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Paul Kleiman
Professor Forman
Professor Newlin
RUSS 505 (Honors)
Russian Thesis
25 November 2018
Ich sterbe!

Fatum ad Benedictum: Moscow-Petushki, Homo Sovieticus, Postmodernism and the Fatidic post-Soviet Irony of Venedikt Vasilevich Erofeev

Dedicated to Riley E. Saper (1997-2009)

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On reading *Moscow-Petushki*:

For any reader of *Moscow-Petushki*, there are several things about its publication and censorship history that are worth keeping in mind.

First, there is currently no singular authoritative text of *Moscow-Petushki*. In addition to the 2005 Zakharov edition, other valuable editions include Nevskaya (2000) and Vagrius (2004, 2003, 2000, 1999). Page references in this honors thesis are to the 2005 Zakharov edition of *Moscow-Petushki*, but to accommodate readers using other editions I also indicate the nearest pair of train stops (*ie.*, chapter break) by which the work is divided.

Second, there is also no consensus regarding which edition of *Moscow-Petushki* should be considered the first completely unabridged publication of the text in Russian, despite Erofeev's own claim that the publishing house "Prometheus" produced the first "almost canonical version." The work was first distributed unofficially in *samizdat* form soon after its completion. It was then published abroad: first in Israel in 1973 (Journal: *Ami*), and later in Paris in 1977 (YMCA Press). In 1989, the Russian journal "Sobriety and Culture" published an abridged form of the text, then the publisher "News/Tidings" produced a fuller almanac; by the end of that same year, the edition Erofeev deemed "nearly canonical" by "Prometheus" was made public to Russian readership. Since then several other editions have also appeared, but none have been deemed authoritative by Erofeev specialists.

I have chosen the Zakharov edition due to its inclusion of elements of Russian *mat* (non-normative Russian slang and parlance), which, due to Soviet or post-Soviet censorship or other publication reasons, were omitted from a number of other editions (including those of Nevskaya and Vagrius). The inclusion of Russian *mat* is an essential component to understanding the language of the text and, in some instances, the plot.¹

All translations of Russian provided in the body of the text are my own unless noted parenthetically.

¹ Eg., "*khui*," or a vulgar Russian word for penis. Towards the end of the poem, Venichka uses this popular article of *mat* to mistakenly reaffirm the direction of the train. For more details, see page 103 or chapter "Pokrov to the 113th Kilometer."

Introduction

The following honors thesis is structured into two parts, four chapters apiece.

The first part is a philological study of the Soviet dissident and writer Venedikt Vasilevich Erofeev's magnum opus, *Moscow-Petushki* (1969-70). This half of the thesis investigates *Petushki* in light of its thematic development of fate, or, more particularly, the fate of *homo sovieticus*—the ironic term devised by Soviet sociologist Aleksandr Zinovyev (1922-2006) to describe a typical conformist citizen of the Soviet Union. I will focus predominantly on *Petushki's* connection to the end of the Khrushchev “Thaw” in the early-mid-1960s and the beginning of Brezhnev “Stagnation” in the late-1960s, and will explore the work's engagement with postmodernism.

The second part of my honors thesis is an extension of the first. In this section, I reconstruct and analyze the “Kolomna period” of Erofeev's life and career (ca. 1962-1963), during which he matriculated at the local Kolomensky Pedinstitute and later, following his expulsion, worked as a truck driver and in mass retail. I posit Kolomna as a watershed in Erofeev's biography. This period saw the end of his university studies and the beginning of the “living large” (what he would name his “*ochen' zhiznennii put'*”) that characterized his existence up until his death in 1990 of lung cancer. After Kolomna Erofeev's life was marked by increasingly destructive bouts of alcoholism and smoking, extensive peregrinations through the former Soviet Union (largely undertaken sans *propiska*, or mandatory residence permit), and, most of all, the freer form of writing that culminated artistically in *Moscow-Petushki*. This part of my analysis asserts a link between the fate of Venichka, the notorious erudite drunk of *Moscow-Petushki*, and that of Venedikt Erofeev, its controversial author. Although not a single journal or piece of writing by Erofeev from this period is extant, I nonetheless maintain that there

is a body of evidence that allows us to piece together a provisional reconstruction of Erofeev's life as he lived it in Kolomna during 1962-1963. The hands-on, on-site research that I conducted for part two took as its starting point the ostensibly "semi-autobiographical" nature of Erofeev's poem-in-prose.

Furthermore, in this second half of the honors thesis I curate and analyze materials from the museum and artcommune "Erofeev and Others" and from the seventh annual Kolomna apple and book fair "Antonov's Apples." I also transcribe and analyze interviews taken with knowledgeable sources on Erofeev: a local Kolomna poet, Aleksei Makeev, and the chief executor of Erofeev's literary legacy and wife of his son, Galina Erofeeva. For the materials from the museum and festival, I include a set of pictures underscored by captioned analyses; for the materials from the interviews, I provide a written transcription interspersed with authorial commentary.

I collected these materials during a seven-week stay in the city during the autumn of 2018, and have reprinted or recreated them with the express permission of the city of Kolomna, as well as the specific personages they concern. For additional biographical and literary cultural information, I also rely on published recorded interviews with Erofeev and the journals he kept throughout the 1960s. These can be found on the official Erofeev website, which contains information on his entire *œuvre* to date.²

² <http://www.moskva-petushki.ru/> (in Russian)

Part One

1. Biography and Myth

Venedikt Vasilyevich Erofeev was born in 1938 in the Murmansk Oblast (region) above the Russian Arctic Circle, and grew up in a small industrial town thereabouts called Kirovsk. The sixth and youngest child of his family, Erofeev spent many of his earliest years shuffling between children's homes and orphanages, struggling to survive: his father, Vasily, was arrested in 1946 for "promulgating anti-Soviet propaganda" (via the notorious Stalin-era statute number 58) and was exiled to a hard labor camp in the Russian Far East, only to return home in 1954; his mother, Anna Erofeeva (née Gushchina), unable to care for her child during his father's absence, fled to Moscow—an act Erofeev later deemed unforgivable—leaving ultimately no one to look after him during these crucial years of development. As a result, Erofeev grew up lonely and alienated, the psychic toll of which is manifest throughout his entire writing career and life. In a 1990 interview with journalist Leonid Prudovsky, he recalls, "[I haven't] a single bright memory. [The children's homes of my childhood were filled with] gratuitous fighting and a cult of physical power. Nothing more."³

Nevertheless, as a child and adolescent Erofeev managed to nurture himself through voracious writing and reading, developing at any early age a life-long reverence for the written word and an aptitude for autodidacticism. According to the testimony of his absentee mother, by

³ This interview was published in edition 65 of *Kontinent*, a former émigré dissident journal which discussed the politics of the USSR. The journal was published in Paris from 1974—1992, and in Moscow from 1992—2013. For a full transcription of the interview (in Russian), view here: http://www.moskva-petushki.ru/articles/interview/sumasshedshim_mozhno_byt_v_ljuboe_vremja/

the time he turned five he had already begun writing, and by the time he “entered school, had already begun composing stories.”⁴ Moreover, at the age of seventeen, in 1955, Erofeev graduated from secondary school, receiving excellent marks and a golden medal (awarded for the highest academic achievement), and traveled for the first time in his life south of the Arctic Circle—his destination, the country’s capital. There Erofeev matriculated at Russia’s most prestigious and competitive university, Moscow State University, free, as it were, from the trammels and hostility of his youth. “For the first time in my life I saw these tall trees and cows,” Erofeev explains. “In Kirovsk there were never trees or cows, and here [in Moscow] for the first time I saw a cow—and just froze up.”⁵

Yet while the environs and newfound freedom of Moscow enthralled him, Erofeev found the academic experience of the university unstimulating. He quickly entered down a path of truancy, substituting formal classroom learning with a more intensive personalized reading curriculum, which he pursued almost exclusively, as it were, in bed. Within a year and half he was formally expelled for “his failure to attend mandatory classing in military training.”⁶ He would later go on to study first in Orekhovo-Zuyevo, then Vladimir, then Kolomna, getting himself expelled from each before ultimately commencing his famous path or *put*’.

The ensuing twenty-eight years of Erofeev’s life are the most fruitful and notorious of his biography, but also the most notably destructive and taxing on his body and soul. While daring to live a life of nonconformism and to create his own kind of life path, often completely at odds with the Soviet system of rules and mores of the time, Erofeev would drink, read and, most of all, write obsessively. His journals from this period, in which he mused prophetically and

⁴ Also excerpted from the Prudovsky interview.

⁵ Quoted to me by Galina Erofeeva, the wife of Erofeev’s only son and chief executor of Erofeev’s literary legacy.

⁶ Excerpted from Erofeev’s personal short biography.

voluminously on subjects he called “ideas spoken aloud,” function largely as the springboard for the creative ideas found in his larger works, especially *Moscow-Petushki*.⁷ In 1969, while working itinerantly at the Shermeteyevo airport fixing cable lines and living without a *propiska*, Erofeev reined himself in enough to pen this singularly provocative masterpiece. Just over an hundred pages, and written in the narrative tradition of Gogol's *Dead Souls* as a “poem-in-prose,” *Moscow-Petushki* vaulted the largely unknown and unpublished Erofeev almost instantly into the pantheon of great Russian writers.⁸

Erofeev was never able to write anything like it again.

Readers and literary critics alike have been wont to conflate Erofeev and the narrator of *Moscow-Petushki*, but as literary critic and Erofeev specialist Eduard Vlasov notes, character and author do in fact have separate (if overlapping) stories and identities.⁹ The distinction begins, crucially, with their names. It is, of course, Erofeev's assignment of the diminutive name Venichka to his narrator and hero that invites us to view *Moscow-Petushki* as autobiographical prose. But this a move that also separates them, albeit subtly: Venichka is the name of (anti)-hero of the story, whereas Venedikt, Venya or Erofeev are names reserved for the writer.

Clear similarities between author and character can be found throughout the work: they vary in size and type. Like the author, Venichka is an obsessed, tormented and erudite drunk, who delights equally in a good book as a bottle of vodka. Like the character, Erofeev also traversed much of the former USSR, often without a stable place of work or residence, and in doing so accumulated a trove of ideas and perspectives on Soviet life, which guided him on his

⁷ Journals, such as “Leave My Soul to Rest” (*Ostav' moyu dushu v pokoye*) and “A Useless Fossil” (*Bespoleznoye iskopayemoye*), are conveniently anthologized in *Moi ochen zhiznennii put*. See bibliography for more details pertaining to the anthology.

