather, and even if the rationale was to save their own son Leva, they nonetheless collaborated with this evil. The air of secrecy that subsequently descended on the Odoevstev household then had disastrous consequences for the next generation. Cut off from the history of his family, Leva cannot develop a relationship with the past and therefore has difficulty discerning what is real. He also does not receive needed support from his parents. Their deception with respect to the past has destroyed their ability to relate to their son sincerely on any level.

The wave of violence under Stalin destroyed the life and career of the patriarch of the Odoevstev family. Yet, when the grandfather is rehabilitated and returns to Leningrad, Leva is stunned to realize what the old man has become. Leva’s formerly refined and long-suffering grandfather has turned coarse and bitter. He cannot now embrace his rehabilitation and the values of pre-Revolutionary culture that the Odoevstevs represented. The terror not only destroyed the life and heritage that defined Grandfather Odoevstev. It destroyed the grandfather *for* that life and heritage. He has been transformed and now better represents the very process of dehumanization against which he stood up. Grandfather Odoevstev cannot partake of “rehabilitation” or the resurrection of the old ways.

The far reach of the Stalinist terror rent the fabric of Russian and Soviet culture. In human relationships, fear replaced trust, and deception integrity. Leva Odoevtsev and his generation have no sense of a time when the old values (trust and integrity) held sway. Leva himself serves as an emblem of what Stalinism bequeathed. Although he is completing his dissertation and demonstrating promise as a literary scholar, his personal life lacks integrity. He fails to defend a friend who falls into official disfavor at the Institute (“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”), and he maintains at times deceptive relationships with three women. Leva’s path toward self-awareness, spurred by the shock of meeting his grandfather, is a circuitous one. It culminates at the end of the novel with a duel between him and his rival, Mitishatev. Mitishatev, in addition to representing the “Soviet man” in all his negative connotations, has symbolically broken Pushkin’s death mask, an exhibit in Pushkin House. Armed with Pushkin’s dueling pistols, Leva and Mitishatev take their places. The narrator, referring to himself as the “author,” turns his back to the scene. A shot is fired, and the narrator “discovers” Leva lying on the floor. Mitishatev flees. The reader has been prepared for Leva’s death since the first pages of the Prologue and the glimpse of his body on the floor of the museum. We learn in an epilogue, however, that Leva has survived the duel. Even so, and even if he has learned certain lessons about honesty and integrity, Leva remains inscribed in the Soviet world of violent assaults on Russian wealth, broadly defined.

Critics recognize *Pushkin House* as Bitov’s magnum opus, artistically highly influential and definitive in its depiction of the relationship of Bitov’s generation and his class to the Soviet experience. Similarly, Vasilii Aksenov, who vies with Bitov as the spokesperson of their generation (if now as a Russian American), takes up the question of the responsibility of the intelligentsia in his magnum opus as well. In *The Burn* (*Ozhog*, 1980), in a singular pronouncement in the novel from the authorial voice, the narrator queries rhetorically, “who cut themselves off from the people, who groveled before the people, who let the Tatars into the city, invited the Varangians to come and rule over them, licked the boots of Europe, struggled madly against the government, submitted obediently to dim-witted dictators? We did that—we, the Russian intelligentsia.”<sup>12</sup> In the history of Russian literature under repression, self-flagellation appears as a recurrent theme among writers of the intelligentsia.

Bitov has identified as his most significant work in the post-Soviet era, what he terms “life after life,” the trilogy that he began as soon as he had completed *Pushkin House*. *The Monkey Link: A Pilgrimage Novel* (*Oglashennyye*) brings together artistic and philosophical concerns that engaged Bitov for twenty-five years.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Vassily Aksenov, *The Burn* (New York: Vintage, 1985) 221.

<sup>13</sup> Andrei Bitov, *The Monkey Link: A Pilgrimage Novel*, trans. Susan Brownsberger (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

Published in Russia in 1995, only Part Three, "Awaiting Monkeys," was written after the fall of the Soviet Union. Although Bitov is less recognizable in the traveling narrators (journalists and writers) of *The Monkey Link*, they convey easily identified concerns of the author—the repression in the period of stagnation under General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev; ecological mismanagement; and the malignant influence of Soviet rule over non-Russian populations in the Soviet "empire."

It is in the second and third parts of the trilogy that we find further evidence of Bitov's recognition of the underside of the Russian legacy. Part Two, entitled "Man in a Landscape," which Bitov wrote in 1983, coincides with one of the bleakest periods of his life and career. In 1979 Bitov, along with other counterculture writers such as Vasilii Aksenov, Bella Akhmadulina, and Viktor Erofeev, submitted for publication in the Soviet Union a collection of their previously rejected literary works. They were rejected again and publicly condemned. The anthology *Metropol'* was subsequently published, in the original Russian, in the United States by Ardis Publishers. As a result of the "Metropol Affair," as it came to be called, and the publication of *Pushkin House* abroad, Bitov faced censorship at home and a subsequent loss of income. He was further disheartened by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. "Man in a Landscape" serves as an allegory of Bitov's and the intelligentsia's despair during the Brezhnev period of stagnation.

