

At Play:
**The Construction of Adulthood and Authorial Identity in Russian
Children's Literature**
(1990-2010)

Submitted by Caterina Balistreri to the University of Exeter
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**At Play: The Construction of Adulthood and Authorial Identity in Russian
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University of Exeter

Abstract

This thesis presents an analysis of texts written for a child audience in Russia between 1990 and 2010 and characterized by humorous inversions of common sense, a tendency for jokes, puns and a cheerful narrative tone. These narrative features are associated with the concepts of playfulness and play. This thesis argues that, by addressing the implied child reader of the post-perestroika period in a playful mode, children's authors tried to cope with profound social and cultural transformations which challenged their identities as adults and intellectuals. The new individual responsibilities concerning the upbringing and the education of children, on the one hand, and the crisis of written culture and of the intellectual as sources of moral guidance, on the other, occurred at the same time as the general structures of trust were collapsing in Russian society. The thesis argues that playfulness allowed children's authors to explore their own identity, and even to express their own fears and doubts as providers of upbringing and education. At the same time, playfulness was a way to involve the child of the post-perestroika period in an attempt to re-construct culture, an attempt which required a strong pedagogical agency. Divided between the wish to guide younger generations and the need to re-define their own selves, children's authors found in playfulness a field where these contradictory drives could be negotiated and their authorial personae could be re-worked. In the so-called post-post-Soviet period, which followed the election of Vladimir Putin as

President of Russia, playful children's literature is still engaged in this exploration of the adult self and of the possibility of providing guidance through literature. This exploration is further challenged by a generational gap separating adults with a Soviet background from children.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical grounds and methods which inform the thesis, while chapter two provides a historical overview of the way in which play and playfulness, both as cultural phenomena and as concepts, intertwined with specific conceptualizations of childhood in Russian and Soviet children's literature until perestroika. The last two chapters are devoted to the analysis of texts, and mostly focus on works by children's authors Grigorii Oster, Artur Givargizov and Natal'ia Nusinova which appeared in the years 1990–2010.

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Transliteration of Russian Words and Names

I have used the Library of Congress System of Cyrillic Translation without diacritics throughout. In cases where a particular spelling of a Russian name has become standard and recognised in the West, I have used this form, e.g. Lev Loseff and Yeltsin.

Translations

When not specified otherwise, all the translations in this thesis are mine.

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Caterina Balistreri

University of Exeter

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Introduction

The differences between then and now, there and here, no doubt require careful investigation and consideration. But the purpose of such investigation can only be to demonstrate that these differences are, in fact, purely trivial.

Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1933

Although children write their own stories, the artistic expression that we call children's literature is written, illustrated, marketed and bought by adults. The power and cognitive imbalance between children and adults is the cornerstone of this literary field. The issue of the pedagogical instinct underlying children's books is extremely complex: an excuse for ideological impositions and the repression of the child's freedom, on the one hand, and a challenge to be faced because of the very power and cognitive imbalance between the adult and the child, on the other. It can be argued that children have the right to stories with a high degree of artistic sophistication and which, at the same time, respect their cognitive and reading skills. Only adults can write these. What is more, the expectation that literature expands a reader's understanding and experience of life should be considered equally important for children. Only adults can and should write children's books that fulfil these expectations.¹

In the last thirty years, international children's literature scholarship has rightly explored the ideological pressures that adults exert on children through

¹ Milan Kundera's view, for example, is that 'The sole raison d'être of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover.' For Kundera, a novel should always 'discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence'. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p.5. I would extend this concept to the whole of art and literature.

books, legitimated by their pedagogical intentions. With this rich and necessary scholarship in mind, I have decided to turn my attention to the second aspect of the imbalance between adults and children – the fact that nonetheless somebody has to deal with this imbalance and write children's stories. Difficulties and tensions may interfere with adults' genuine desire to share their experiences with children, with adults' genuine desire to be present in their lives as a source of guidance and protection. I started looking at children's literature as at the literary field which displays with particular intensity, and in all of its marvels and miseries, in all of its complexity, the experience of altruism. The latter can be defined as conceiving the notion of other, and accepting one's own agency in regard to the other.

Post-perestroika Russia, with the profound and abrupt changes that occurred there, is the ideal setting for investigating how children's literature expresses the complexity of altruism. Between the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, two main factors overlapped with each other and, in my view, had a remarkable impact on children's literature by stimulating adults' pedagogical impetus, on the one hand, and challenging their self-confidence as providers of care, on the other. A series of reforms, and the collapse itself of the Soviet Union, with its State-centred system, attributed to adults new responsibilities concerning how to raise and educate children. Furthermore, the overall structures of trust which sustained society collapsed, and these included the traditional status of the intellectual and of the written word as sources of moral guidance. In this context, many Russian children's authors, most of whom had just started to write for a child audience, tried to renew children's literature by getting rid of Soviet didacticism. Playfulness – especially in the form of jokes, the reversal of the common sense, the creation of absurd atmospheres, and the

use of zany and unusual word associations – was a salient feature of their narrative strategies.

It was my intent to examine how playfulness and the play concept informed different genres in Russian children's literature published from 1990 to 2010. For this reason, I do not focus on a single genre, and I discuss children's verses, short stories and a children's memoir. All of them present narrative strategies which are associated with the concept of playfulness. In all of them, the authorial voice appears to construct his or her identity by means of playfulness. Some of the texts selected are extremely popular, such as Grigorii Oster's *Bad Advice*. The cult children's magazine *Tramvai*, to which the thesis devotes much attention, had millions of readers. Other primary texts, and in particular those written by Artur Givargizov, are published in small print-runs. However, they have been obtained the most relevant Russian children's literary awards, and receive enthusiastic reviews. Since this thesis focuses on the identity of adults as providers of care and intellectuals, the approval of the urban intellectual world (expressed through awards and reviews) makes these texts relevant and representative.

These playful works for children of late perestroika share a pedagogical attitude towards their child reader: authors, illustrators and critics advocated a form of pedagogy based on new values, emphasising the child's self-expression and inner freedom. In this thesis I suggest that this pedagogical impetus corresponded to an attempt to create a new culture, that is to say to establish new connections between objects and meanings; an attempt at re-defining objects and phenomena as these authors witnessed the cultural system in which they had come of age collapsing. In other words, these children's authors embarked on a cultural and pedagogical enterprise in a time in which adults

were being challenged as providers of care to young generations and as intellectuals (in the first case, having received new responsibilities; in the second, having being deprived of their prestige). The economic catastrophe that hit Russia in the 1990s further complicated the position of adults as providers of care. What is more, in some respects the Soviet cultural background was perceived as a legacy of violence and oppression. The educators of the post-perestroika period had to cope with the fear of being harmful, the involuntary transmitters of the same oppressive culture they wished to eradicate.

This thesis focuses on how Russian children's literature published from 1990 to 2010 expresses the construction of an adult authorial identity through narrative strategies which are associated with the play concept. The construction of this authorial persona took place in the midst of the above-mentioned challenges, and as a response to them. Authors, indeed, felt the need to establish themselves as reliable agents of pedagogical authority. However, while constructing their identity as truth-tellers they were also confronted with their own shortcomings. In other words, truth-telling implied the exploration of a possible truth about the authors' own selves, and this ultimately risked undermining their identity of trustworthy pedagogues. The relevance of the socio-historical context is here enormous, and the thesis is mostly informed by socio-historical approaches to the material.

Although the title of this thesis mentions playfulness, and play and playfulness are central concepts throughout my work, this is not a study of playfulness. Rather, playfulness is the lens through which I address the relationship between the adult and the child in children's books. More specifically, my object of enquiry is the articulation of adults' pedagogical agency and authority towards child readers. Playfulness offers a fruitful

perspective because, as I explain in the first chapter of the present work, it brings together discourses which idealise the child's freedom, and others which constrain the child's freedom by emphasising adulthood as the ideal stage of human life which children can reach by means of play. By entering the field of play, in other words, children's writers put themselves in a complex position from which they tend to empower and disempower the child reader at the same time. The contradictions and the difficulties entailed in the experience of altruism are here amplified.

The present work investigates the way in which cultural and socio-historical factors such as the transformations of the role of adults as providers of care and upbringing, the crisis which written culture and the figure of the intellectual underwent, and the overall crisis in the structures of trust in Russian society after perestroika, had an impact on Russian children's literature written between 1990 and 2010. In particular, the thesis asks what the effects of two tendencies, the empowering of adults as care-providers and the weakening of the status of intellectuals, have been for Russian children's literature. It will identify and examine elements of playfulness in Russian children's texts of the post-perestroika period, and the way they are associated with the play concept, by placing them in a specific historical, social, political and literary context. The thesis will put these playful strategies in relation to the need, on the part of children's authors, to cope with empowering/weakening tensions, resulting in specific positions for the authorial voices with regard to child readers twenty years on from the collapse of the Soviet system. Given the fact that today's children's writers in Russia came of age during the Soviet time and are now addressing an audience that does not share this cultural background, the thesis will consider how the relationship between the adult and the child has been

reshaped within Russian children's texts. I will focus on children's books with a playful character, mostly consisting of humorous inversions of common sense and of other narrative devices which aim to amuse the child, turning to his supposed inherent tendency to laughter and joyfulness.

The Condition of Adults as Providers of Care and Upbringing in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Periods

As this thesis focuses on texts which were written between 1990 and 2010, it is important to take into account the way in which the linkage between adults and the assumption of a pedagogical role was developed in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.

There is a great deal of evidence that during the Soviet era adults were officially deprived of any real power in making decisions about the way children were raised. In Catriona Kelly's words, they were reduced to the role of 'recipients of advice about how to bring their children up',² in line with the standards and guidelines established by the Party. In the mid-1930s, the state strengthened the nuclear family, but only because it considered it as auxiliary to the State.³ Kinship was a powerful metaphor in which blood ties were secondary to those linking the political leaders, the national heroes and the rest of the state (seen as a 'family') to one another. In the Stalinist myth of the Great Family, a good child could even reject the members of his own family if these were unfaithful to the state, and the case of Pavlik Morozov was exemplary.⁴ At

² Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia 1890 – 1991* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 413.

³ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 115.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.115. See pp. 114–34 for Clark's in-depth discussion of the Stalinist myth of the Great Family and the way this myth informed literature and culture. Clark also points out that already before the Stalin era Russian radicals supported the idea that

the same time, it should be noted that the family during the Stalinist era represented a refuge for individuals, a space in which one could escape the authoritarian character of the workplace.⁵ Therefore, the family was a complex entity, in which collective and private values merged, and sometimes clashed with each other.

The Thaw introduced new elements to the relationship between adults and children, by encouraging Soviet citizens to enjoy family bonds and domestic life. However, as Christine Varga-Harris argues, the new emphasis on the pleasures of domestic life during the Thaw did not signify an invitation to enjoy private life as such: 'although the separate family apartment connoted privacy, the home was intended to be a site for the rejuvenation of the collectivist spirit of the revival of socialist activism'.⁶

The Palace of Pioneers, built in Moscow in 1962 on the Sparrow Hills, is a telling sign of the condition of Russian adults as providers of care and upbringing and their relationship to children in the 1960s. The Palace represented a space separated from the adult community. In it, 'far from home and parental influence, amidst beautiful natural surroundings, the routines of

corrupt blood ties should have been rejected in favour of 'higher-order bonds of political community' (ibidem, p. 115).

Pavlik Morozov was a thirteen-year old boy who lived in a village in the province of Ekaterinburg, Gerasimovka. He supposedly denounced his father to the authorities as a kulak conspirator, and was killed, with his brother, by his relatives in 1932. On his legend and significance in Soviet culture, see Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London: Granta Books, 2005).

⁵ *Children's World*, p. 381.

⁶ Christine Varga-Harris, 'Forging Citizenship on the Home Front: Reviving the Socialist Contract and Constructing Soviet Identity during the Thaw', in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. by Polly Jones (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 101–06 (p. 102). As Kelly points out, the Twenty-Second Congress of Soviets held in 1961, with its promulgation of the Moral Code of the Builders of Communism, left little doubt about the fact that the Thaw confirmed that collective values and patriotic commitment had to be citizens' priority (*Children's World*, pp. 142–3.)

family life were replaced by the Pioneer's own routines.'⁷ The segregation of children was essential for the building of the future Soviet adult. 'Parents', Susan E. Reid maintains, 'could not be entirely entrusted with their children's upbringing [...] for some continued to inculcate patriarchal values. Moreover, no child should remain outside a well-organized collective: only within the collective could the individual fully develop'.⁸

Parents and teachers at school continued to receive instructions as to how to approach the child according to established Soviet pedagogy,⁹ and new trends were not easily accessible to the larger public.¹⁰ Polly Jones's remark that the official rhetoric of the Thaw imagined 'the *whole* of Soviet society as a "State school"' appears convincing. Her words capture a condition that perestroika would expose in all its complex, and difficult to handle, consequences: the condition of adults who feel like children, deceived by those who should have taken care of them. She writes:

On the one hand, [the Thaw official rhetoric] imagined Soviet people, especially the fresh-faced youngest generations, as 'perfectible'. Within the prevalent discourse of upbringing (*vospitanie*), children were often optimistically viewed as blank slates, on which the Soviet system could inscribe its ideal characteristics. [...] Both children and youth peopled the new Soviet imagination as ideal bearers of communism, yet also as incorrigible wrong-doers, resistant to propaganda and a threat to the socialist project. Similar ambiguity surrounded the older generations, who could be – in reality and rhetoric alike – dangerous remnants of the past (*perezhitki proshlogo*) with bad habits (including poor parenting), which might nevertheless be 'liquidated' using the correct propaganda.¹¹

⁷ Susan E. Reid, 'Khrushchev's Children's Paradise: The Pioneer Palace, Moscow, 1958–1962', in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. by David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002), pp. 141–79 (p. 144).

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

⁹ Although new emphasis was put on mechanisms of learning rather than on those concerning teaching, as well as on the value of fantasy and the child's individual expression, school programmes remained centred on patriotism and on the formation of a Communist consciousness. See *Children's World*, p. 151.

¹⁰ During the 1960s, Paedology and Lev Vygotskii were rehabilitated, but only a small number of copies of his works were available. *Children's World*, p.150. On Paedology, see Chapter 2 of this thesis.

¹¹ Polly Jones, 'Introduction: The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization', in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization*, pp. 1–18 (pp. 9–10).

Like school-children, adults had to re-learn what true communism was and how to be communists themselves. Khrushchev's secret speech represented a new source of guidance.

In the 'State-school society' of the Thaw period, adults had to re-learn not only how to be communists, but also how to bring up children, at the same time as the link between the private and the public spheres was being reshaped and strengthened. As Ann Livschiz demonstrates, concerns about hooliganism, as well as about poor education and the raising of children were widespread among party officials, teachers and common citizens immediately after Stalin's death in 1952.¹² In letters and public gatherings about the issue, parents and teachers were declared inadequate, and, in turn, teachers and personnel at school demanded greater power over decisions concerning punishments and rewards. Livschiz emphasises that, on the one hand, 'in the post-1953 period everyone wanted to express their opinion about the morals of the youngest generation'. However, personal, individual involvement in matters of education was still subservient to collective values that had in the Party their centre of meaning and authority.¹³ Responses to the crisis in education and upbringing shared a firm belief in the Central Committee and in the values of the community as the only real sources for an effective solution to the problem.

The fact that, during the Soviet period, the authority of adults was undermined as to how to bring up their children or how to edit a syllabus at school partly fed the argument according to which Soviet citizens supposedly wore a mask in public, supporting ideology, while in the private sphere they showed awareness of its falseness. In *Less Than One*, a short autobiographical

¹² Ann Livschiz, 'De-Stalinizing Soviet Childhood: The Quest for Moral Rebirth, 1953–58', *ibidem*, pp. 117–34 (pp. 116–22).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

text, Iosif Brodskii tells of this double code of behaviour in his own family by referring to the 'official lies at school and unofficial ones at home' as such an obvious and well known fact as to be hardly worth mentioning.¹⁴ Some scholars have argued that, during the Soviet time, the family represented a space for resistance, 'the only place permitting the development of personal initiative and autonomy'.¹⁵ And yet the very existence of discourses about the mask worn in public appears to underline adults' lack of freedom to perform an educative role. In other words, precisely this lack of freedom may have induced adults to adopt alternative and more rewarding strategies of self-representation.¹⁶ What is clear is that the family as a private and public space was the theatre for the difficult negotiation of agency throughout the Soviet period.

¹⁴ Joseph Brodsky, 'Less Than One', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Viking, 1986), pp. 3–33 (p. 7). For an in-depth study of the relationship between the private and public dimensions in the Soviet Union, see Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People: Changing Values in Post-Stalin Russia* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Shlapentokh observes that 'the family has become a symbol of the institutions opposing the state', and that 'the ideological atmosphere in the Soviet Union has been shaped by the struggles of the state and the populace to mold the family to suit their conflicting needs' (p. 165).

¹⁵ Jacqueline Heinen, 'Public/Private: Gender-Social and Political Citizenship in Eastern Europe', *Theory and Society*, 26, 4 (1997), 577–97, p. 579. See also Olga Mesropova, 'Private Space on the Public Stage: Marriage in Russian Stand-Up Comedy of 1990s', in *Uncensored? Reinventing Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. by Olga Mesropova and Seth Graham (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers Indiana University, 2008), pp. 211–22.

¹⁶ Aleksei Yurchak has convincingly demonstrated that this binary model (in which truth is opposed to falsity, reality to mask, revealing to dissimulating) fails to take into account crucial aspects in people's everyday life during late Socialism. He sees the public life of citizens (demonstrations and other acts of mass participation and support) as dominated by a 'performative shift', wherein the constative dimension of language and acts (their meaning) has become secondary to the performative one. He writes: 'Participating in these acts reproduced oneself as a "normal" Soviet person within the system of relations, collectivities, and subject positions, with all the constraints and possibilities that position entailed, even including the possibility, after the meetings, to engage in interests, pursuits, and meanings that ran against those that were stated in the resolutions one had voted for. [...] These acts are not about stating facts and describing opinions but about doing things and opening new possibilities'. Yurchak also interprets in the same way those private acts, such as joke-telling, which supposedly belonged to the other side of the binary, the one pertaining truth, reality and revealing of the self. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 24–5.

It was only with perestroika that the Soviet attitude towards pedagogical thinking and family rights started to change. Gorbachev introduced significant reforms, followed by Yeltsin. First, the USSR ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. Then, in 1992, the Law on Education, and, in 1996, the Family Code, which was modelled on the UN Convention, were introduced. Although these reforms gave parents the right to bring up their children according to their own personal wishes, there was a lack of clarity about the definition of key terms such as ‘abuse’, ‘neglect’, or ‘best interest of the child’.¹⁷ Concepts pertaining to the sphere of education, such as ‘independence’ and ‘individualized curriculum’, remained equally unclear. This made the implementation of the new laws difficult. Moreover, according to Amy C. Butler and Ludmilla G. Kuraeva, these changes were not introduced in response to popular demand: rather, they represented the fruit of international pressure, as Russia had to demonstrate that it was adhering to democratic principles.¹⁸ However, reforms such as the reintroduction of the foster-care system, the promotion that it received on the part of some intellectuals, and the debate that developed around the condition of abandoned children in the late 1980s suggest that, when these reforms took place, the Soviet populace was very sensitive towards the parental role and the responsibilities that it entailed for the individual.¹⁹

¹⁷ Amy C. Butler and Ludmilla G. Kuraeva, ‘Russian Family Policy in Transition: Implications for Family and Professionals’, *Social Service Review*, 75. 2 (June 2001), 195–224, p. 217.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

¹⁹ The re-introduction of the foster-care system was advocated and promoted by the *Sovetskii detskii fond imeni V. I. Lenina* (V. I. Lenin Soviet Children’s Foundation) in 1987. This had been campaigned for by the children’s author Albert Likhanov and was committed to exposing and improving the condition of Soviet orphans. I will discuss further the role and the significance of The Children’s Fund in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The foster care system had a long history in Russia and in the Soviet Union. It was suspended in 1968. For a history of, and the problems connected to, fostering children in Imperial, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia, see *Children’s World*, especially pp.158;