“Ideas spoken aloud” in original Russian: “*mislyi vslukh*.”

⁸ Indeed, Erofeev's fame increased drastically, even as a *samizdat* writer.

⁹ Vlasov, section 4, comment 29.

put' as much as they do Venichka on his train ride from Moscow to Petushki. Yet the downtrodden and drunken soul of *Moscow-Petushki*, Venichka, reveals a vein of tragedy and faith in Erofeev's life that runs much deeper than any surface-level similarities or coincidences. Erofeev only has one true equal in his long history of failed relationships—Venichka—and only this one character understands his extreme absence and longing for true love (and truth) engendered by his childhood. Erofeev was married first to Valentina Zimakova (1942—2000), a school teacher of mathematics, and later to Galina Nosova (1941—1993), a high-strung woman who killed herself shortly after Erofeev's own death. In neither case did he feel any kind of deeper, kindred understanding. Both marriages were essentially fictive: they conferred him an escape route from prosecution (chiefly, for living intermittently without documents, especially until 1973), and a place to stay at critical moments of his life.¹⁰ In his adult life he had only one true romance, toward the end of his life, with a younger woman named Natalya Chmelkova, who may have retroactively fulfilled the intensely romanticized role of the mistress about whom Venichka writes in *Moscow-Petushki*.¹¹

Erofeev knew the Christian Bible (New Testament) by heart by the time he was a student in Vladimir, and Venichka likewise makes reference to it all throughout *Petushki*. The work's religious preoccupations often cross with its rife alcoholic ones as well, evident from the opening pages: during his departure from Kursky Train Station, Venichka cries out gratefully to the Lord's angels, who (falsely) promise him salvation at a local bar with sherry. Likewise, the work ends with Venichka's arrival at "Petushki" Train Station (in reality the selfsame Kursky Station),

¹⁰ Galina Erofeeva supports this claim in our interview. See part two, particularly pages 47-48.

¹¹ Erofeev's only son, Venedikt Venediktovich, did and currently still does reside in Petushki, which often served as the non-fictionalized basis of Erofeev's trips to the city.

where Venichka cries out again, this time directly to the Lord, “we are all drunk, each in his own way.”¹²

Any analysis of *Moscow-Petushki* must necessarily contend with the intersections of Erofeev’s biography with these attributes— religious, alcoholic or other— of his expressive fiction. The interplay of his life and fiction has generally received little critical attention. Only now, in 2018, in celebration of the eightieth anniversary of Erofeev’s birth, has the first full “philological biography” of *Moscow-Petushki* and Erofeev been published.¹³ As such, some earlier scholars have pointed to the blurred line between Erofeev’s life and art. Renowned literary critic Mikhail Epstein argues, in fact, that autobiographical and fictional elements intersect into a kind of “myth of Venya” (*venin mif*), in which “Venichka Erofeev” is the result of an amalgam of contradictory elements from his own life and Venichka’s. In particular, Epstein cites Erofeev’s talent in comparison with his minimal literary output; his intelligence vis-à-vis his comparatively poor work ethic and excessive drink and travel; his overweening pride for Russia vis-à-vis his general indifference to its patriots; his joy in the Soviet form of systemization vis-à-vis his irregular lifestyle; his nurturing personality vis-à-vis his frequent crudeness.

In this way, I generally agree with Epstein’s interpretation, and I find the examples that he proffers to demonstrate Erofeev’s frequent conflation with Venichka very compelling. Nevertheless, I remain wary of the degree to which he and especially other literary critics (eg., Mark Lipovetsky, Karen Ryan-Hayes and Edith W. Clowes) have used the author-myth as a means to establish criteria for a developing vein of postmodernism possibly unique to the late Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. Instead, I argue that we need to regard this myth as an

¹² Fuller quotation: “We are all in some way drunk, each in his own way. Some of us have drunk more than others, [but we are all drunk the same.] (Petushki, Vokzalnaya Ploschad)

¹³ That is, *Venedikt Erofeev: postoronny* by Oleg Lekmanov and two co-authors. See Bibliography for greater details.

essential point of insight into the role of fate in the work, not postmodernism. In the following two sections, I make the argument that although fate develops thematically in a Russian postmodern context, the lasting accomplishment of *Moscow-Petushki* is the way in which said context is used to reinterpret the notion of fate during the late Khrushchev and early Brezhnev eras.

2. *Homo Sovieticus*

The first conclusion that any reader of *Moscow-Petushki* is bound to arrive at by the time that Venichka's train leaves Kursky Station is incontrovertibly bleak: no matter how comedic or absurd the work may appear, it fundamentally characterizes the relationship of the individual to late-1960s Soviet society via a tone of overwhelmingly dejected, grim realism and unbridled, irremediable powerlessness. Its opening dedication, which calls the work "tragic sheets of paper," augurs Venichka's ultimate demise on the last page, and everything therein becomes a longwinded survey of the work's time period: disorientation, alcoholism, misogyny, absenteeism, social parasitism (*tuneyadstvo*), disenfranchisement and other schemes, plots and ruses by which the Khrushchev and later Brezhnev states ruled its society.

There are myriad ways to interpret Venichka's foremost (an-)protagonist role in *Moscow-Petushki*, which embodies most if not all of these aforementioned forms of social repressions. However, no interpretation is quite in keeping with Erofeev's own deep appreciation for Russian literature as the Pushkin and Gogol-pioneered literary hero *malen'ki chelovek*. Indeed, the *malen'ki chelovek*, or "little person," was an archetype of nineteenth-century Russian literature, which arose in the 1820s and 1830s to realistically describe the vicissitudes of socially low and downtrodden people oppressed by Imperial Russia.

In *Moscow-Petushki*, Venichka as a reincarnation or reinterpretation of a *malen'ki chelovek* is a largely debated one, provoking varied debates about Venichka's relative wealth and vodka consumption. Nonetheless, the comparison stems from Venichka's self-modeling on Evgeny of Pushkin's "Bronze Horseman," where "traditional literary and artistic motif of the suffering of 'malen'ki chelovek stymied by the big city and antagonism of his environs (Vlasov, 4-31)" is recast in the best of Pushkinian tradition. As Venichka travels from Moscow to Kursky

Station in the prelude to the work's central train ride, shivering "from the cold and woe,"¹⁴ we are likewise reminded of the misery of Evgeny's own peregrinations after a flood inundates his life: "As for the world, he [Evgeny] ceased to know it, / But wandered all day, sleeping where / He could upon the quay... (Part 2, Stanza 8)." By analogy, Venichka's life is also hopelessly flooded— regardless of his direction, he'll "end up at Kurskaya Railway Station,"¹⁵ cold and just the same as before— but, unlike for Evgeny, a greater menacing *governmental* power is at fault. In *Petushki*, Erofeev describes the city of Moscow as fraught with existential dangers harnessed by The Kremlin. In Venichka's creative imagination the Moscow Kremlin is not just the city's ordinary crowning landmark, but a visibly fierce and impregnable barricade around the city center. It embodies an immense monolithic concentration of Soviet power, which from the outset of the work repels him to the city outskirts—Kursky Station, where the train of *Moscow-Petushki* embarks. All in all, the first lines of the work—"everyone says words 'The Kremlin, The Kremlin,' but I have never once seen it myself"—suggests not a physical or geographical blindness, but a metaphysical one: Venichka is at the mercy of the kind of greater force seeking to deliberately disorient both the enfeebled (Evgeny) and intoxicated (Venichka).

Venichka is also set to wander the city on his path to Kursky Station by virtue of the Bible's overarching, profound influence on the text. As Erofeev knew the Holy Scriptures by heart, "getting lost" for Venichka becomes a spiritual rite. Specifically, the Old Testament dictates to "go left or go right, or wherever your face turns..." and as Vlasov notes the Ecclesiastes aphorism "there is nothing new under the sun" suggest his long and suffering wandering. Furthermore, Venichka's famous self-directed imperative "stand and go"—

¹⁴ Full quotation: "I went right, swaying slightly from 'the cold and woe,' yes, from the cold and woe..." *Moscow to Kurski Station*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

periphrasis in its own right of the Gospel of Matthew¹⁶—prophetically reinforces the greater importance of travel than arriving at one’s destination (the train and later Petushki).

As such, in *Petushki* I argue religion dovetails with the *malenki chelovek* to create an ironic rendering of the Soviet everyman, or *homo sovieticus*.

The clearest example of Venichka as *homo sovieticus* is evident in the omnipresent impediments, particularly incurred by drinking, to obtaining material stability traceable to the oppressive 60s-era Soviet state. Venichka highlights this through a rather obviously “forgetful” (ie., forged) and haphazard tally of the price of his drinks. His mantra, “I drank for six rubles,” is notably undervalued or as Yuri Levin wittily ironizes “hyperbolized.”¹⁷ A more accurate calculation reveals that, by the time Venichka wakes up on the steps of a unknown stairwell in chapter two, he had drunk “a glass of Zubrokva,” a glass of coriander, two cups of Zhiguli beer, a bottle of white wine [approximately 24 ounces], two glasses of Okhotnichya [Hunter’s] vodka” (Vlasov, 4-22)—that is: for eight rubles, not six. Still, Venichka’s fabrication is telling. While not willfully deceiving his reader, Erofeev seems to allude to *The Overcoat*, the famous 1842 short story by Nikolai Gogol. Like Venichka, Gogol’s *titulyarnii sovetnik* (ninth socioeconomic class) Bashmachkin struggles to make ends meet; he stretches a measly annual wage of 400 rubles into financing a new overcoat to survive a harsh Russian winter. In this vein, both characters seem to lack the material security of the more privileged people above them—on the pre-Revolutionary Table of Ranks (Bashmachkin) or in the Communist Party (Venichka)—but Venichka responds by deliberately miscounting in order to drink more. Out of the best of Russian literature, therefore, Erofeev fashions a specifically Soviet dissident statement that,

¹⁶ Matthew 8:13: “Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you.”