The narrator in "Man in a Landscape" describes a seemingly fantastic encounter with Pavel Petrovich, a painter and sculptor who is in the process of painting the reality in which the narrator is inscribed. Pavel Petrovich also guides the narrator on an alcohol-inspired journey through time and space, trying to reveal the relationship of art to creation and to revise the scientific conception of the evolution of humankind, according to the creation myth of Escheguki. Escheguki, the evil double of the creator Hikibumatva, seeks to mimic the god's creations. Hikibumatva created the songbird; Escheguki, the bat. Hikibumatva created the butterfly; Escheguki, the housefly. Escheguki sculpts the monkey as a tribute to the Creator himself. Out of vexation at the created caricature, Hikibumatva sheds a tear and a drop of sweat from his brow into the eyes of the monkey. These anointing drops transform the monkey into a human being, a "man who is two-sided—he was created by the devil, but inspired by God" (132). According to this myth, we have evolved from the monkey, but having inherited our flesh from the devil, we are unable to achieve oneness with God.

Pavel Petrovich's myth accounts for the human potential for evil (our devil's flesh). The narrator continues his boozy journey with the painter and eventually recounts Pavel Petrovich's personal experience with evil: "The dreadful stories of his sympathetic, horrific life were fitted in between these spatially and temporally unequal drinks.... The fascists set fire to his house; sheep bleated; the



flag fluttered over the village soviet; the tractor crushed a drunk in a rut; one night a boar appeared in the headlights of the Studebaker; not until a week later were they found, starving in a cellar and unable to remember the word 'mama'; his brother escaped from the juvenile colony but proved to be the 'cow'—his fellow escapees ate him fifty kilometers from Ulan-Ude; they found a child's finger in a meat pie at the station lunch counter; his father raped his little sister in a furrow" (125).

Despite the melodramatic nature of this biography, the narrator does not doubt Pavel Petrovich. He observes that the underlying motif of the artist's life story is betrayal: "Every time he was unjustly, illegally, accidentally, intentionally, through no will of his own, et cetera, banished, seized, resettled, imprisoned, punished, humiliated, trampled—at the university, in the army, in the orchestra, in the work brigade, in kindergarten, in the Academy of Arts—his highroad, his bright path, his calling, his purpose was blocked and cut short. Every time, he was *betrayed*" (125–26). Pavel Petrovich attributes the human potential for evil to Escheguki's creation of a monkey caricature of God. That potential was realized to the maximum extent in Pavel Petrovich's Russian context. Worst of all, however, the malignant atmosphere has tainted Pavel Petrovich himself. When the police confront the inebriated artist and narrator, Pavel Petrovich runs away. Having listened to the artist's tale of woe, the narrator observes: "And however unrepentant I was as his listener, however poorly I understood, I could not be fully unaware of the link between this endless chain of treacheries and the fact that he had taken to his heels last night and I had been arrested" (126). The creation myth accounts for evil in the evolution from Escheguki's monkey to *Homo sapiens*. In the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev, that evil flourished and was then bequeathed to subsequent generations.

In the third part of Bitov's trilogy, the bifurcated narrator (a writer and his alter ego) travels to the Soviet Republic of Abkhazia. His encounters with a motley array of locals and fellow travelers disclose or emphasize numerous failed promises of Soviet ideology. While in Sukhumi, the capital, the narrator, with an entourage from a film crew, pays a visit to a former world record holder in pistol shooting named Marxen. The reader receives Marxen's brief biography as an emblem to the illogic and tragic consequences in Soviet life. His ethnicity is described: "His father was Georgian and his mother Abkhazian, but his grandmother had been Jewish, a pre-Revolutionary revolutionary, and that was how he came by the name Marxen. His parents were imprisoned in '37, so he ended up in the village with his Abkhazian grandfather. Even then in '37, he saw things clearly. Marx and Engels—he hated those mothers" (161). Although extremely nearsighted, "minus twenty," Marxen could certainly see through the government's false charges. His options, as the son of enemies of the state, were limited. Marxen's road was obvious, the narrator tells us—sports! Another Soviet absurdity, perhaps, but his celebrity has in any case waned by now. Marxen now

testifies to the abject situation of the has-been athlete in the USSR: "He had nothing! He didn't have his pistol—it had been state property, unlawfully classified as a military weapon. Only the stock—that was all he had left as a memento of his world record and twenty years of his life. Embarrassed by the paltriness of the outcome of an entire lifetime, he tenderly unfolded a flannel rag, as though it contained a baby's little corpse. There lay a fantastic bone..." (161). All Marxen had left from his celebrity and service to the state was a piece of wood carved to match his grip on a pistol.