Today, Russia is a society that declares its strong commitment to family values. Slogans such as: 'Liubov' k rodine nachinaetsia s sem'ii' (Love towards the country starts from the family), or 'Sem'ia—odin iz shedevrov prirody' ('The family is one of nature's masterpieces'), are visible at almost every metro stop in Moscow, and other outdoor advertising spaces display similar messages. These official discourses identify adults as care-providers and the family as the mirror of the nation's cohesion and wellbeing in post-Soviet Russia. The anthropologist Serguei Oushakine draws attention to the fact that this rhetoric is ubiquitous in Russian society today. In his view, it stems from the lack of alternative social frameworks capable of generating sets of meanings and values. 'Metaphors of social and biological kinship' Oushakine writes, 'have become the dominant ways of conceptualizing political, economic and cultural development' since the mid-1990s in Russia.²⁰ Other cultural analyses of post-Soviet popular culture confirm and enrich Oushakine's analysis. Scholars have demonstrated that the Soviet past is being re-conceived in personal terms, as family history,²¹ and that themes such as the joys of family life or domestic happiness have become part of an 'ideology based on comfort, warmth, and security'.²²

177–179; 211–213; 212–226; 594. See also Alan Ball, 'Russia's Besprizornye and the New Socialist Generation', *Russian Review*, 52.2 (April 1993), 228–47; T. M. Smirnova, *Opyt patronatnogo vospitaniia detei v sovetskoj Rossii i sovremennost'*, Rossiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnii universitet, 2010
<<http://childcult.rsuh.ru/print.html?id=618906>> [accessed 1 July 2013]; Anne White, 'Charity, Self-Help and Politics in Russia, 1985–1991', *Europe–Asia Studies*, 45. 5 (1993), 787–810.

²⁰ Sergei Ushakin, 'Mesto-imeni-ia: Sem'ia kak sposob organizatsii zhizni', in *Semeinye uzy: Modeli dlia zboriki*, ed. by Sergei Ushakin, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004), pp. 7–52 (p. 10).

²¹ See Birgit Beumers, 'Pop Post–Sots, or the Popularization of History in the Musical *Nord-Ost*', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 48. 3 (2004), 378–95.

²² Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 228.

In this social context in which so much emphasis is put on family values, the notions of adulthood and citizenship are associated with both the assumption of a pedagogical role within a patriarchal model and with the transmission of traditional values.²³ As Oushakine cogently observes, this notion of 'tradition' and the role assigned to adults as promoters of it implicitly take for granted the stability of culture.²⁴ The idealization of kinship appears to be intertwined with discourses on the transmission of culture from one generation to another, so that the family becomes a school, and the school is embedded in the family rhetoric.²⁵

The adoption of a model that relies on the idea of the stability of culture is problematic in Russia, where adults are confronted with a national history in which the link between one generation and the other, and the transmission of values from fathers (in the broadest sense of the word) to children was extremely fragmented throughout the Soviet period.²⁶ This fragmentation is also characteristic of contemporary Russia. For example, a study conducted by A. Iu. Veselova in 2001 on school-children's essays suggests that 'the history of the recent Soviet past, the witnesses of which represent the majority of the country's inhabitants still today, appears as far from today's schoolchildren as events that occurred during the 19th or the 18th century'.²⁷ The risk, Veselova concludes, is 'a serious cultural split between generations, which may be the first step towards the progressive loss of a single cultural language'.²⁸ The absence of a 'single cultural language' linking generations to each other is

²³ 'Mesto-imeni-ia', p. 16.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 47.

²⁶ This issue is thoroughly discussed in Marietta Chudakova, 'Zametki o pokoleniakh v sovetskoi Rossii', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 30. 2 (1998), 73–91.

²⁷ A. Iu. Veselova, 'Istoricheskoe proshloe v sochineniiakh shkol'nikov na vol'nuiu temu', *Detskii sbornik: Stat'i po detskoj literature i antropologii detstva* (Moscow: Ob'edinennoe gumanitarnoe izdatel'stvo, 2003), pp. 126–36 (p. 126).

²⁸ Ibidem.

perceived as a serious threat to the supposed stability of today's Russian society.

Russian children's authors are at the centre of these transformations concerning the pedagogical role of adults and the possibility of conveying culture from one generation to another. Their involvement in these transformations is twofold – as adults themselves, and, more specifically, as intellectuals. Indeed when, with perestroika, adults were entrusted with new pedagogical responsibilities, children's authors could feel entitled to assume a didactic function to be directed not only at children but also at parents and teachers. This is the case, in particular, of Grigorii Oster, whose work I discuss in this thesis. At the same time, some children's works written between 1990 and 2010 expressed the need to redefine adults as providers of care and upbringing, to find alternative ways of defining adulthood, especially adults' profiles as pedagogues. Indeed the rhetoric surrounding adulthood and the domestic atmosphere, discussed by Oushakine and other scholars, excluded the possibility of uncertainties in undertaking a pedagogical role. The children's texts I discuss in this thesis ultimately express a search for the meaning of adulthood which emerges from both social pressures and individual concerns to establish a dialogue with the younger generations. This search is inevitably intertwined with a broader concern with the value of literature, and the possibility of conveying values and strengthening generational bonds through literature.

The Crisis of the Intellectual World: 'End of a Charismatic Epoch'²⁹

The Russian intellectual world underwent a profound crisis soon after perestroika. This occurred as part of an overall crisis of society which deprived Russian people of their previous points of reference. Geoffrey Hosking points out that, in the Soviet Union, structures of trust were represented by institutions which enabled citizens to feel part of a strong nation, such as the armed forces, a universal educational system, social security and so on. Nonetheless, family circles, or mutual, private arrangements, played an equally important role, especially since Soviets typically 'trusted people, not institutions'.³⁰ According to Hosking, the weakening or breakdown of both of these sources of trust occurred under Gorbachev and Yeltsin.³¹ As a side-effect of their policies, a void was created in society at large that affected the economy, politics, the relationship between citizens and the State, and, ultimately, private lives. One of the consequences of the crisis that affected the late Soviet and early post-Soviet society was that the figure of the intellectual began to be questioned as a source of moral and cultural guidance.³²

As Stephen Lovell remarks, in the Soviet period there was a strong belief that 'the printed word was capable of uniting people and instilling in them the

²⁹ I borrowed this expression from Lev Gudkov's and Boris Dubin's essay 'Konets kharizmaticheskoi epokhi: Pechat' i izmeneniia v sistemakh tsennosti obshchestva', *Svobodnaia mysl'*, 5 (1993), 32–44.

³⁰ Geoffrey Hosking, 'Is Russia Really Different? Reflections on Structures of Trust', *The East-West Review*, (Spring 2009) <<http://www.bearr.org/en/node/1512>> [accessed 30 November 2009]. On the issue of trust among private circles in the Soviet Union, see also Geoffrey Hosking, 'Forms of Social Solidarity in Russia and the Soviet Union', in *Trust and Democratic Transition in post-Communist Europe*, ed. by Ivana Marková (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 47–62.

³¹ 'Is Russia Really Different? Reflections on Structures of Trust' [accessed 30 November 2009]

³² Geoffrey Hosking, 'The Intelligentsia and Russia's Twentieth-century Crisis of Trust', in *Words, Deeds and Values: The Intelligentsias in Russia and Poland during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Fiona Björling and Alexander Pereswetoff-Morath (Lund: Lund University, Department of East and Central European Studies, 2005), pp. 229–52.

core values of the Soviet society'.³³ This trust in literature implied a specific conception of the reader that developed in the twentieth century. In the 1920s, the printed word was given the task of transforming the values of Soviet people, but, as Lovell remarks, the Soviet reader was more an ideological construct than a concrete subject.³⁴ In the 1930s, in particular, the reader became 'a collective, homogenized "mass reader", not an active consumer but the passive object of print culture'.³⁵ This approach persisted until the 1980s, and one of its consequences was that the reader was conceived of as 'a serious student of culture (*kul'tura*) interested in books for their educative value'.³⁶

'Reading conferences', quite popular during the Thaw, were organized once again during perestroika, because, Lovell points out, 'their mobilizing ethos fitted in very well with that of perestroika itself'.³⁷ Gorbachev's reforms, however, added a new element to the 1960s attitude, and this is particularly relevant for authors who set out to renew culture by turning to child readers: intellectuals felt that the time had arrived for them to take a more active role as moral guides of the society. In Lovell's words, they did not want to be any longer 'the passive, if respected, transmitters of cultural values',³⁸ but finally part and parcel of the reforming process, 'as the authorities' equal partners'.³⁹ The reading boom registered during perestroika, concerning in particular those authors who had been long forbidden or never published before, encouraged

³³ Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press LTD, 2000), p. 21.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 39. For the persistence of the concept of the mass reader in the 1980s see p. 36. For another definition of this concept and the educative role of literature in the Soviet Union, see Iurii Tynianov, 'Zhurnal, Kritik, Chitatel' i Pisatel' (1924) in Iurii Tynianov, *Poetika; Istoriiia Literaturny; Kino* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), pp. 147–8.

³⁷ *The Russian Reading Revolution*, p. 172, note 7. On the reading conferences, see pp. 47–8.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

this feeling. It was assumed that 'once the intelligentsia was free to air democratic ideas in public rather than just at the kitchen table, it would carry the rest of society along with it and turn the Soviet Union into a civilized and democratic place'.⁴⁰ In the first half of 1991, however, there was already much less demand for those non-aligned authors for whom Soviet readers had shown great enthusiasm during glasnost.⁴¹

According to Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin, Russian intellectuals found themselves in a very fragile position after perestroika.⁴² In their words, they had been used to approaching literary classics 'as a State-recognised canon for the education (*prosveshchenie*, 'enlightening') of the masses, on the one hand, and as a 'hidden parable of their own opposition to power' on the other.⁴³ In Gudkov's and Dubin's view, by grounding their self-identity in this attitude, intellectuals avoided posing themselves unpleasant questions about their own actual role and their own actual merits, beyond representing the supporters and spiritual heirs of the great Russian classics. When, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was no longer any need to oppose the power, this double approach to the classics ceased to exist, and the time arrived for the intelligentsia to answer those questions. Gudkov and Dubin state that the result

⁴⁰ Ibidem. As Lovell explains, between 1986 and 1989, literary journals and the literary intelligentsia worked hard for the publication or republication of many important works, but 1990 seems to have been a borderline year, between a high interest towards elite literature (represented by Solzhenitsyn, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak and others), and the decline of influence and prestige of thick journals and intellectuals (Ibidem).