¹⁷ Levin, 31

despite the interference of larger forces (eg., government), the *homo sovieticus* still managed to drink by the liter.

In this vein, the third/final chapter stop before the notorious “Moscow-Petushki” train ride begins to probe the addictive and psychological toll of overdrinking. As a rampant social problem of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, alcoholism nevertheless afflicted Erofeev, a profligate drunk, quite personally. In Venichka’s question, “Did I drink for good or for evil?” (4-23), resonates an autobiographical question which can only be answered as the train accelerates and his intoxication dramatically worsens. While these events occur in the following section, I take the opportunity to examine the topic of Venichka’s fate (*homo sovieticus*) vis-à-vis postmodernism.

3. Postmodernism and Fate

(Section 1)

Whatever stance a literary critic takes on the postmodernist merit of *Moscow-Petushki*, the term ‘Russian postmodernism’ needs to be made cohesive and clear. Thus, I consider several questions: First, what is Russian postmodernism and where did it originate, if not in Western epistemology and philology? Secondly, who are its exponents, antecedents and future proponents? Is Pelevin related to Gorky and Grossman, Popov and Petrushevskaya to Tolstoy? And thirdly, must Russian postmodernist writing, as Salman Rushdie asserts of the Western canon, function as an “antagonist to the state,”¹⁸ and, if so, who are its allies and enemies? The West, Russia or both?

Fortunately, literary critic Mark Lipovetsky helps define Russian postmodernism via four discrete categories: audience, sources, characteristics and purpose.

According to Lipovetsky, the audience of postmodernism has since its inception always been “largely limited to dissidents.” However, in recent years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian postmodernist cultural trends have been to some degree “rediscovered by the broad [mainstream] audience.” This has resulted in a rather noticeable revival of 1920s modernist and avant-garde experiments, as well as post-Thaw Soviet culture source material. In turn, these recent source materials have acquired the following characteristics: the destruction of “ideological discourses, political dictatorships, and utopian ideas that had collapsed together with the Soviet regime,” and a playful “escapism from the grim post-Soviet reality, its crime and desolation.” Finally, contemporary post-Soviet postmodernism presents a cerebral response to the culture of mass entertainment—television, pulp fiction, pop

¹⁸ Rushdie, p.50

music—that has besieged the Russian intellect (and intelligentsia) since the Yeltsin-era 1990s. By the Putin aughts, there is a noticeable conflation of commercial glamour with neo-conservatism and nationalist fervor, continuing up to the present day of the year 2018; today, the Putin-led myth of “Russian stability” continues to overwrite the national palimpsest of previous Soviet legends and influence Erofeev’s post-Soviet fate in ironic ways (see part two).

While Mark Lipovetsky confers an incisive analysis of the history of Russian postmodernism, the goal of my analysis is to connect Russian postmodernism to fate in *Moscow-Petushki*, for which there is currently a dearth of research. Specifically, I argue that Russian postmodernism defines fate in *Petushki* through its connection to a Western postmodernist-inflected style integrating low and high brow cultures and Western and Russian literatures. As in the undemocratic society discussed in the previous chapter, fate during the train ride is marked by Rabelaisian and picaresque humor, and Erofeev’s imagination that tackles many topics: intoxication, infatuation, expulsions, cancers, nomadism, talent, intelligence, erudition and wit. Accordingly, I argue that fate is the first principle of the work and resume our study of Venichka’s fate at the point the previous section leaves off, namely, as Venichka enters the restaurant at Kursky Station before boarding the train.

In this scene, in which Venichka realizes that he’s been gulled by the angels into believing there is a glass of sherry waiting for him at the railway bar, he begins a rather long tirade. As literary critic Oliver Ready notes, this section is emblematic of Erofeev’s vast knowledge “of allusions to Soviet and pre-Revolutionary” literature, music and art.¹⁹ Reworking Russian literary and cultural tradition to tap deeper into the import of literary proverb, Venichka pronounces sardonically, “All voices of all singers are equally vile, but each is vile in its own

¹⁹ And, additionally, his profound erudition of “hundreds of poems and dates” (Epstein, 2).

way.” As a kind of *bon mot* mocking the opening of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*— “All happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”—Erofeev’s literary reference nonetheless resonates quite deeply and *à propos*. Given that Venichka has just arrived at the train station and in the forthcoming chapter will board the train, the implications of danger here refer to the *zheleznaya doroga*: the novel *fin de siècle* long-distance railway transportation which Anna rides extensively in Tolstoy’s 1877 masterpiece. In fact, Anna’s famous drawn-out suicide, which she commits by thrusting her body in front of a moving train in Book Eight of the novel, might augur Venichka’s own death at the end of *Petushki*. While Venichka dies from a homicide committed by four unnamed hitmen, the clearly delineated train stops progressively contrive on par with Anna’s own demise.²⁰

Once Venichka boards the train, each subsequent reference to high literature becomes even more debased than the last, pulling him further into Russian postmodernist- and Soviet-shaped fate. Before riding even five short stations which span just over three pages/four chapters and describe little more than his drinking, Venichka already begins to recount an experience from “ten years ago, when he moved to Orekhovo-Zueyevo” (Chukhlinka to Kuskova, 29).²¹ In this chapter, Venichka relates how a group of four bunkmates, with whom he lived ostensibly in complete harmony, suddenly began to accuse him of so-called elitist literary behavior—that is, for never using the bathroom. Approaching him one day, they assert, “This is the way it is: [you think] we’re shrimp and blackguards, and that you’re all ‘Cain and Manfred (29).’” The allusion

²⁰ Interestingly, *Anna Karenina* also returns *Petushki* to the topic of *homo sovieticus*, since Venichka’s *bon mot* is also a reference directed at one of the leading opera stars of his day, Ivan Kozlovsky (1900-93). By unsubtly (ie., drunkenly) insinuating the “unique vileness” of Kozlovsky’s voice—which Vlasov confirms is “saccharine, high [and] shrill”—Venichka laments the degradation of high culture through under Soviet stagnation, in which the Soviet everyman could now hear the 1960s operatic star sing at any low-class dive bar, rather than at the Mariinsky or Bolshoi.

²¹ Five short stations: from “Moscow to Hammer and Sickle,” from “Hammer and Sickle to Karacharova,” from “Karacharova to Chukhlinka,” and from “Chukhlinka to Kuskova.”

here is to the central protagonists of two Lord Byron's eponymous closet dramas, notorious for their romanticism and socially rebellious character. By making this reference, which "occupies in European literature, culture and mentality a key ideological position" (Vlasov, 195), the bunkmates skewer a long tradition of conformist anti-intellectualism that plagued Soviet society during the late-1960s "stagnation." Their deadpan, crazed seriousness reads as a Juvenalian satire of contemporary alleged Soviet superiority—which since its inception frequently promulgated work and education as the fundamental means to becoming a world superpower—by suggesting that any display of advanced cultural knowledge is often not a boon but a threat to Communism. For lack of any more substantiated evidence, one could thus be charged spuriously and absurdly for failure to use the bathroom.

In just the next train stop chapter (Kuskova-Novogireevo), Venichka recalls a second story combining high literature with low culture to parody (in a postmodernist vein) the fate of *homo sovieticus*. This time, however, he draws on a Russian source: the classical Silver Age poet Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Blok. In one of the work's most clearly autobiographical sections, Venichka first recounts that just "one week ago he was fired from his work as a brigadier" (28), where for four weeks he worked at Sheremetyevo Airport installing cable lines. While noting that the official cause of his discharge was the "introduction of a flawed system of individualized graphs" (32), he explains that in actuality he was fired for the (re-)education of his co-workers; he taught them contemporary Middle-Eastern politics, lectured about literature, and, worst of all, developed the allusive 'individualized graphs' recording their different vodka consumption habits.²² About Blok and literature in particular, Venichka writes, "...after I taught them how Pushkin died, I gave them to read "The Nightingale's Garden, Blok's narrative poem." There in

²² "Introduction of a flawed system of individualized graphs" in Russian original: *vnedreniye porochnoi sistemi individualnikh grafikov*

the center of the work, if you throw aside all ‘fragrant shoulders,’ ‘darks fog before dawn,’ etc...is the story about a man fired for ‘drunkenness,’ ‘whoring’ and ‘absenteeism.’ (33)”²³

In this sense, *Venichka* offers a critique of Blok’s narrative poem. Calling it in conclusion a very “*svoyobraznaya*,” or singular piece of writing, he suggests that Blok and most of the Silver Age of Russian poetry at large used Romantic, lyrical and naturalistic imagery to escape the true, more raunchy elements of life in their work. This harkens to Erofeev’s later criticism of the hypocritical, highfalutin-sounding Maksim Gorky, who *Venichka* flippantly jokes wrote Socialist Realist novels while living a luxurious life “eating agavas” on the island of Capri (“Fryzaevo-61st Kilometer”), and the elitist Turgenev, whose classic novella *First Love* (1860) he calls affected (chapter stations 65th Kilometer through 95th Kilometer, and additionally “Krapunovo to 85th Kilometer”). Erofeev’s literary criticisms point to the vast rift between Russia’s rich but fading literary tradition and its current societal banality. Erofeev disdains that “shops [have opened] on Pushkin Street”²⁴ and the average *homo sovieticus* is less likely to know what Pushkin died from than the cost of an average bottle of vodka.

In the next section, *Venichka* rides two more train stops (from “Novogireevo to Reutovo” and from “Reutovo to Nikolskoye”) before arriving at a final (fourth) moment to subvert high and low cultures. Here the focus is Ivan Kramskoi’s 1884 portrait canvas painting *Inconsolable Grief*, which *Venichka* uses to defend drinking as an antidote for *toska* or melancholy.²⁵ He writes, “For example, imagine a cat...broke, say, a Sèvres porcelain vase belonging to the grief-stricken princess or noblewoman [in this painting]. Would [the woman] start to go crazy and

²³ Cf. Cantos 5: In the fragrant and hot gloom / Coiling with a warm hand, / She repeats uneasily: / “What is it, my beloved?” (Samuel Muratov translation)

²⁴ Excerpted from “Useless Mineral” (pg. 30).

²⁵ Reader’s note: *weltschmerz*, or as Vladimir Nabokov confers an abridged translation, a “Russian word roughly translated as sadness, melancholia, lugubriousness.”

wave her arms like mad? Of course not, because for at least a day or three she'd be on a higher plane—[grief-stricken well] beyond cats, porcelain, everything” (40).