In his travels toward the monkey colony, the narrator makes various observations on Russian and Soviet society. On a stop along the way, he ponders the fate of the Russian village. Much that he observes that is healthy and wholesome there has suffered from the malignant influence of the city or the regime. He notes that ruddy-faced country lads have emptied the villages to populate the urban police force. To know their last names is to travel through the countryside: "For example the name of the village Akshontovo flashes past your window on the roadside. Exactly. In your youth you had an encounter with a Sergeant or even (keep going) a Lieutenant Akshontov. He composed the statement and you signed it, seemingly not even for what you had done but for what you had not done. Solid negatives: unprintable (expressions), illicit (intoxication), insubordination (to the representative of authority)" (183–84). The misuse of these ruddy-cheeked youths has its counterpart in the Abkhazian village in a rosy-faced young woman who welcomes the narrator on his arrival. Her fresh appearance and her unlikely name (the "Russian" Sophie—wisdom) argue against her position—she is a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. A degraded Russian culture has both seduced the villagers from their pristine world into the city and insinuated itself into their rural life.

The Abkhazian village recalls for the narrator other villages and perhaps the most devastating Soviet intrusion into the countryside. He suddenly remembers the "heavenly northern village of Turlykovo" and all the characteristics of the buildings and surrounding territory. And what came to pass: "People had lived there! And—it had existed! ... They did not live there now. The temple had been abandoned with a weird, shocking suddenness: spoons in the sideboard and a little frock hanging in the wardrobe.... What a bombing that was! Come on out, crawl out, it's all over! ... That was how it seemed, that the handsome residents would suddenly emerge, making a joyful noise and exulting that nothing had been destroyed, everything was intact.... Except.... They would never return! That was the terrible thing. They would never again want to.... As though collectivization were, indeed, Russia's notorious primacy in the invention of the neutron bomb: everything is safe and sound, man alone is gone. We will yet return to Turlykovo!" (190–91). Such abominations against the Russian village represent for Bitov not only the devastating legacy of violence against the people, but a direct betrayal of the "Russian wealth" that was hailed in the nineteenth-century journal of that name.

Social scientists have identified alcohol abuse as yet another scourge on the Russian people—this one dating from at least imperial Russia, which did not abate in the Soviet era and has not abated today.<sup>14</sup> We might expect to find this indictment in *The Monkey Link* as well. However, those familiar with Bitov's generation of writers and their works (not to mention the writers themselves) recognize the real and metaphorical escape alcohol has proffered as a means to alter consciousness and, therefore, reality. In "Awaiting Monkeys," as in the tradition of canonical alcoholic narratives (such as Venedikt Erofeev's *Moscow to the End of the Line*, 1969, and Vasilii Aksenov's *The Burn*), travelers to the monkey colony Pavel Petrovich and Doctor D. argue the necessity of alcohol: "Without beer the nation will become totally besotted.... You can't go against nature.... We're a drinking people.... But God, *what we drink!*" (*The Monkey Link*, 239). Pavel Petrovich says that one of the crimes against the people in the period of stagnation was not the regime's use of alcohol as a palliative (under Andropov the price of vodka fell to below five rubles once again). It was the regime's failure to provide *pure* alcohol and *decent* wines (239). As in most other alcoholic narratives in Russian literature, the reader must negotiate between the protagonists' justification for the privileged position of alcohol in Russian culture and its effect on the protagonists and other characters, as revealed in the narrative.<sup>15</sup>

These are just some of Bitov's observations in *Pushkin House* and *The Monkey Link* on Russian treasures and the Russian heritage. We recognize a greater focus in *Pushkin House* on inherited *high* culture, and in *The Monkey Link*, Bitov's pilgrimage novel, on the legacy of the Russian land and common people. These are all cautionary tales. Our legendary connection to the monkey, as told in Part Three of *The Monkey Link*, is emblematic of everything that Russia and Russians have inherited. Humans descend from both good and evil—the flesh of the devil and the spirit of God. We were transformed from the hideous monkey by God's tear and a drop of sweat from God's brow. We might deduce in *The Monkey Link* a traditional literary lesson in morality (*pouchenie*) for Russia—remember and mourn what has been abused and ruined (the tear), and struggle to preserve and build on the good portion (the sweat of one's brow) that remains. Redeem the Russian treasure trove.

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<sup>14</sup> Patricia Herlihy, *The Alcoholic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 5–13.

<sup>15</sup> See Cynthia Simmons, *Their Fathers' Voice: Vassily Aksyonov, Venedikt Erofeev, Eduard Limonov, and Sasha Sokolov* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).