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 88.

⁴² Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin, 'Bez napriazheniia...: Zametki o kul'ture perekhodnogo perioda', *Novyi mir*, 2 (1993), 242–55. See also the already quoted 'Konets kharizmaticheskoi epokhi'. The theme of the crisis of the intellectual world is also addressed by Dubin in Boris Dubin, 'Zhurnal'naia kul'tura postsovetskoii epokhi', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 4 (1993), 304–11. About the reaction of the intellectual world towards this crisis see Katerina Clark, 'Not for Sale. The Russian/Soviet Intelligentsia, Prostitution, and the Paradox of Internal Colonization', *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 7 (1993), 189–205.

⁴³ 'Bez napriazheniia...', p. 244.

was a catastrophe.⁴⁴ They maintain that intellectuals' long-term indifference towards what was not perceived as 'high', that is the every-day 'pragmatics of life' (*'pragmatika zhizni'*),⁴⁵ made them incapable of addressing Russian society's concrete problems. This supposedly led to the loss of their audience: 'people did not acknowledge or support any longer [the intelligentsia's] claim to supremacy and authority in the name of the "classics", or, in other words, [their] presumption of having a pedagogical-educative superiority and [their] intellectual paternalism [...]'.⁴⁶

Although Gudkov and Dubin place this turning point in 1992, the crisis hitting the intelligentsia began to be perceived as early as 1990. In that year Aleksandr Genis, for example, published an article eloquently entitled 'Vzgliad iz tupika' ('A View from a Blind Alley').⁴⁷ In it, the author addressed the question of the Russian literary intelligentsia's dismay after perestroika, when the loss of a common, general truth to support made it paradoxically incapable of dealing with the freedom of speech it had finally obtained.

In the very middle of this crisis concerning intellectuals as moral leaders of society, some Russian authors attempted a re-foundation of culture and a rethinking of values through children's literature. They embarked on a defence of literature and of the intellectual as a valid source of moral guidance, but their enterprise acquired the features of a quest for truth and for the possibility of advocating it. Their re-foundation of culture appears as a struggle for meaning, and for the re-foundation of the structures of trust in society. The strengthening of family bonds through stories which addressed the theme of family relationships can be read in this light. However, it was the relationship between

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 245.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Aleksandr Genis, 'Vzgliad iz tupika', *Ogonek*, 52 (December 1990), 17–19.

the author and the child reader that immediately emerged as the main field where the struggle for meaning had to take place. In some cases, adult authorial narrative voices openly revealed their fragility and their vulnerable nature, although we should not be too quick to read this position as a refusal of pedagogical authority. As Roberta Trites demonstrates, the dynamics of power in texts for young readers are extremely intricate and often contradictory.⁴⁸ This thesis does not seek to demonstrate how certain children's texts can be manipulative in spite of the liberating intention they seem to bear; other valuable scholarship has already demonstrated this. Rather, it addresses the imposition of a subject position on child readers as part of a complex process in which the concepts of other and of self seek recognition. The object of the present inquiry is the articulation of adults' narrative and pedagogical agency between two main poles – the other and the self.

Different in Terms of Degree: Russia Compared to Other Contexts

The context above described is specific to Russian culture. However, in Western Europe adults have gone through similar periods of crisis, in which their pedagogical authority and their capacity to assume a leading role have been questioned. Commenting on the position of children under Soviet power, Catriona Kelly maintains that this was 'different in terms of degree, rather than intrinsically different, from their position in self-consciously "modern" states more broadly'.⁴⁹ The same concept can be extended to the position of adults and their pedagogical agency. The recent history of Great Britain offers

⁴⁸ Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), p. x. Seelinger Trites draws on Foucault's notion of power as both enabling and repressive. See also pp. 3–5 for a more specific discussion of power and for a review of different scholarly standpoints on power within adolescent fiction.

⁴⁹ *Children's World*, p. 2.

examples in which adults have felt mistrusted in their capacity to act in the interests of children without efficient State control.⁵⁰ An Italian children's novel explores the other side of the context described in this introduction: the tensions that children's writers can experience in affirming their agency and authority as adults. *Bambini nel bosco* (*Children in the Wood*), by Beatrice Masini,⁵¹ can be read as a reflection on the act and the process of writing for a child audience, and on the value of literature itself for human lives. This reflection develops into a discussion of pedagogical authority— the need for such authority and how the right to exercise it is acquired.

In Masini's novel for junior readers, after a non-specified catastrophe that has provoked the collapse of civilization, children with no families are kept in a separated area. Except for administering to them a drug that deletes memories, and preventing them from leaving the camp, adults do not perform any form of control over these children, who lead a wild, meaningless life full of violence and disorder. Inspired by a book of fairy tales they find by chance, they escape and head for the woods. Here they learn emotions and how to relate to each other. The two elder children, Hana and Tom, become the leaders of the group, but the situation forces them to find a plausible foundation for their claim to the other children's trust and, in some cases, obedience. Tom and Hana's reflection

⁵⁰ For example, Maeve Pearson sees the introduction of the first National Curriculum of England and Wales (Education Reform Act of 1988) by Margaret Thatcher's conservative government as characterized by 'the most astonishing level of centralized State control, not only in terms of defining the curriculum as a whole, but even down to the detailed planning and intense monitoring of the day-to-day activities of teachers'. Pearson discusses the children's writer Philip Pullman's view of this shift in educational policy. Pullman states that it expressed fear of teachers as 'evil, politically motivated men and women, who, without iron control and constant supervision, would corrupt our children in a hundred different ways'. Philip Pullman, 'Isis Lecture', Oxford Literary Festival 2003 <http://www.philip-pullman.com/assets_cm/files/PDF/isis_lecture.pdf> [accessed 7 July 2013]. For Pearson's ideas I drew on her unpublished draft "'If You Promise to Believe Me": Agency and Authority in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials'. I am thankful to the author for providing me with this text.

⁵¹ Beatrice Masini, *Bambini nel bosco* (Rome: Fanucci Editore, 2010).

on the legitimacy of their role, the implications of this responsibility and the possibility of refusing to accept it, starts out of this renewed context. The fact that Tom is appointed by this small community to be reader of the book of fairy tales, and so the 'holder of words', makes this character the representative of the children's author, the one who 'holds words' for an audience that has not the same possibilities of expression, in other words, children.⁵²

Like Tom and Hana, Russian children's writers of the post-perestroika period found themselves free from authoritarian imposition, and felt this was the time to establish a new order in life, according to their own views. They were also prompted by the specific socio-cultural context to find a new foundation to their own presumed right to lead, educate, convey values and claim trust. Unlike Tom and Hana, however, they did have a memory: their Soviet background. This sometimes acts as a stable point of reference, sometimes as a heavy and destabilizing burden.

The Link between Life and Books

In the present study, I link authorial voices in Russian children's literature to a specific socio-historical context. This endows my work with an undeniably socio-anthropological overtone. And yet, I consider literature as a creative process through which individuals rework reality, rather than mirroring it.⁵³ However, as I

⁵² Beatrice Masini declared that she identifies with the character of Tom. See the interview Elena Mameri, 'Il romanzo "Bambini nel Bosco" di Beatrice Masini sfata un tabù: per la prima volta un libro per ragazzi finalista al Premio Strega. L'intervista' <<http://www.varese7press.it/il-romanzo-bambini-nel-bosco-di-beatrice-masini-sfata-un-tabu-per-la-prima-volta-un-libro-per-ragazzi-finalista-al-premio-strega-lintervista/>> [accessed 12 December 2011].

⁵³ As Maria Nikolajeva points out, drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalization of literature, 'modern children's literature, like modern literature and art in general, is not a mirror which reflects reality precisely as it is (or is supposed to be); it is rather a crooked mirror which distorts reality, divides it into hundreds of puzzle pieces which readers are challenged to put together'. Maria Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature Comes*

maintain that the tensions and the doubts that these children's texts expose are common to other cultures, but are different in the degree with which they were exposed, the social, cultural and historical background which accounts for this higher degree has to be discussed.

The relationship between art and the social sphere has always been complex and even conflicted.⁵⁴ Today, at least in the Western world, establishing a close connection between art and life is problematic because we prefer to conceive the work of art as free from the bounds of the specific time in which it was produced. Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author with reference to the endless possibilities of interpretation a work of art is open to, thanks to the multiple dimensions it entails, its infinite possible meanings.⁵⁵ At the same time, however, the Marxist tradition of thought has profoundly influenced our approach to art as the fruit of methods of production that are responsible for any social, political and spiritual process. There exist other approaches to the possible connection of art to life, beyond seeing the former as totally independent from the latter or, on the contrary, a mimesis, or even a mirror of it. Northrop Frye, for example, as Nikolajeva reminds us of, sees art not as a reflection of reality but 'as a displacement (or corruption) of myth'.⁵⁶

Children's literature studies have employed these and other

of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p.98.

⁵⁴ It has been observed that the conflicted relation between art and society can be traced back to Plato, who banished the poet from his *Republic* because representation lies. See 'The Ethics of Subject Creation in Bakhtin and Lacan', in *Critical Studies*, 3.2–4.1–2 (1993): *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference: University of Manchester, July 1991*, ed. by David Shepherd (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 144–62 (p. 162).

⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Aspen* 5–6 (1967) <<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>> [accessed 20 June 2013].