As such, Russian art serves a similar role to literature in bearing out the meaning of Russian postmodernism. While no reader can put an exact measure on Venichka's feelings, his sense of *toska* is evidently heavily influenced by vodka—or quite different from that which underwrites Kramskoi's work, which is based on the death of the artist's own son. Instead, Venichka's artificial self-comparison to the grieving woman of the painting sooner hints at his vision of the noblewoman as a kindred spirit. It's not coincidental, in fact, that this woman will actually revisit him later in the guise of a woman uncannily “dressed all in black from head to toe” (“113th Kilometer – Omutische,” pg. 105). As a rather dreary and fatalistic ending to the approximate first half of the work²⁶, this scene concludes that although Kramskoi's noblewoman and Erofeev's *homo sovieticus* are wholly dissimilar, they drank for the same reason: to alleviate their pain and suffering.

²⁶ That is, this is a distinction that I (not Erofeev) make for clarity and chapter breaks.

4. Postmodernism and Fate

(Section 2)

Fortunately, in the beginning to the second half of *Petushki*, Venichka proves that he has a remedy for all Soviet denizens' vodka-borne *toska* and, incidentally, readers requiring a break from his postmodernist subversion of high culture and literature: his secret, more vodka. Indeed, in the chapter station "Elektrougli to the 43rd Kilometer," Venichka reveals a series of highly toxic and risible concoctions—alcoholic drinks that are as killingly absurd as they are poisonous. His first drink, for instance, called the "Balsam of Canaan," is prepared by combining 100 grams of methylated spirits with clear varnish and 200 grams of milk stout to create (the desired!) "vulgarity and sinister tendencies in the people who drink it (Mulbrine, 48)." His second one, the "Spirit of Geneva," similarly mixes up 50 grams of white lilac with 200 grams of leg antiperspirant to achieve an absurd sense of the "world's creation. (56)" Both drinks, like the succeeding ones he mentions, are thoroughly undrinkable works of art. However, in devising these ridiculous concoctions, Erofeev does appear to beg a weighty, seriocomic question: with the rampant drinking culture of late 1960s Russia, what was the *homo sovieticus* willing to drink in order to get drunk?

The answer, as it happens, is indirect.

In the span of the forthcoming several chapter stations, Venichka strikes up a conversation with fellow passengers on the drinking habits of classical writers that speaks to this question. Beginning in the next chapter station "43rd Kilometer to Khrapunovo," Venichka makes acquaintances with the following riders: first, a man name Mitrich and his grandson (also named Mitrich) who steal his "compote and white bread" (61); second, a learned self-described alcoholic whose defining feature is his black moustache; third, a "Decembrist" who should have

exited the train at Khrapunovo (by then, two stops earlier); and several other passengers and later participants in the conversation. At chapter station “Yesino-Frayzevo,” the black-mustached man begins the first major topic of conversation by discussing how much various famous writers’ and musicians’ drank. Beginning rather coyly and addressing himself only to Venichka, he claims first that Ivan Bunin wrote that red-haired people blush when they drink and that Ivan Kuprin and Maksim Gorky were lifelong inebriates. Then he arrives at the crux of his argument: Chekhov, Gogol, Modest Mussorgsky and all “worthwhile people of Russia” (64) drank like fish.

As such, this chapter station speaks to a long tradition of Russian excessive drinking culture that extends well past the Soviet age. In the black-mustached man’s assessment, that Chekhov drank himself *literally* to death—“...Chekhov's last words? ‘*Ich sterbe*. “That is, I’m dying... give me some champagne’ (63)” — Gogol drank vodka like a fish from his “special pink goblet” and Mussorgsky only finished his operatic masterpiece *Khovanshchina* by curbing his dipsomania all draw the same inevitable conclusion: artistic genius is fated as much to superabundant talent as excessive drink. However, then the conversation takes a rather unexpected turn. The Decembrist interjects that Goethe, a German author, was able to “never touch [a drop of alcohol and instead got] all his characters to do his drinking for him (66),” suggesting, as it were, that only all *Russian* great minds drink alike. As a clear mythologization of Goethe’s true abstinence²⁷, the Decembrist’s exaggeration nonetheless emphasizes the stark dichotomy on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. In the backward USSR, genius and *homo sovieticus* drink aplenty; in the socially-advanced West, they “drink less and speak non-Russian” (82)—and that makes all the difference.

²⁷ Vlasov confirms that Goethe was by no means a “teetotaler,” pg. 353.

While the black-mustachioed man's theory that all great writers are alcoholics proves half-baked, or only applicable to Russians, the conversation he starts marks a tonal shift into the work's interest in non-Russian culture—particularly Western. After this point, *Moscow-Petushki* becomes engrossed in the political and culturological commentary of Venichka's fantastical tales from his time abroad. Following several short stops, Venichka begins in "Nazarevo to Drezna" to recount his failures to assimilate during his fictitious time spent abroad: first in Italy, where the people don't understand "our [Russian] sadness" (78), then in Paris, where he is rejected from the Sorbonne, and lastly in London, where the director of the British museum (by the ludicrous name of "Komby Korn") refuses to engage with him. Of his experience in Paris in particular, Venichka's rejection from the Sorbonne and his underappreciated theoretical writings establish the social and intellectual limits inherent in the geopolitical divide of the Iron Curtain in the late-60s "Stagnation" period. As an élite institution of Western thinking, the Sorbonne denies Venichka admission on the basis that in order for a Russian to be admitted, he or she must be something of a "phenomenon" (79). Therefore, *Petushki* suggests that university relations with an ordinary *homo sovieticus* and inveterate drunk like Venichka are entirely untenable.

In addition to Parisian academia, Venichka also fails to penetrate the intellectual and cultural upper crust of French society. Like in Italy and England, in France Venichka's essay is written on a subject applicable only to his sociohistorical background—or, as he calls it, "to Russian conditions, not French" (81). He also fails to recognize the great Parisian couple of the day—Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir—when walking one day along the Champs-Élysées, he stops and suddenly mistakes them for "two known people, perhaps from the newspapers: Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet" (80). In this vein, Erofeev's comic conflation of literary personages becomes one also of comparative Western-Soviet history and geopolitics.

Particularly with the women writers, Erofeev skewers the difference between true French *haute* culture and its *poseur* or foreigner avatar by likening the feminist and Western philosopher de Beauvoir with the Russian-born Triolet, who visited the Soviet Union and affiliated with the Russian duo of Vladimir Mayakovsky and “muse” Lilya Brik. Accordingly, Venichka’s plausible false deduction from the Soviet press signals Erofeev’s attempt to exaggerate the entry-level cultural knowledge that an ordinary Russian citizen trapped behind the Iron Curtain lacked; as newspapers were official organs of the state, the *homo sovieticus* could only legally learn the state-promulgated news, accounting for the obscuration of cultural and ideological differences between these woman.

Venichka’s frustrations with historical and geopolitical polarity are borne out even further in the chapter station “from Krutoe to Voinovo.” At the end of *Petushki*, Venichka’s progressively increasing intoxication transmogrifies into an intensely muddled and megalomaniac hallucinatory dream: he is elected as president to “the First Plenum” of a kind of travestied post-apocalyptic or post-Bolshevik Soviet Union (91). As the exact circumstances surrounding his election or the new government’s foundation are omitted, Venichka’s rule presents a biting satire. Comporting himself officiously, he begins to dole out what he asserts are necessary of “every revolution” (91): buffoonish, piecemeal decrees, such as ones to open liquor stores at earlier hours, return land to the people, ban certain letters of the alphabet, turn the clocks (calendars) forward or back, and, needless to say, terrorize the people. The highfalutin style and bureaucratese nature with which he executes them, which he later denounces as the work of a man “with a three-day-old hangover” (92), criticizes the distance between *homo sovieticus* and the government. Erofeev implies that the *homo sovieticus* was so removed from the motions of government that, if he were to ever become ruler, he would be entirely ignorant of

how to fulfill its basic functions. Venichka's ludicrous wonderment while sitting in presidium, "How did this [decree system] not occur to me earlier?" (92), harkens to the inefficiency of the Soviet government. In the USSR, measures continued to be passed at the desire and caprice of the ruler rather than the will of the people.

In the finale of *Moscow-Petushki*, Erofeev takes his final stab at the fate of *homo sovieticus* in rendering the suspenseful chase and eventual murder of Venichka by four unknown figures. This scene's intentional ambiguity in the describing the identities of the killers—be they KGB agents, foreign spies, train passengers, etc. — inherently mixes a broad range of cultural interpretation with the high tragedy of a final-act death. Still, Vlasov interprets that these four figures definitively represent Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, the founders of Russian Communism. As such, the total-sum embodiment of the Soviet power is responsible for Venichka's death. Whereas in the very beginning of *Petushki* the elusiveness of the Moscow Kremlin represents Venichka's social marginalization, its visibility in the ending of the poem in prose suggests an ill-fated expiration or artistic retiring of the *homo sovieticus* archetype. In fact, *Moscow-Petushki* ends on a resounding note of *peripeteia*, an Ancient Greek dramaturgical device in which the finale dramatically reverses the circumstances of the main character. The moment Venichka finally reaches the destination, it's not Petushki but the Moscow Kremlin—where, as the story has it, Venichka's number has already come up.

Part Two

1. Kolomna Prehistory (ca. 12th century – 1960)

The city of Kolomna is located in the Greater Moscow Region (Moskovskaya oblast') approximately 70 miles to the southeast of Moscow and is home to an ancient history. Its official beginnings date back to 1187 when it was first mentioned in the Laurentian Codex, a set of chronicles that interpret the history of the Eastern Slavs living in Kievan Rus'. However, recent archaeological evidence suggest that it could be more than half a century older.²⁸ In the year 1301, Kolomna officially became a part of the Grand Duchy of Moscow under the control of Daniil Aleksandrovich, Prince of Moscow; by the end of the fourteenth century became a significant port city of trade located on the confluence of the Oka and Moscow Rivers. In the sixteenth century, following a series of invasions part of more than two centuries of Mongol-Tatar yoke over Rus', the predecessor state of modern-day Russia, Kolomna constructed its city kremlin. More than half of which remains intact and on display today. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kolomna regained its status as a commercial hub of commerce, building and maintaining dozens of cloth halls. Traces of these centuries-old historical milestones of the city are displaced and preserved all around –on placards, city building murals, and so forth; in museums, archives, etc. They continue to serve as a reminder of the rich pre-revolutionary history of the city.