⁵⁶ Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 3. Nikolajeva refers to Northrop Frye's *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).

understandings of the relationship between life and art. However, a feature common to many scholars in this field is the reference to figures that are behind the books: authors, parents, teachers, children's literature professionals, and to these human beings' intentions, frustrations, and desires when addressing a child audience in a book. In other words, contemporary criticism of children's literature appears to not only acknowledge the link between books and life, but even to consider the investigation of this link as one of its prerogatives. Nikolajeva's declaration: 'basically, we read fiction because we are interested in human nature and human relationships as revealed through fictive characters',⁵⁷ was preceded by Peter Hunt's words: 'children's literature is an obvious point at which theory encounters real life'.⁵⁸

In *Art and Answerability* (1919), *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (1920–1923) and, partly, in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-1922), Mikhail Bakhtin expressed his view of the relationship I am discussing here. 'Art and life' he wrote, 'are not one, but they must become united in myself –in the unity of my answerability'.⁵⁹ For Bakhtin, form, that is compositional complexity, bears the axiological value of the work of art, because it is form that gives voice to perspective, meant as ethical and aesthetic depth. In order to reach this ethical and aesthetic depth, an external, 'genuine source of real strength' is

⁵⁷ Maria Nikolajeva, 'Beyond the Grammar of Story, or How Can Children's Literature Criticism Benefit from Narrative Theory?', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 28.1 (Spring 2003), 5–16, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Peter Hunt, 'Introduction: The World of Children's Literature Studies' in *Understanding Children's Literature: Key Essays from the International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt (New York: Routledge 1999) pp. 1–14 (p. 2).

⁵⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Art and Answerability' in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov, Supplement translated by Kenneth Brostrom (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 1–3 (p. 2).

required 'having authoritative independence and self-sufficiency'.⁶⁰ This external strength is the answerable author. With this notion Bakhtin refers not to the individual behind the book, but to the fruit of a writer's struggle to objectify their heroes, to disappear from their work. In this thesis, I am not concerned with the artistic value of the children's texts under discussion, but rather with the traces of the journey through which a writer reaches or tries to reach the 'outsidedness' (the 'vnenakhodimost', as Bakhtin calls it) of the answerable author. My investigation will examine the perspective expressed by the book. The main markers of this perspective are not only the themes the book addresses, the messages it tries to convey, but also its overall structure, its narrative strategies.

The present study is informed by the idea that the value and the meaning of a work of art will certainly not be exhausted by references to the socio-historical conditions. Nevertheless, substantial cultural and social transformations are here taken as relevant to the choice of narrative strategies and the expression of values which are significant for us, non-Russians, both in their specificity and beyond their specificity. This is why two factors, the Soviet cultural background of these authors and the collapse of the Soviet system, acquire great relevance in my work. As Milan Kundera has pointed out, one does not need to know the history of the Czech Republic to understand his novels, or the history of Spain to understand *Don Quixote*, but we will miss much of these works of art if we ignored the adventure of the *amor cortese*, chivalry, the passage from Middle Ages to the modern one or, in Kundera's case, European revolutionary enterprises over time.⁶¹ To state that understanding of the post-perestroika context enables an in-depth discussion of

⁶⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity (ca. 1920–1923)', in *Art and Answerability*, pp. 4–256 (pp. 31–32).

⁶¹ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 40. See pp. 36–40 for a further discussion of the relationship between the novel and the historical context.

the complexity of writing for a child audience means to take into account themes and phenomena which have been specific to Russian history and culture over the centuries. Nonetheless, this thesis does not lose sight of the broader European history of the relationship between adulthood and childhood, the idealization and the ideological pressures to which the child has been subject, and around which adults' agency has been articulated over time, including through children's texts and texts on childhood.

In the first chapter I clarify the theoretical background of the present work. Children's literature scholarship has repeatedly lamented the lack of a clear theoretical foundation in the last three decades. As it establishes the methodology for this study, this chapter will survey the main theoretical standpoints concerning the relationship between the adult and child in children's literature, and establish how playfulness and the play concept are linked to one another.

In the second chapter I focus on how the concepts of play and playfulness have intertwined with children's culture and with children's literature in Russia from the Middle Ages to perestroika. It should be noted that I also discuss aspects of culture which are not immediately linked to the concept of play, but which have become a substantial part of its ideological underpinnings.

In the third chapter, I discuss playful children's texts written during the 1990s. In a time in which adults were still going through a deep identity crisis and the intellectual world was losing its prestige, some Russian children's authors embarked on a pedagogical enterprise through literature, which equalled a 'cultural reconstruction', to use the expression of one observer of the time. The chapter explores how children's authors turned to playfulness as to a territory in which they could work out their identity as adults and intellectuals,

prompted by a child implied reader seen as in need of their presence and guidance. This exploration of the self was combined with a strong pedagogical impetus. The Soviet legacy was both a motivation and an obstacle. On the one hand, it informed these authors' playful strategies in the wish to convey new values. On the other, it instilled in them the doubt that they belonged to that world which they wished to subvert. The chapter will discuss a number of children's texts which appeared in popular children's magazines and as separate books, and will eventually focus on the most popular work by Grigorii Oster, the series *Bad Advice*, as the epitome of the Russian playful trend in children's literature in the 1990s and beyond.

In the fourth chapter I discuss the developments of the linkage between playfulness and Russian children's authors' search for a definition of the self in relation to their child implied reader throughout the 2000s. The Soviet cultural background of children's authors has now a different value: it is a gap that separates them from their child readers, but also a possible source for a dialogue. At the background of this new search for identity and meaning is society's pressing discourse on adulthood and patriarchal values. In children's literature, playfulness appears to be a means for deconstructing this discourse, and working out a more genuine pedagogical identity, which does not exclude the expression of fragilities and doubts.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Ground and Methods

*Io
 Proprio io
 Dentro il mare c'è più luccichio
 La conchiglia ora ha fatto la perla
 La balena ora riesce a vederla
 Ma io sono balena, io sono
 conchiglia
 Il tuo mare, tua mamma e tua figlia
 Questo mare ci agita nelle sue
 onde
 E chi sono ora io, si confonde
 Ma se solo il tuo sguardo
 s'incrocia col mio
 Dico sì, sono qui
 Sono io.*

*Me
 Just me
 There's more light under the sea
 Now the seashell has made the
 pearl
 Now a whale can see it
 But I am the seashell, I am the
 whale
 Your sea, your mother, your child
 We are tossed around by the
 waves of this sea
 And I no longer know who I am
 But as soon as your eyes cross
 my eyes
 I say yes, I am here
 It is me.
 Bruno Tognolini, 'Io'.*

The present work is underpinned by an understanding of children's literature as a field whose specificity rests on the relationship between those who produce these texts – adults – and their audience – children. The issue of this relationship is crucial for anyone dealing with children's literature. After reviewing the main theoretical standpoints concerning the relationship between the adult and the child in a book for young readers, in this chapter I will discuss my view of this relationship. I will then explain the selection of a group of

children's texts which are linked to the play concept, and discuss the concepts themselves of play and playfulness. Finally, I will clarify my research methods.

1.1. Child/Adult Relationship and The Children's Book: the Value of Theory

During the 1970s, children's literature began to be acknowledged as an independent scholarly field that was not necessarily linked to education and library science. The US-based Children's Literature Association (ChLA) has undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the development of this area. Since its inception in 1972, many studies have investigated, for example, the relationship between societal assumptions and children's literature, and the semiotics of the children's text.¹ In spite of this fruitful scholarship, children's literature has experienced difficulties in establishing itself as a subject in its own right. Maria Nikolajeva traces the rise of a new, non-pedagogical approach to juvenile fiction, one informed by contemporary literary theories, to as recently as the mid-1980s. As she points out, the discipline is still in search of its own methods, and lacks a definite theory of its own.² In *The Hidden Adult*, Perry Nodelman presents evidence of several efforts made to define the main research objects of children's literature, and his review makes it clear that scholarly enquiry has proceeded slowly. The aim of Nodelman's book is to define children's literature, and the intense dialogue that the author undertakes with previous standpoints and methods of analysis in this field confirms that

¹ See, for example, Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press) paperback edition 2009 [first edition 1986], or Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003 [third edition]).

² Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.1; Maria Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 4.

children's literature studies is still struggling to define its own identity. This is partly due to the fact that these studies have always had to fight against their second-class status within academia. For example, when Francelia Butler, one of the founders of the ChLA, started teaching children's literature at the University of Connecticut in 1962, her course was 'known derisively as "kiddie lit",³ and the discipline was not supported by any academic association or academic journal.⁴ Much has been written about the possible reasons for this academic disdain. Emphasis has sometimes been put on a gender bias, as women are the typical teachers and care-providers, and so children's literature is perceived as a women's field.⁵ Other assumptions, connecting childhood to a lack of depth and seriousness, have played an equally significant role.⁶

In her 1996 work *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, in which she applied a semiotic approach, Maria Nikolajeva provided a definition of children's literature which did justice to its profundity. She defined it as a canonic art. After explaining how, in a book for young readers, two *semiospheres* (systems of signs), the adult's and the child's, interconnect with each other, she moves on to say that the repeated and predictable structures of the majority of these texts

³ Robert McGill Thomas Jr., 'Francelia Butler is dead at 85: Children's Literature Champion', *New York Times*, 25 September 1998
<<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/25/arts/francelia-butler-is-dead-at-85-children-s-literature-champion.html?src=pm>> [accessed 10 April 2011].

⁴ See Francelia Butler, 'The Editor's High Chair: Children's Literature and the Humanities', *Children's Literature*, 2 (1973), 8–10. In 1986, Zohar Shavit opened her *Poetics of Children's Literature* by underlining that 'only a short time ago, children's literature was not even considered a legitimate field of research in the academic world'. *Poetics of Children's Literature*, p. ix.

⁵ Francelia Butler herself hints at the gender bias underlying the academic disdain towards children's literature in 'The Editor's High Chair: Children's Literature and the Humanities', p. 8. See also Kenneth Kidd, 'Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature: The Case for Complementarity', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 28.1 (2004), 109–30, pp.116–17.

⁶ See Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, chapter 'Common Assumptions about Childhood', pp. 79–107; and Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature*, chapters 'The Notion of Childhood and Texts for the Child', and 'The Self-Image of Children's Literature', pp. 3–59.

represent a code, or rather a *canon*. Like an icon, in which not only the overall subject ('Virgin of tenderness', 'Virgin of sorrow', 'Trinity' and so on) but even the geometrical proportions of the body of the figures portrayed must be respected, a children's text is traditionally constructed according to very strict canonical rules. Like an icon too, a children's book contains 'merely a portion of the information which its creator intends to mediate and which its recipients [...] can "read". [...] Children's books', Nikolajeva continues, 'may convey less information, but they generate more meaning'.⁷ This understanding of children's literature opens up a series of questions concerning the relationship between the producers of children's books, adults, and the consumers, children. It is the adult, indeed, who is in charge of the selection of the information to convey in a children's book, aware that child readers' cognitive features and reading skills are different compared to those of adults.

One may ask whether it is the difference between adults and children that makes children's literature a canonic art. In other words, the disparity between the sender and the receiver of the text may be seen as the condition that makes children's literature a field in which diversity is ultimately overcome, thanks to structures which 'convey less information but produce more meaning'. The child receiver, indeed, is supposedly able to understand and develop this meaning, in spite of his cognitive specificity. If so, the passage from the initial imbalance to overcoming entails a struggle on the part of the adult who produces this piece of canonic art which is a children's book. This struggle consists in the recognition of the other's difference and specificity, and in the development of narrative structures which are able to cope with them. This is

⁷ *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, pp. 54; 58. For a discussion of semiospheres, see pp.56–8. Nikolajeva describes the field as a single semiosphere with two codes, the adult's and the child's.

the view of children's literature which I employ in this thesis. This means, importantly, that the object of my inquiry is not the children's book as the final product of this struggle, but the struggle itself regardless of its success or failure in the recognition of the child's otherness.

Much as reductive and even misleading too rigid categorizations often are, it can be stated that, in the process of becoming a specific discipline, separated from library studies and education, children's literature studies has embraced one of two main directions, and both seem to emphasise the concepts of otherness and meaning. The first of these sees children's literature as a literary field which is intrinsically revolutionary, able to bring substantial changes to mainstream literature and even to society. Juliette Dusinberre's *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* is an example of this standpoint, followed, among others, by Alison Lurie's *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: the Subversive Power of Children's Literature*; Julia Mickenberg's *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States*; and Kimberly Reynolds' *Radical Children's Literature*.⁸ Deborah Thacker Cogan's essay 'Playful Subversion' represents another example of the scholarly standpoint that sees children's literature as intrinsically revolutionary and subversive. The essay argues that those literary strategies which question hierarchies and which are usually associated with postmodernism are to be found in children's books that long precede

⁸ Juliette Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990); Julia L. Mickenberg, *Learning from the left: Children's Literature, the Cold War and Radical Politics in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Kimberly Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007).

postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon.⁹

The second direction focuses on the imbalance between adults and children and on the way children's books express this imbalance. This perspective puts emphasis on the fact those who write, produce and review these texts are adults; children, since they are not even responsible for buying their own books, are meant to be only readers. It is claimed that, through books, adults impose on children an idea of childhood, which the latter may adhere to without even being aware of it. According to this viewpoint, the relationship between the adult and the child in children's literature is comparable to that between two societal groups, where one tends to be misrepresented or powerless: men and women, white and black people, or heterosexuals and homosexuals. The power imbalance is seen as even more accentuated in the case of children because, while other disempowered groups can speak for themselves, children, in society and culture, are voiceless.¹⁰ Scholars who have embarked on this approach to children's literature define the latter as the product of adult minds addressing a child audience from their superior position of power. Studies which express this specific attitude towards the field are: Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*; John Stephens's *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*; Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*;¹¹ and works by Maria Nikolajeva, Perry Nodelman, or Roberta Seelinger Trites, some of which will be discussed here. In spite of the differences among these

⁹ Deborah Cogan Thacker, 'Playful Subversion', in Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb, *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism* (London and New York : Routledge, 2002), pp. 139–50.

¹⁰ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1994, p. 26.

¹¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: McMillan Press, 1984); John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, (London and New York: Longman, 1992);

scholars, they appear to share the opinion that children's literature may potentially be a democratic practice, giving a voice to those who are unrepresented,¹² but it seldom, if ever, is. 'Children's fiction' Jacqueline Rose maintains, 'rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. It is an idea whose innocent generality covers a multitude of sins'.¹³ Rose's words, written in 1984, are still of enormous relevance for those engaged with this field. For example, in 2010, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* devoted a whole issue to the value of Rose's thought in today's children's literary criticism. Since Rose's pioneering work, it has been impossible for children's literature scholars to ignore that adults know more than children do.

Nikolajeva has devoted much attention to the investigation of the power imbalance that characterizes the relationship between adults and children. This does not contradict what she stated in her 1996 study, but rather completes it. She contests not the artistic value and the deep content of children's texts, but matters of ethics and, consequently, of ideology. Jacqueline Rose had already posed the terms of the key question concerning children's writing, when she referred to the perception of it as 'the place where the very ethics of language are worked out'.¹⁴

In order to investigate the dynamics of the relationship between adults and children in children's literature, scholars have turned to different theories,

¹² Perry Nodelman himself is a children's writer, which suggests that he acknowledges that children's literature is not necessarily a means for colonizing the child. Nikolajeva has acknowledged the potentiality of children's literature, basing her inquiry on narrative voices that give birth to a narrative pluralism, enabling the reader to choose a subject position. See, for example, Maria Nikolajeva, *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (Lanham, Maryland, and London: 2002), pp. 88–109.

¹³ *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

for example Postcolonialism, feminist, queer, or Marxist theories.¹⁵ These have sometimes been employed to show the fallacy of the argument that asserts that children's authors lend their voices 'to children who cannot make their own voices heard or their own stories told'.¹⁶ In the light of such theories this assertion has been read as unethical: whoever occupies a superior position cannot adopt a minority's subjectivity without colonizing that minority.¹⁷ Nodelman observed in 1992: 'In the act of speaking for the other, providing it with a voice, we silence it'.¹⁸

In *The Hidden Adult*, Nodelman suggests that adults have built colonizing assumptions about childhood that represent it as a golden stage of human life. This may have 'the noncolonialist result of imagining children as superiors to adults and of imagining children's literature to be inviting children to think of themselves as beings superior to their elders'. Nodelman asks: 'Just who is

¹⁵ For the application of Postcolonialist theories on children's literature, see, for example, Perry Nodelman 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature', in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 17, 1 (1992), 29–35, or *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Post-Colonial Context*, ed. by Roderick McGillis, (New York: Garland, 2000). An example of the employment of Feminist theory in children's literature criticism is Lissa Paul, 'Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature', *Signal*, 54 (September 1987), 186–201, and 'Feminism Revisited' in *International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature* ed. by Peter Hunt (London and New York: Routledge, 2004, Second Edition, Volume 1), 140–53. Besides Nikolajeva, whose application of queer studies to children's literature will be discussed later in this thesis, scholars who have employed queer theory are Kenneth Kidd (see for example, his *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adults' Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011)), or Eric Tribunella (see for example, his *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2010)). For recent Marxist approaches, see *Owners of the Means of Instruction: Children's Literature: Some Marxist Perspectives*, ed. by Jenny Plastow (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Maria Nikolajeva, 'Imprints of the Mind: The Depiction of Consciousness in Children's Fiction', in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 26.4 (Winter 2001), 173–87, pp. 184–5.

¹⁷ See *ibidem*, but also Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, p. 163: 'Children's literature might be best characterized as that literature that works to colonize children by persuading them that they are as innocent and in need of adult control as adults would like them to believe.' On pp. 164–70, a broad discussion follows in which Nodelman applies Edward Said's analysis of colonialist thinking for his personal definition of children's literature.

¹⁸ 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature', p. 30.

colonizing whom?',¹⁹ but immediately answers that it is the adult, and the adult only, who benefits from the conviction that children are wiser or superior. Nodelman's question keeps its thought-provoking power in spite of his own answer to it. In this thesis I maintain that the ideal of childhood as a potentially harmonious, happy, complete, or, in other words, perfect state of being may entail a problem for adults who address children through literature, and who are aware of their own imperfection and incompleteness. Rose seems to overlook this aspect when she writes that adults turn to children's literature because they associate it with an ideal of plenitude (embodied by the child), and with the aspiration to heal or conceal the fractures that concern the coherence of one's subjectivity and language. For Rose, children's literature is a means for deceiving the child and the self. She grounds her argument on Freud's view of utterances as our means of identifying ourselves and objects in the world. Because of its arbitrary nature, Rose maintains, language can be a means for deception, a deception which concerns first of all one's own self.²⁰

Rose's conceiving of language as deception seems to be challenged by studies which have put emphasis on linguistic reflexivity. According to these studies, the effort of putting a term and its meaning together, and thus producing language can also reveal to the speaking subject the arbitrary component of this process.²¹ This is especially relevant in the present work, as

¹⁹ *The Hidden Adult*, p. 168.

²⁰ *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 16

²¹ For a review of the several scholarly positions on linguistic reflexivity, see John A. Lucy, 'Reflexive Language and the Human Disciplines' in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics* ed. by John A. Lucy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 9–32. More recently, Talbot J. Taylor has devoted much attention to the issue of reflexivity in language. See, for example, 'Language Constructing Language: The Implications of Reflexivity for Linguistic Theory', *Language Sciences*, 22, 4 (10 October 2000), 483–99. Professor Taylor gave five Leverhulme lectures on the theme of language reflexivity at the University of Edinburgh in 2003. The texts of these lectures are available at <<http://wm.academia.edu/TalbotTaylor>> [accessed 30 June 2013].

‘producing language’, that is to say a new culture, is the task that, in my analysis, Russian children’s authors set for themselves during late perestroika.