²⁸ Mazurov, pg. 58

In the Soviet era, monumental and irreversible changes would befall the city, as would the entire country transferring from a government of Russian Imperialism to Bolshevik-led Communism. In the wake of the October Revolution, many of the city's major cathedrals were plundered and later closed; the first was the Uspenskii Cathedral in 1918.²⁹ It has since been restored and today once again stands upright on the Sobornaya ploschad', the major square of the city's historical center. In the following two decades of the interwar period, Kolomna for a third time in its history became a major hub of industry and progress. However, this time it industrialized in keeping with Soviet ideals: furniture and sewing factories were established and vestiges of the tire-repair and food production sites built in the 20s and 30s still remain. At the outset of the Soviet entrance (ca. 1941) into the Second World War, Kolomna played a significant role in the production of artillery, and a plaque still hangs in honor of a famous artillery technician, in addition to memory public monuments to those soldiers who served.

Thus, the period of the 1950s and early-1960s comes on the heels of yet another monumental cultural and historical change. The Kolomna which Venedikt Erofeev inherited at the time of his arrival to Kolomna in 1962 was complicated and multi-layered. It was founded on both ancient and early Soviet prehistory and a rather recent (and short-lived) relaxation of censorship and social repression. In light of these factors, I examine the city's art-commune and museum-residence "Erofeev and Others," which explores this period in depth.

²⁹ Maevsky, pgs. 156-58.

2. “Erofeev and Others”

The art-commune and museum-residence “Erofeev and Others” is located on the corner of 205 Oktyabrskoy Revolyutsii Street and “Two Revolutions” Square in the historical center of Kolomna. It is situated on the second floor of the wine retail shop “*Ongoniok*,”³⁰ which served as the very place Erofeev began to work after he was expelled from Kolomensky Pedinstitute and, shortly thereafter, the origin of Erofeev’s so-called path.

“Erofeev and Others” is composed of two parts: an art-commune located on one side, a museum-residence on the other. The art-commune stages art and writerly projects composed on an individual and collective basis by a monthly artist(s)-in-residence. He or she is chosen through a selective application process which draws on prominent artists and writers of national and international renown. Previous art residents have included playwright Dmitri Danilov, author of “Man from Podolsk” and other theatrical works, artists Anton and Pavel Yakushevi, who during their residency created a an art project entitled “Deep Illustration” based on the comically absurd drinking recipes of *Moscow-Petushki*, and many others; the September 2018 resident was the South Korean artist Sujin Lee, who developed a project dedicated to exploring intercommunicative artistic solutions to language barriers between Korean, English and potentially Russian.

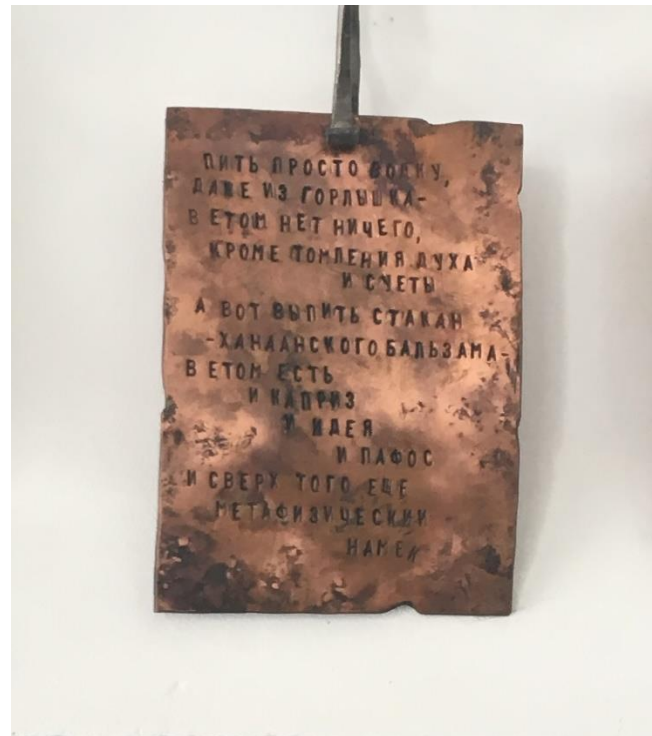
Although the art-commune committee looks for in the majority of its residents a clear connection between the residents’ artistic interests and Erofeev’s work, the other section of “Erofeev and Others”, the museum-residence, more actively preserves the history of Erofeev and

³⁰ Russian for “small flame.” Ogoniok is also the name of one of the oldest weekly illustrated magazines in Russia, founded in 1899, which Erofeev read and commented on in his journals.

Kolomna. In the following section, I provide an abridged account of its functions and layout to establish a clear case for the central role that the art-commune attempts to serve in elucidating the conditions in which Erofeev lived during this critical period of his life.



Figure 1. Dmitri Danilov (far left) in attendance at the “Antonov Apples” apple and literary festival in Kolomna, which was held on September 15, 2018. The theme of the featured discussion is the preservation of heritage in Kolomna, which mirrors “Erofeev and Other’s” own literary and outreach initiatives. See section ‘b.’, entitled “‘Antonov’s Apple’ Fair,” for a more detailed description of this event.



Figures 2 and 3. Work by former art residents, brothers Anton and Pavel Yakushevi. The leftmost picture features their mosaic representation of one of Venichka’s angels who guide him throughout the story, which hangs not far from the art-commune in the historical center; the rightmost picture is sculpture bearing a description of one of Venichka’s recipes for drinking. The first line translates, “To drink just vodka, even from the bottle, is nothing more than to exhaust the soul and excite the vanity of the day...”

The museum “Erofeev and Others” begins on the second floor, which is easily accessed from the main entrance by ascending a set of concrete stairs guided by a gnarled wrought iron handrail. (As a many-time visitor and archive researcher in the museum, I still recall that my first impression of the museum during my first trip was created by the building’s high ceilings and the close quarters.) On the second floor, tickets are purchased at the ticket office, located proximately to a small glass display of works by Erofeev on sale; coats are hung on a homemade coat check of bungee cords and clothespins (a courtesy of the artcommune). Albeit modest, these guest accommodations form the crux of main entranceway to the museum and the compact and alternative lifestyle of the 1960s Soviet Kolomna follows.

The first room of the tour begins in a short and narrow antechamber serving as a basic connection to the bedroom area or the main library and living den. Albeit small, this foyer is lined, stacked and covered to the hilt with Soviet memorabilia from the period: Soviet posters ranging from military aviation recruitment to discouraging gossiping and anti-Soviet behavior; pieces of military, work and casual dress; and other sundry articles and priceless relics. The majority of these items were donated to the museum by former residents of Kolomna on its opening day seven years ago.³¹ By their nature, they represent authentic cultural materials from the 1960s. Lastly, in the center of the room hangs a picture dedicated to exploring the color variation of Erofeev’s *Moscow-Petushki*; a crowning contemporary piece of art among 60s objects.

From the entrance hallway, a visitor has the choice to enter the bedroom, a cozy 100 sq.-foot space adorned by a lofted bed and a small portrait of Alla Pugacheva, or the main library

³¹ That is, December 1, 2011 was chosen as the opening day of the museum to commemorate the 59th year anniversary of Khrushchev’s famous visit and later condemnation of the exhibition of the avant-garde artists in the Moscow Manege.

and living den. In the library and den, where I as a researcher spent most of my time, one can become acquainted with the museum's sizeable philological materials: works of Erofeev in their various editions, original copies of the serialized publication of *Moscow-Petushki* in its first censored and later uncensored Soviet publications, and an impressive library based on works that Erofeev notably valued and read. These are depicted in the following photographs, figures 4-7.



Figures 4 and 5. On the leftmost side stands “Erofeev’s library,” reconstructed based on his literary preferences and values. Within the library one can find a complete collection of the works of Balzac, Stalin and other prominent world writers and political figures; Vladimir Lenin, whose works naturally served the basis for Erofeev’s “*Moya malen'kaya leniniana*,” or “My Little Lenin,” is also included in full, and occupies the entire middle left shelf. On the righthand side, a collection of some of the works by Erofeev, such as *Moi ochen' zhiznennii put'* and an original copy of *Moscow-Petushki*, whose censorship is discussed in figure 6.



Figures 6 and 7: Figure 6 (left) features the front cover of the 1989 issue of “Sobriety and Culture” which first published Erofeev’s *Moscow-Petushki*. Figure 7 (subsequent page) features several of the beginning pages of the issue. As the reader will notice, I have underlined with a thin, computer-generated violet pen a passage which reveals that this edition indeed passed through a censor before its print. As the sentence reads in translation in its expurgated form, “Never mind, it’s nothing,” I said to myself, “but that pharmacy, do you see it? And that - in the brown coat scratching the surface of the sidewalk...” In this case, the word “*pidor*,” or pedophile, was omitted due to its perceived profanity. Although this marks a major step toward the full publication of *Petushki*, this edition cannot be considered altogether fully complete.

From the library and living den, one proceeds to the final major room of Kolomna exhibit: the Soviet-styled kitchen. The artcommune argues that the kitchen is representative of both a traditional communal dining area and a typical gathering space for hidden political conversation amid the Soviet repressions of the 1960s. It is stocked with the variety of Soviet items to make it the model of both Soviet home and dissent culture: a 1960s refrigerator manufactured by Aeroflot, an old-fashioned sink and faucet, and Soviet teas and food—herring, *kielbasa*, sauerkraut, *pelmeni*, *vareniki*, *golubsti*, etc.



Figure 8. A view of the interior of the kitchen. The table is set with an assortment of teas, sushki (a popular Soviet snack still eaten today), and a samovar stands in the background.