Gregory Bateson explored the evolution of reflective components, that is to say metacommunicative rules, in animals. He found out that play is the context in which an animal learns the notion of signal: ‘that is, to recognise that the other individual’s and its own signals are only signals, which can be trusted, distrusted, falsified, denied, amplified, corrected, and so forth’.²² Later in this chapter, I will discuss Bateson’s view of play as the context in which individuals can gain awareness of the arbitrary nature of language. Here I would like to point out that, in the presence of an addressee that belongs to another group, a group which is, or is perceived of as being, voiceless, such as children, children’s literature – the very act of ‘answering [children’s] questions and telling [children] tales’²³ – can turn into the site where adults have to deal with the ‘the conventional [that is, normative] character of language’,²⁴ and with the agency that it entails.

The perception of linguistic normativity, and the agency that language entails may represent a problematic challenge for adults, rather than a confirmation of their ontological superiority and power. In the need to guide children both from an ethical and a cultural point of view, and to establish what is right and what is wrong (all actions contained in the concept of ‘creating language’), personal reasons merge with social pressures, resulting in tensions and difficulties. In the analysis I propose in this thesis, this occurred in post-

²² Gregory Bateson, ‘A Theory of Play and Fantasy’, in Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (London: Intertext Books, 1972), pp. 177–93 (p. 180).

²³ *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 16.

²⁴ Talbot J. Taylor, Leverhulme Lecture III, ‘Language Mastery: Who’s in Charge?’, University of Edinburgh, 2003
<http://academia.edu/457278/Leverhulme_Lecture_3_Language_mastery_whos_in_charge> [accessed 30 June 2013].

perestroika and post-Soviet Russia, where the issue of adults' pedagogical responsibility became, as we will see in the following chapters, the object of an intense debate.

Pedagogical responsibility can make authors unconfident, rather than empowering them.²⁵ While I recognise the power imbalance inherent in the adult-child relationship, I believe that a discussion of the issue of 'the hidden adult' should put emphasis on the awareness, on the part of children's writers', of children's need of adults' guidance, beyond the issue of power. I follow Alan Richardson's line of thinking, according to which:

Any argument that, noting the historical infantilization of women, slaves, the working classes, racial minorities, and colonized people within modern social discourses, attempts uncritically to portray children themselves as a colonized group [...], which child-centered discourses "infantilize" [...], loses sight of the undeniable fact that children, unlike the various adult groups oppressed in their name, *are* in legitimate need of protection and guidance.²⁶

There is the possibility that, by embarking on the role of moral leader to young generations through literature, adults are confronted with their incapability of accomplishing the pedagogical task they have set for themselves. In this process, the construction of adults' identity in terms of superior power and knowledge, on the one hand, and the deconstruction of this identity, on the other, can co-exist within the same text written for a child audience.

According to Nikolajeva,

adults can never fully interrogate their own power position, and the overwhelming majority of children's books do not even attempt at such interrogation, either by ignoring the issue altogether or by unconditionally

²⁵ Jill Paton Walsh protested against the fact that children's literature is associated with the educational system as follows: 'Many teachers see the children's writer, like the children's doctor, the children's psychiatrist, the children's teacher, the children's home, as part of the apparatus of society for dealing with and helping children, as a sort of extracurricular psychiatric social worker.' Jill Paton Walsh, 'The Writer's Responsibility', *Children's Literature in Education*, 4, 1 (March 1973), 30–6, p. 32.

²⁶ Alan Richardson, 'Romanticism and the End of Childhood', in *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuities, Postmodern Contestations*, ed. by James Holt McGruvan (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), pp. 23–43 (p. 31).

affirming adult norms.²⁷

Added to this, I would suggest that when adults ignore the issue, and even affirm their worldview through a children's book, there is space for a discussion of their difficulties in adhering to their own wishes and expectations as providers of guidance and care.

In this thesis, I argue that the dynamics through which the adults' norms are imposed on child readers do not only belong to a history of aetonormativity,²⁸ that is to say the exercise of power as oppression and repression, but also to a history of adulthood in which the profound need to protect the others, share experience with them and help them gain their own individual independence meets obstacles. These obstacles can be related to various factors. For example, changes in society can leave adults unprepared, and the economic crisis which often accompanies these changes can further challenge adults' confidence. These are the circumstances which concerned post-Soviet Russia: a political and cultural system had collapsed at the same time as adults had been given new pedagogical responsibilities as parents and teachers. In these conditions, deeply rooted assumptions about children and childhood are difficult to 'deconstruct' and to see objectively, and interfere with the cultural exchange between an adult and a child, even when the former genuinely intends to renew this relationship and to recognise the child's freedom as an individual.

Children's literature often does not bring ideas of radical change into society. However, it remains the site for the reworking of the experience of the

²⁷ *Power, Voice and Subjectivity*, p. 203.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 1–11. The term 'aetonormativity' was coined by Maria Nikolajeva in analogy with the term heteronormativity, which is central in queer studies. With this term, Nikolajeva referred to the imposition of adults' norms of behaviour and worldview on children. The concept of aetonormativity is further discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

cultural and affective exchange between human beings, when one of the two subjects involved in this exchange has, or thinks he has, a pedagogical responsibility towards the other. The issue of *how* (rather than *whether*) to assume a pedagogical role and deal with doubts about one's own ability to be of help, or, in other words, the issue of *how* to say 'I am here for you' when one does not know who one is, is central in my approach to the texts discussed in this thesis.

1.2. The Imagined Child as Constructed and Constructive

When, due to personal or social circumstances, adults perceive the need to tell a child, like in Tognolini's poem which is the epigraph to this chapter, 'Yes, I am here, it is me', the issue of the features and the function of the imagined child to whom they say these words is crucial. Lee Edelman maintains that, today, 'the [image of the] Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention'.²⁹ He addresses this phenomenon in terms of 'reproductive futurism', wherein the Child is the emblem of a moral imperative, implied in slogans such as 'We are fighting for the children. Whose side are you on?'³⁰ Behind this imperative, Edelman maintains, lies the authentication of a stable social order, based on a way of conceiving identity as defined by oppositions (what is 'me', what is 'not me'), and 'by extension, of history as linear narrative [...] in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself – as itself – through time.'³¹ Edelman argues that queerness can make problematic those stable constructions of the self and of social order. I suggest that children's literature can participate in this

²⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 3.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

interrogation of social and individual identity, and it is the imagined child itself which can stimulate this form of resistance.

Discussing the imagined child and its intrusive presence in citizen's lives, Edelman seems to neglect the fact that the imagined child is a complex entity, determined by external factors, and by others which are linked to profoundly inner and personal drives. By responding to the social imperative which puts the innocent child, asking for adults' defence, at its centre, children's authors (among whom I include illustrators and other possible actors in the production of the children's book) can call into question 'the absolute value of reproductive futurism',³² and embark on a dialogue with another imagined child, whose evocative power puts into doubt the affirmation of a coherent and stable order as unproblematic, as something 'whose refusal [is] unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane'.³³

The Russian children's texts I discuss in this thesis are an example of the multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways in which authors interact with the imagined, or ideal, child in the process of writing for a juvenile audience. These texts were written in a period in which the mandate of reproductive futurism was increasingly pressing, and most of them seem to be remarkably engaged with ideals of cultural and social construction formulated around the image of the child in need. Some of these texts appear to affirm adults' normativity, and thus contribute to the construction of culture as a web in which adults find reassurance in knowing themselves and what 'good' is. Other texts, however, reveal not only adults' doubts about their own selves as subjects able to provide care and moral guidance, but also doubts about the viability itself of cultural reconstruction as 'good'. In some key examples, the process of association of a

³² Ibidem, p. 3.

³³ Ibidem, p. 4.

term with its meaning, or of a signifier with a signified, is represented as a painful act steeped with violence. Contrary to what Edelman argues about queerness, however, the multiple messages that these texts convey, including the questioning of an organizing principle of culture, do not stem from a stance of resistance to the discourse on children's need for adults' guidance and protection. Rather, they originate in embracing this discourse and the hope for 'dialectical access to meaning',³⁴ as a form of responsibility and ethical commitment.

In adults' ethical and pedagogical commitment to the act of writing books for a juvenile audience, a constructed image of the child can intertwine with a constructive child, which corresponds to an imagined child that is not only a passive object, but, rather, holds a form of agency. The constructed child can best be described, in Nodelman's words, as 'the constructions of childhood that adults have invented to justify those needs [of protection and guidance] – particularly in texts intended for child readers'.³⁵ The expression 'constructive child' was suggested by David Rudd.³⁶ He referred to actual children, or the children outside the book, and to the fact that they have the freedom to choose their own subject position while reading it.³⁷ My understanding of the constructive child is different from Rudd's. In my view, the constructive child is another imagined child. It undermines the reassuring power of the constructed one, the child that adults exploit to justify their power and the coherence of their

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 6.

³⁵ *The Hidden Adult*, p. 163.

³⁶ David Rudd, 'Theorizing and Theory: The Conditions of Possibility of Children's Literature', in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, pp. 29–43 (p. 31).

³⁷ Ibidem. On the complexity of the issue of the subject position in children's fiction see Maria Nikolajeva, 'The Identification Fallacy: Perspective and Subjectivity in Children's Literature', in *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature*, ed. by Mike Cadden (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), pp. 187–208.

own selves. The constructive child is a child 'other' who, by virtue of its otherness, asks for its own definition, provided that the defining subject is prepared to be questioned, in turn, as to who he or she is. When this constructive child is heard, children's literature becomes a creative process which develops itself between two opposite poles consisting of two questions: Who are you? and Who am I? The responses to these questions can be multiple. However, even when adults eventually chose to impose their own worldview in the process of defining their own selves and the one of the child they are addressing, children's books can still be seen as the field where this difficult process has occurred. In my discussion of some of the primary sources of this thesis, heteronormativity is one element of a process of definition of the self and of the other which presents contradictions and cracks.

1.3. Otherness and Altruism in Children's Books

As literature for the other, conceived of for, and devoted to, the other, children's books offer to child readers adults' views of the child they are addressing and of themselves. This may entail the imposition of an identity on the child, but also a self-exposure, an uncovering of the self. It is this self-exposure that can put into question the idea of the adult as a universal and monolithic entity (endowed with qualities which are defined in relation to the child, such as superior knowledge, superior experience, or superior wisdom). It is here that the constructive child exerts his agency.