After completing the tour of the museum and exiting the atmosphere of Soviet Kolomna in the 1960s, a visitor necessarily leaves with a deep impression of the museum's role in upholding the legacy of the city's deeply-celebrated hero, Venedikt Erofeev, who worked just beneath the museum for more than a year of his life. Through its attempts at city outreach—such as its decoration of the historical center of the city with art and graffiti, as well as the mounds of

household items and cherished goods collected from former citizens of Kolomna and placed on display—“Erofeev and Others” argues a lucid, reverential picture of Erofeev’s circumstances during the mysterious and unrecorded time of his life in Kolomna.

3. “Antonov’s Apples”

On September 15, 2018, Kolomna residents and tourists from Moscow, the greater Moscow Region and different sections of the world gathered in the historical downtown of Kolomna to take part in the region’s greatest annual tourist attraction: the seventh international “Antonov’s Apples” Apple and Literary Book Fair.

As the name suggests, the “Antonov’s Apples” Apple and Literary Fair is a yearly festival celebrating the fall season of apple-picking amid a cosmopolitan literary festival. Through a series of activities and events encourages its attendees of all ages to engage in literary endeavors—chiefly, to read, listen and learn. (Appropriately, the name “Antonov’s Apples” originates in an eponymous short story by the first Russian Nobel Laureate for Literature, Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin.) First inaugurated in September of 2011, each year’s festival has subsequently expanded on the achievements and progress of the previous. Festival organizers seek to simultaneously increase festival attendance and strengthen the scope of its literary events. Last year’s host of guest speakers, for instance, included the renowned Russian writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya, who read her short story “Gudauta’s Pears,” which explores internecine ethnic conflict in the Northern Caucasus. This year’s event included the installation of a “book boat,” on which festival-goers could ride while reading, and a series of planned group walks about the city.

The overarching theme of this year’s festival was “eternal histories.” As the director of the festival and “Erofeev and Others,” Ekaterina Vladimirovna Oinas, relates, these are “the very stories that parents tell their children, and that children in turn tell their own.” In a press release for the festival, she added that, “‘Eternal histories,’ as they’re called, are the stories that we read in letters, postcards, diaries, journals and books; they are stories that we hear in music and that

are shown in theater, the types that are passed down in cooking book recipes and books alike...[in Kolomna] on September 15th, writers, readers, actors and farmers will share their stories with us.”³²

As in previous years, the 2018 Kolomna “Antonov’s Apple” Fair was organized into a series of day and evening events held at various booths installed throughout the downtown historical center. Popular booths included: the “Cultural Heritage Salon,” which in the morning hosted showcases for publishing firms “A Walk Through History” and “CompassGuide,” and in the early afternoon held a meeting and story reading session with Scottish poet and writer Michael Kerins, a recipient of the a literary Oscar for storytelling; “The Main Theater Stage,” which hosted a reading of excerpts of Boris Pasternak’s *Doktor Zhivago* by the professional Russian theater actor Denis Balandin and an afternoon theatrical production based on Chekhov short stories; “The English Pavilion,” which hosted a Shakespeare reading in both English and Russian; “and the “Children’s Stage,” which hosted two short plays for children.

³² <https://kolomnapastila.ru/news/1217/> (in Russian) and see bibliography for more details.



Figures 9-14 (Counterclockwise, starting in upper left): A snapshot of the opening-hour festival parade, with signs that read: “Let’s save our heritage for future generations,” and “an apple a day keeps the doctor away”; a reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in both the English original and Russian translation; a postprandial theater production based on Chekhov short stories; children gathered in front of a children’s production of “Sonya the Smart Dog”; an orchestra rehearsal for the evening performance of Tchaikovsky’s “Swan Lake”; Russian Academic Youth Theatre actor Denis Balandin performing rehearsed excerpts of *Doktor Zhivago*.



The “Cultural Heritage Salon” held two significant festival-wide discussions.

The first discussion was held with Andrei Filimonov, a finalist for the “Big Book” prize, or Russia’s premier literary prize awarded for works of prose written in the Russian language. Festival attendees were informally invited to the salon to voice their opinion on the following question: whether or not—and, if so, how—it is possible to discuss family memories of the twentieth and twenty first centuries? As a kind of festival-wide opinion poll, this question elicited a number of varied responses and emotions. The majority of participants argued that it *is* possible to discuss family memories ranging from diffidence to public unwillingness, but formed a consensus that the stable 2000 aughts are easier to discuss than the more chaotic nineties. Lastly, when prompted, nearly all agreed that the Khrushchev-era 60s is a period worthwhile actively discussing and remembering.

The second and major discussion of the booth followed immediately after the first, and many of the speakers invited to share their opinions in the first conversation became listeners in the second. Specifically, in this section, alongside writer Dmitri Dailov (see: section one, “Erofeev and Others”)³³, a poet, philosopher, historian, culturologist and moderator were selected to speak on the topic of “creative interpretation of heritage as a means to preserve personal and collective memory.”³⁴ The discussion began with the moderator prompting each member of the panel to speak to in what ways his profession is responsible for collectively interpreting heritage, beginning with Danilov. Danilov stated that, as a writer who worked in Kolomna at “Erofeev and Other,” his understanding of the complexity of this topic is one he

³³ An expanded biography of Dmitry Danilov: native of Moscow, Danilov (b. 1969) is a writer, poet, and playwright, and the author of more than eight books of prose, four books of poems, three plays, which have been translated into more than 15 languages and published in the USA, Europe and China. He is the laureate of the “Novi Mir” Journal prize (2012), and several other awards (including for his play “The Man from Podol’sk,” and is a two-time finalist for the “Big Book” award.

³⁴ Original: “*Tvorcheskaya interpetsatsia naslediya kak sposob sokhraneniya kichnoi i kollektivnoi pamyati.*”

tried to express in his art-writing project, “Kolomna, Verbatim: Conversations on the Wall.”³⁵ For this project, he gathered snatches of speech that he heard “on [Kolomna] streets and alleyways, on tramcars and autobuses, in parks and courtyards.” He wrote them down without any form of redaction, hence the principle of relating spoken speech “as it is,” or verbatim. In turn, he worked with a local Kolomna graffiti artist to transcribe his “verbatim notes” as a way of “returning” them to the walls.

The mounting effect of the festival and two major festival discussions is a clear and sustained effort to preserve past and present oral and written cultures of Kolomna. In contrast to the museum “Erofeev and Others,” in which a precise curation of rooms the books, food, clothes and other things convey the meager, typical Soviet “Thaw” home life that Erofeev lived, the “Antonov’s Apples” festival depicts contemporary Kolomna. Nevertheless, both city-wide enterprises necessarily cast Erofeev through a filter of post-Soviet reverential ironies. The festival’s prominent featuring of sumptuous productions based on Pasternak and Chekhov (favorite writers of Erofeev’s, but not his literary equals) seem starkly out of tune with gritty and unstable life Erofeev lived and wrote about it. In the subsequent section, I will consider two interviews which further show the intensely ironic transformation of commodification and deification that many Russian writers have undergone under the Putin regime.

³⁵ Original: “*Kolomenskii verbatium: rasgovori na stenakh.*”



Figure 15-17. Figures 15-16 reveal several of the panel speakers from the day's second colloquium on the subject of preserving collective memory. Figure 17 shows Dmitri Danilov standing before a wall which was graffitied with words from his verbatim project. As Danilov himself points out, the words on the wall are impermanent: it's quite possible that after some time they'll be washed or wiped away. Note: Figure 17 comes from the art commune website (uncited photographer); it was reprinted with permission of Ekaterina Oinas, the museum director, and the art commune at large.

4. Interviews

The following are the transcriptions of two interviews. The first of these was recorded with a local Kolomna poet, the co-leader of a rock band called “Cahors³⁶” and prolific reader named Aleksei Makeev, who spoke to me about his passion for *Moscow-Petushki*. The bulk of his interview is a modern-day hagiography of Erofeev: it contains what, in his opinion, makes Erofeev’s writing brilliant and unambiguously “Russian” in tone and style. The second is with the wife of Venedikt Erofeev’s only son, Galina Erofeeva, who was able to speak under-researched facets of Erofeev’s life and family history. Her interview is a more traditional hagiography of Erofeev; at times, it makes Erofeev into a Christ-like figure. Following the transcription and small bits of writerly commentary scattered in between sections (for clarification and transitional harmony), I provide an analysis of how the details shared in both interviews relate to the post-Soviet ironies of Venedikt Erofeev.

Aleksei Makeev:

Aleksei and I met for our interview at the Museum “Kalachnaya” on Zaitseva Street in Kolomna’s downtown. Here Aleksei is employed as *kalachnik* giving tours on the culinary history and preparation of the culturally-significant Russian bread called *kalach*. Having originally met Aleksei after attending one of his tours in the museum and explaining my academic interests in Erofeev and *Petushki*, he kindly invited me to return to the museum

³⁶ The name Cahors is derived from the eponymous French red wine. It is the only wine permitted during Great Lent. Uncoincidentally, Aleksei is a devout follower of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is not unrelated to his modern-day hagiography of Erofeev.

anytime following the end of his work shift to hold an interview and personal poem reading³⁷ right outside the museum itself. As a result, the following interview is comparatively more impromptu than the one conducted with Galina Erofeeva.

The interview began simply, with me prompting Aleksei to explain his opinion of Erofeev. This was his response:

“Erofeev was a genius. If you consider the situations in which he lived, and how he lived, and that he was able to write Moscow-Petushki, it’s remarkable. Each time I read Petushki, I read it differently: in a pleasant mood, I’ve read it like a comedy; in depression, I’ve read it like the blackest of comedies—in fact, it contains some of the darkest, scariest, and most nightmarish scenes that I’ve read in literature. And it was all written in the most beautiful, conversational Russian language that never becomes mawkish, nor vulgar, nor self-satisfied. You can’t judge it by traditional literary standards. It’s better suited for a kind of metaphysical standard...it’s almost mystical. It’s hard to explain.”

In response to this, I asked Aleksei why he considers Erofeev specifically a “Russian” writer and not a Soviet one? This was an opinion which he had shared with me informally before the interview, but here he elaborated in greater detail:

“Erofeev’s Russian because he’s working with all of the best Russian literary structures. Y’know, I’m not sure that many people in America will immediately understand what it means to live without a passport. Without a passport, you can’t officially acquire a place to live, you can’t

³⁷ However, Aleksei declined to have his poems recorded, due to what called their “personal” and “mildly political” content.

officially acquire a job. Again, it's really hard to understand what this means. It's essentially to deprive yourself of everything. You become no one. And at age twenty, he [Erofeev] ripped up his passport and threw it out, and didn't receive a new one until he was past thirty.³⁸ In this sense, he was hardly Soviet: he lived by his own ways and rules."

"So," I argued, "isn't the significance of living without a passport essentially a Soviet topic?"

"Well, not quite. The soviet topic is something different, in my opinion. It's dissident, political conversations in the kitchen, alcoholism as a means of escape, and the like. Erofeev is connected to all of these topics, of course, but what distinguishes him from them, is that for them this all happened after work. These Soviets still lived by the law: they had passports and they lived in their apartments. The one exception that I can still think of is are the hippies who moved to Crimea, but there it's warm all the time, so living outside of apartments isn't so bad. [He laughed.]

You also need to consider the uniqueness of Erofeev's accomplishment. Erofeev matriculated at the Moscow State University (MSU) without even the slightest of help. In order to do so, he needed to have such a strong level of skills and knowledge by age seventeen. It's remarkable."

In one of my closing questions, I asked Aleksei why he thought that Erofeev wasn't able to write anything of literary significance on par with *Moscow-Petushki* in the last twenty years of his life. He answered:

³⁸ In fact, he didn't receive a new one until 1974. See subsequent interview with Galina Erofeeva.

“Y’know, it’s complicated. On one hand, Erofeev certainly in my mind has produced more of worthwhile works than he’s credited for, that is, much more than Moscow-Petushki. I value his play Walpurgis Night, [Or the Steps of the Commander, written in 1985], and his journals [which Erofeev kept throughout his life] are quite interesting too. On the other hand, if we accept the notion that Petushki is his only first-class work, then it’s important to remember the sequence of life events that befell Venya after the publication of Petushki. That is, right after Petushki he divorced his first wife, a schoolteacher of mathematics who lived in the village of Kuzyevo in the Petushkinski Region, and his second wife was very mentally unstable and suffered greatly.³⁹ It’s also clear that he drank much more in the second half of his life, and that the operation on his throat after he contracted throat cancer weighed on him too⁴⁰. The last twenty years of his life are tragic, there’s no doubt about it.”

Galina Erofeeva:

Galina and I met on a pre-arranged afternoon at her mother’s house, a modest third-floor rental located not far from Bibirevo metro station on the northern tip of Moscow. After arriving to the apartment and being treated to a large spread of tea and apple- and potato-based *pirozhki*, a delectable yet fairly inexpensive Russian puff pastry, Galina began the interview herself by

³⁹ Indeed, Galina Erofeeva killed herself three years after Erofeev’s own death in 1990 by jumping from the thirteenth-floor balcony of their former apartment on Flotsakaya Street in northern Moscow.

⁴⁰ Aleksei is correct, but he understates the truth: Erofeev famously described his throat surgery as the most excruciating pain of his life, and was later very upset about the Soviet government’s refusal to grant him an exit visa to receive better care in France. Cf. Chmelkova, pg. 32: “Erofeev wanted to write always, but his extremely difficult operation interfered. When many people, almost up to the day that he died, came to the writer with requests to write forewords to a new book of poetry or the like, he often refused, joking that ‘he had no time. It’s all being spent on not dying.’ ; Chmelkova, pg. 46: “I asked Bella [Akhmadulina] to do what she could to help get Venichka to Paris for a surgery. She responded, ‘Yes, yes, of course, but you don’t understand, it’s very difficult to do.”

asking about the subject of my research and discussing the inherent Biblical nature of *Moscow-Petushki*.

She said: *“The biggest topic of Moscow-Petushki is the Bible. The Bible Venedikt Vasilievich knew by heart. Which, as he often said, he was extremely proud of. Before researchers of Petushki used to think that the greatest thematic in the work was alcoholism—but it’s not. A recent computer-based study, I hear, at the Kolomesny Pedinstiute actually determined that, by word count, the Bible shows up the most. The Bible’s also not just in Petushki, but in virtually all of Erofeev’s work, including Zapisky Psichopata. [In English: Notes of a Psychopath. Erofeev wrote this work before and during his matriculation at Moscow State. It was published posthumously.] If you think back, for instance, Zapisky contains several different images of a mother: first there’s a “baptized mother,” then [she cuts off to quote Zapisky] ‘I am the mother of the ruler of the mountain, and no one even lifted my dress!’ What he means here is that there is a mother of the mountain, of the sun, which comes from [the Book of] Ezekiel. There’s also a mother breastfeeding her child.*

From here Galina began to talk about Erofeev himself.

She said: *“[In addition to the Bible,] Erofeev was always reading. He collected a huge mass of literature, swallowed it, and produced his own work. He reworked quotations [from world and Soviet literature], and created a new image, meaning of what they stood for. When I talked to former classmates of Erofeev, those who knew him even from the short time he was a student at Moscow State University (MSU), they said that he stopped going to class in order just to lie*

around in bed and read books.⁴¹ Books he just swallowed whole. But he didn't just read: he also took extensive notes of what he read and recorded them in his journal. And when he became a writer, he essentially transformed his journals into works of literature."

At this point I gently interrupted Galina to pose a question about Erofeev's study of German, a lesser-known subject about Erofeev's life. She responded:

"Yes, Erofeev studied German since his childhood, and received all 'A's'.⁴² He read Goethe and Nietzsche in the original, but he also read various former Nazis—did you know? He read Hitler, Göring and others in the original too. Where he got them during Soviet times I don't know: it was of course forbidden to read any of those texts. But, yes, he studied German to read them in the original. And at one point he eventually made a little money off translations from German to Russian. I even have some of his translations [kept in his journals] with me, which are unpublished. He also studied English very briefly, but that was right before he was expelled from MSU, and then he stopped his English-language studies."

From here we backtracked a little, discussing Erofeev's path to MSU and the first seventeen years of his life above the Arctic Circle. She said:

⁴¹ Erofeev himself defends this point of view in an interview conducted with him in 1990. Interviewer Leonid Prudovski; journal "Continent," issue #65.

⁴² In addition to in the German language, Erofeev was a straight-A student in all subjects. At the time of his graduation from high school, he was the only student to receive a "Golden Medal," which earned him entrance to Moscow State University.

“Indeed, Erofeev lived his entire childhood above the Arctic Circle, and when he got to Moscow he thought of it as a kind of verdant paradise. He was really shocked by the presence of trees, the kinds—pines, spruces, birch—that they have in northern Norway, Sweden, Finland but at that time in the Murmansk Oblast’ were almost essentially lacking. So yes, when he got to Moscow, he was shocked by how green it was, having spent his childhood in the cold, snow-covered tundra and in children’s orphanages.”

At this point, we began to talk about Erofeev’s life in Kolomna, with Galina concluding the day’s discussion with her own opinion on Erofeev. She said:

“Erofeev’s life in Kolomna was short-lived—he lived there less than two years [1962-1963] — but it’s not to be overlooked. He arrived at Kolomna in 1962, and within a few months he had already been expelled, at which point he began to work as a truck driver.

But you know, Kolomna is ultimately quite a closed period in Erofeev’s life. If you look at this time, you won’t find anyone with whom Erofeev was particularly close or shared any sort of meaningful relationship. In fact, in some ways it was basically a time for Erofeev to lay low, since, coming to Kolomna from Vladimir, he was able to dodge some of the persecution and investigations that had been put out against him for his religious preaching at the Vladimir Institute.

On the whole, Erofeev—when I first began to think him over, his beliefs, etc., and I’ve been studying him and managing his literary legacy for more than twenty years now—Erofeev I consider to be an imitator of Christ, although priests have urged me not to speak that way. [She laughed.] But I’ll tell you anyway that, just as Jesus Christ traveled the land, reading and

speaking his teachings, so did Erofeev roam Russia, with his own kind of teachings. First he went to Moscow State University, then to Orekhovo-Zuevo, then Vladimir, then Kolomna, and everywhere he went he carried a copy of the Bible and readings from Jesus Christ. The more I think about it, the more I realize it's just the truth."

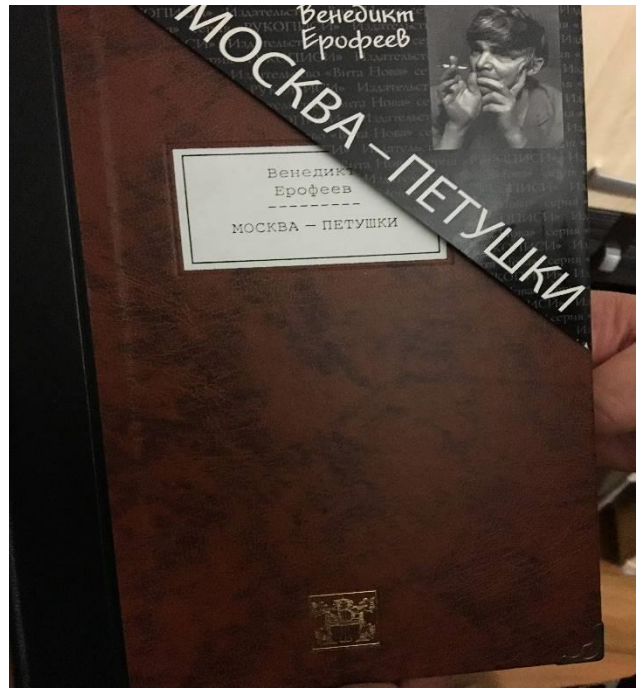
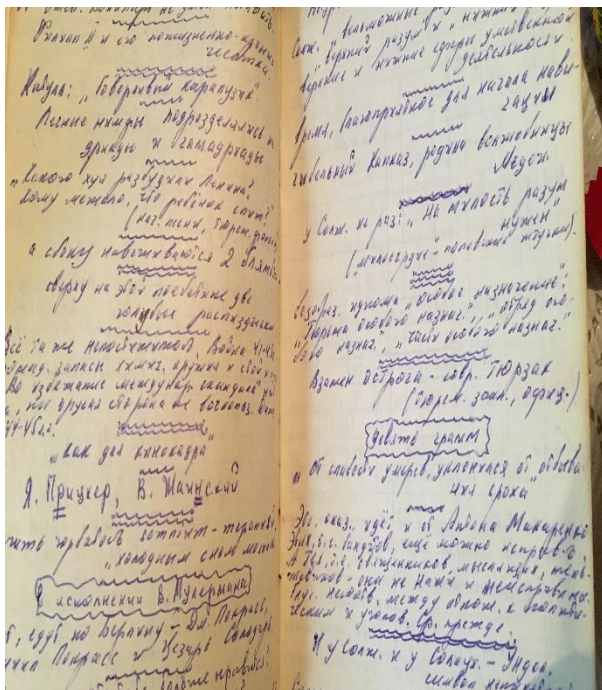
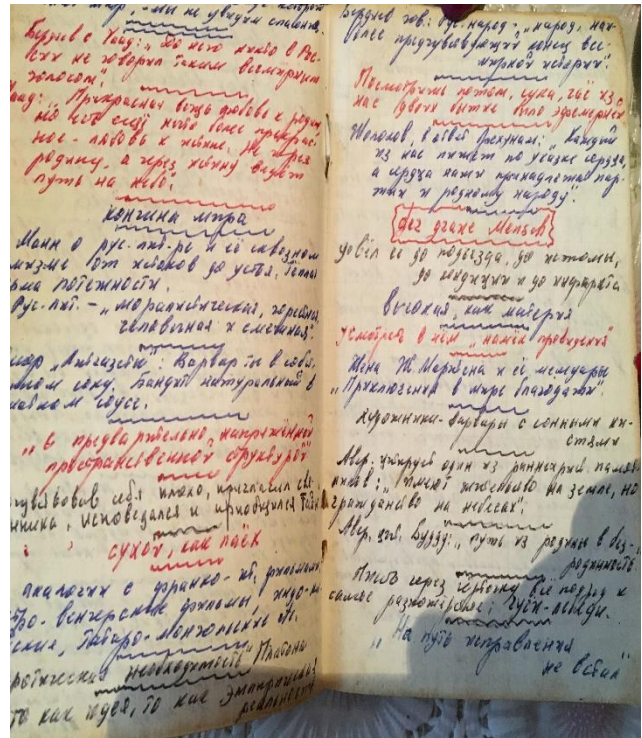
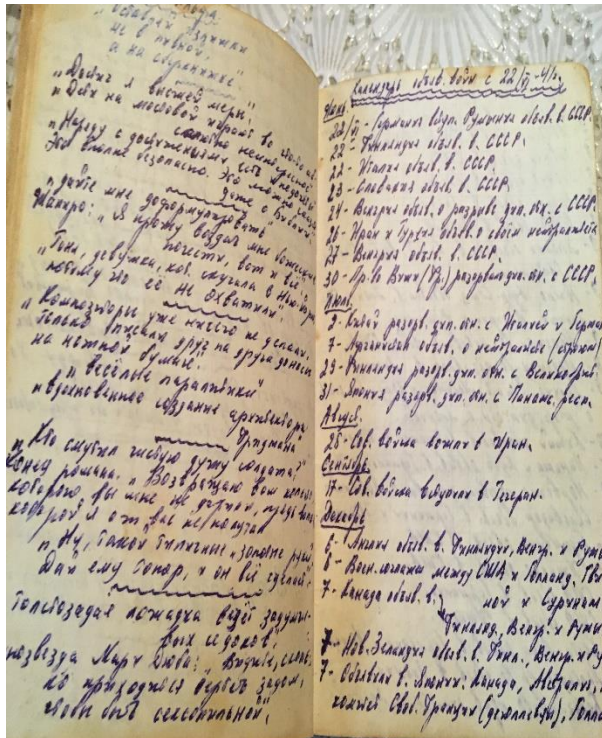


Figure 18-21. Figures 18-20 detail different sections selected at random from Erofeev's numerous journals. Galina commented that these journals are remarkable in two ways: by themselves, they stand out by their compactness and the patterns of mnemonic color-coordinated system (refer to figure 19) that record countless numbers of facts, quotations and ideas; together with Erofeev's finished works, they represent the basis of creative journaling that would develop into full-fledged literary accomplishments. (NB: An incidental shadow created during the act of photography obscures the bottom right of figure nineteen). Figure 20 shows the opening cover of a copy of *Moscow-Petushki*, held upright in the palm of Galina's hand.

Conclusion

Conducting field research on *Moscow-Petushki* and Erofeev in Kolomna and as an interviewer has led me to an unmistakable conclusion: the post-Soviet fate of Vendikt Vasilevich Erofeev is fraught with tremendous ironies.

First, the Museum and ArtCommune “Erofeev and Others” and the Festival “Antonov Apples” are responsible for a memorialization and commodification of a profligate alcoholic, whose writings were only legally published the year before he died, and Russian literature at large.

In the former, memorialization is tantamount to sanctification. The museum and artcommune have created a cottage industry to celebrate Erofeev as a genius whom they believe to have graced their presence for nearly two years. They seek to “resolve” the mystery of the complete absence of writing from Erofeev from this period of his life by lavishing him with praise, when in actuality Erofeev’s matriculation at the Kolomna Institute was more probably a pretext to obtain a covert shelter from Soviet law enforcement. The excessive indulgence in and reverence of Erofeev is visible in everything from the museum’s adjacent artcommune, which is designed so that artists-in-residence may draw inspiration from Erofeev’s “rebellious” spirit, to the shades of historical inaccuracy of the museum’s kitchen, which provides a misleading impression of the nature and tone of *kommunalka* dissident kitchen culture and perhaps *kommunalki* at large. Erofeev led a tortured life; “Erofeev and Others” minimalizes the difficulties of such at the expense of a more honest appraisal of his life and corpus.

In the latter, commodification is tantamount to sanctification, albeit of Russian literature on the whole, not just Erofeev. As Stephanie Sandler cautions in her book, *Commemorating*

Pushkin, there is a growing tendency to revere, almost deify Russia's greatest poets, which prevents an honest appraisal of their work. By analogy, the ostensibly literary festival was entirely devoid of any sort of literary criticism; instead, while outwardly advocating reading, it employed large for commercial enterprises, such as food vendors and publishing houses, to make sales. While I recognize that any successful festival of such a scale needs the financial backing of sponsors, the result was nonetheless very corporate. I wager that a sizeable portion of festival attendees have not even read the Ivan Bunin short story for which the festival is named, but were there for unrelated business or commercial reasons.

Secondly, both of the recorded interviews presented further hagiographies of Venedikt Erofeev, albeit to different ends.

Aleksey's interview pegged Erofeev as an indisputable genius, particularly focusing on the series of tragic events before and after the composition of *Moscow-Petushki* that helped shape his fate. While Erofeev's life is marked by several astonishing successes, such as his matriculation at Moscow State University and monumental, heroic amount of reading (to say nothing of *Moscow-Petushki*), it is nonetheless defined by tragedy. Like many others, Aleksey misconstrues the proportions of Erofeev's successes to failures, rendering a new post-Soviet *venin mif* in which a Soviet ne'er-do-well has taken on the amorphous position of a godhead under the Putin regime.

Galina's interview, by contrast, pegged Erofeev as a Parousia of Christ, reflecting the omnipresence and reprioritization of Eastern Orthodoxy under Putin. Her comment arguing that *Moscow-Petushki* used to be considered a work about alcoholism, but now is recognized as about religion, reflects a personal agenda; as I have shown in the preceding analysis, both subjects are integral to *Petushki*. As with her final one suggesting Erofeev's prophetic relationship to Jesus,

this comment sooner indicates the growing role of religion, particularly Christianity, in popular and to some degree critical appreciation of Erofeev and Russian literature today.

In concluding this honors thesis, I argue that this culturological analysis of Kolomna dovetailed with the literary analysis of *Moscow-Petushki* to confer a cogent analysis of '*fatum ad Benedictum*,' or the fate of Venedikt Vasilevich Erofeev; likewise, may it warn against the new dangerous trends and ironic twists of fate in post-Soviet Russia preventing readers from reading Erofeev lucidly and truly.

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Guide to Museum, Festival and Interviewee Information:

1. “Erofeev and Others” is an art-commune and museum-residence located in the historical heart of Kolomna, Moscow Oblast, Russia. Its director and chief supervisor is Ekaterina Oinas and its chief theater affiliate is Karen Nersisyan; it is managed daily by rotating local staff and residents.

Address: 205 Oktyabrskoy Revolyutsii Street, Kolomna, Russia

Website:

Ru—<https://artkommunalka.com/>

Eng—<https://artkommunalka.com/english/content/o-nas>

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+7 (985) 335-02-20

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2. In 2018, the city of Kolomna hosted the seventh international “Antonov’s Apples” Apple and Literary Book Fair, a yearly festival celebrating the fall season of apple-picking amid a cosmopolitan literary festival. The festival took place around several key locations in the city’s downtown, and was headquartered on Ploshchad' 2 Revolyutsiy (“Two Revolutions” square). Its curators were “Erofeev and Others” dir. Ekaterina Oinas and Natalya Nikitina; the architect of the festival responsible for the festival’s landing, Yuli Matichin; the artists of the festival, the artistic group Furgon; the technical curator, Konstantin Buyanov. In addition, the festival drew on many volunteers from the community and local *Musei Navigator* (“Navigator Museum), including its director Darya Antonovna and interviewee Aleksei Makeev.

Location of Ploshchad' 2 Revolyutsiy (on Google Maps):

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Ploshchad'+2+Revolutsiy/@55.1015572,38.7561055,15z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x0:0xc95ea5d7f4f5945d!8m2!3d55.1015572!4d38.7561055>

Video Press Release:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=175&v=lxrOyWlzscg

Ekaterina Oinas Festival Itinerary and ‘*Vechniye istorii*’ (“Eternal Histories”) Press Release (In Russian): <https://kolomnapastila.ru/news/1217/>

Dmitri Danilov “Verbatim” Press Release:

<https://artkommunalka.com/ru/content/kolomenskiy-verbatim-razgovory-na-stenah>

3. Interviews were collected with Aleksei Makeev, a Kolomna poet, co-leader of a rock band called “Cahors,” *kalachnik* and prolific reader of Erofeev; and Galina Erofeeva, the literary executor and daughter-in-law of Venedikt Erofeev. Both interviews spoke to alternative notions of “Erofeev hagiography” growing in post-Soviet Russia today.

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