As Hanna Arendt points out, the category of personal identity implies the other as necessary. She observes that all living things 'fit themselves into a world of appearances' and thus reveal an 'urge towards self-display'.³⁸ Human

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981)

beings, she carries on, replace self-display with self-presentation: they ‘present themselves in deed and word, and thus indicate how they wish to appear’.³⁹ Self-presentation can be driven by hypocrisy and pretence, but it all the same exposes the personality to the others’ gaze and questions.⁴⁰ Drawing on Arendt’s thought, Adriana Cavarero argues that, ultimately, the one who acts – the *actor* – does not know who he or she reveals, and ‘the meaning of identity remains patrimony of an other.’⁴¹

Cavarero discusses the link between storytelling and selfhood by pointing out that the other has a narrative position that awaits recognition on the part of the story-teller as what ultimately constitutes him or her. This other is a concrete presence, even when it is ‘an ideal reader to which the text appeals’.⁴² Cavarero emphasises that the reality of the self is bound to the material, concrete, presence of someone other, in the dimension of the here and now. This dimension rejects ‘the anonymous face of an indistinct and universal alterity – namely, that force of the abstract altruism which is too easily identified as a generic benevolence or pious intention’.⁴³ The other Cavarero refers to is ‘a unique existent that no categorization or collective identity can fully contain. She is the you [*tu*] that comes before the we [*noi*], before the plural you [*voi*] and before the they [*loro*].’⁴⁴ Likewise, the pedagogical impetus which, in my reading, underpins the children’s texts discussed in this thesis is an impetus to declare an altruistic ‘I am here, it is me’, the opening of a you-and-I relation with the child reader. This coincides with an enterprise in which, due to the difficult

[1978]), p. 29. Arendt borrows the term ‘self-display’ from the biologist and zoologist Adolph Portmann.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 34.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 36.

⁴¹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 22.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 85.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 90.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

conditions in which it took place, the adult is tempted to identify himself with the child – with his suffering, for example, with his being in need – or to make sense of his own life-story through the child's. However, following Cavarero's understanding of altruism, I see adopting a position that addresses the child reader as 'you' through children's literature as a refusal to dissolve the child's otherness in the name of empathy or identification.⁴⁵ Addressing 'you' assigns uniqueness and distinction to the other. It resists the speaking subject's temptation to find support by speaking as 'we', a collective identity – 'the adults' –, and keeps him or her bound to the responsibility entailed in the I-for-you moment. My understanding of the constructive child, as opposed to the constructed one, in children's literature, is akin to Cavarero's thinking on otherness and story-telling.

The Italian scholar Antonio Faeti brings the dynamics between story-telling and selfhood to the heart of children's literature. In a short text about children's literature and memory, he writes: 'When I became a professor, a group of colleagues enrolled in my modules, and I realized they would reveal their inmost selves even during my lessons, [...]'.⁴⁶ With these words he seems to suggest that, through children's literature, adults turn to the child, the *other*, with a desire to speak and being listened to, and thus to expose themselves to the gaze and the questions of the child.⁴⁷ Faeti referred to his colleagues' 'inmost selves' by the term *i cassettoni*, the 'secret compartments': a repository of memories that make us vulnerable, those memories which are particularly difficult to exhume and which one usually prefers to keep private. These adults

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 92.

⁴⁶ Antonio Faeti, 'I ricordi nel cassettone', in *Gli anni in tasca: Catalogo 2009* (Milan: Topipittori, 2009), pages are not numbered.

⁴⁷ With this expression I am not referring to an actual child audience, but to an imagined Child.

felt the need to pour out their most delicate feelings while they were gathered in a room for a seminar of children's literature, as if in search of the gaze of a child other upon them.

Faeti develops and completes his understanding of children's literature as the search for the other's gaze when he seems to state the imagined child is also the receiver of an identity, the recipient of the adult's gaze upon him. Indeed, Faeti observed that children's literature creates 'the broadest and the clearest symbols'.⁴⁸ He suggests that this may be attributed to an 'ever-returning evangelistic vocation to explain certain things, the most important things, [...] to children, to those who are in a subordinate position.'⁴⁹ As becomes clear in other passages of Faeti's reflection, this ultimately authoritarian performance ('the evangelistic vocation') is enacted through an inner struggle on the part of the author to ensure that the child is not only a screen on which adults can project their own bygone ideals and present frustrations.⁵⁰ The evangelistic vocation, an expression which raises the suspicion of a condescending approach on the part of thinkers formed by Post-colonialism and Poststructuralist theories, is therefore driven by the presence of an other who asks the speaking subject for meanings.

1.4. Ethical, Cognitive and Aesthetic Labour in Bakhtin's Dialogism

Mikhail Bakhtin's early reflection on the self/other relationship in aesthetic activity helps to clarify further and expand the issue of the agency of the child other in the book. According to Bakhtin, none of us can escape his or her

⁴⁸ Antonio Faeti, *I diamanti in cantina: come leggere la letteratura per ragazzi* (Bologna: Il Ponte Vecchio, 2001 [Milan: Bompiani, 1995]), p. 147.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Faeti's notes on *The Witches* by R. Dahl, and, especially, on *The Nature of the Beast* by J. Howker in *I Diamanti in cantina*, pp. 66–7; 165–70.

specific corporeal and spatio-temporal embedding; in this sense, 'there is no alibi in Being': 'I, the one and only I, can at no moment be indifferent (stop participating) in my inescapably, compellingly once-occurrent life'.⁵¹ Because of this physical dimension of existence, none of us as a subject can achieve any whole representation of the self. I cannot really see my corporeal delimitations, nor the space my body occupies, with sky and the rest of the landscape at its back. It is only the other who has access to me, who can 'consummate' (*zavershit'*) me, enjoying in this sense an 'excess of seeing' (*'izbytok videniia'*).⁵² Bakhtin addressed this point broadly in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, but in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* he devotes attention to it, by focusing on what we can do for the other, who cannot achieve any whole representation of him or herself:

I, from my unique place in Being, simply see and know another, [...] I do not forget him,[...] for me, too, he exists – that is something only I can do for him at the given moment in all of Being: that is the deed which makes his being more complete [...] and which is possible only for me.⁵³

In the same way, I can conceive myself as a series of scattered fragments and need the other to perceive these fragments as forming a coherent whole.

For Bakhtin, this act of perception corresponds to and is perfected by aesthetics, because aesthetics allows the subject to concretely inscribe the aspiration to see the other as a whole. With the term 'aesthetic' we commonly refer to what has to do with the external surface of things and the value we attribute to these external features: ugly, beautiful, eccentric and so on. Bakhtin's understanding of aesthetics is very specific. In his view, the aesthetic

⁵¹ M. M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, translation & notes by Vadim Liapunov, ed. by Vadim Liapunov & Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 41.

⁵² These terms are used by Bakhtin in 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity'. For the discussion of the Russian terms by the translator, see 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', p. 235.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

is an activity constantly devoted to the perception of an object, it is a form of shaping, or 'consummation', and thus a form of authorship.⁵⁴ In aesthetics the subject makes 'sense out of the world by fixing the flux of its disparate elements into meaningful wholes'.⁵⁵ This production of meaning process relates to both a person standing in front of us and a text and its hero.

Bakhtin argues that in requiring the other's intervention for defining themselves, subjects are seeking love:

I feel an absolute need for love that only the other is capable of internally actualizing from his own unique place *outside* of me. To be sure, this need shatters my self-sufficiency from within myself, but does not yet shape me affirmatively *from outside*.⁵⁶

The other is called to 'author' us, to provide us with a definition, and the need for love that this request implies makes necessary an ethical effort: we do not want the other to project his own self on us, we want to be recognized objectively as human beings. In these early philosophical reflections, aesthetics, cognition and ethics, as Bakhtin sees them, are therefore not separate from each other. However, this aesthetic relationship is not a given, but always an effort, an achievement.⁵⁷ Following Bakhtin's reasoning, it can be argued that Faeti's colleagues, who were gathered in a seminar room of children's literature ready to pour out their inmost selves, saw in the imagined child an object and a source of consummation and love.

Consummation, as said, makes necessary an ethical effort, and this

⁵⁴ Michael Holquist, 'Introduction: The Architectonics of Answerability' in *Art and Answerability*, pp. ix–xlx (p. xxiv).

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', pp. 50–1.

⁵⁷ In his later work, Bakhtin differentiated between different forms of aesthetic activities, and only few of them achieved this ethical and cognitive potential. Consummation for Bakhtin is not a closing off, but an understanding of the person or the object in their openended relation to time and space. The epic hero, instead, is closed, finalized, because already determined by the chronotope of epic. In Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist's words, 'Bakhtin was an enemy of anything that had ceased to be in process'. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 152.

effort is also required in the relationship between an author and a hero in a work of literature. An author disappears from his or her work, by occupying an external position ('*vnenakhodimost'*, 'outsidedness', as Bakhtin calls it), in the very process of adhering to the inner laws of his or her own creation. As Ruth Coates observes: 'authorial love [...] according to Bakhtin manifests itself through sacrifice',⁵⁸ and 'the paradigm for responsible, active self-hood is found to be in Christ'.⁵⁹ 'The author [...] – Coates writes – sacrifices him- or herself for the hero by adopting the "difficult" external position necessary to complete the hero aesthetically'.⁶⁰ Thus, the power imbalance between the one who consummates and the object of consummation can be overcome by the battle for outsidedness, which 'may also be lost by an author'.⁶¹ 'Rather than attempting to diminish the power gap', Coates notes, 'Bakhtin accepts it as a "given" of the relationship but is constantly at pains to deconstruct it with the powerful weapon of love'.⁶² The authoring subject must recognise the object as something foreign and independent, otherwise consummation turns into an abuse, an imposition of identity. This recognition, the struggle for outsidedness, is the result of a struggle of the author with his or herself.⁶³ Indeed, as has been observed, Bakhtin sees the creation of a hero by an author as ultimately the creation of the self.⁶⁴ The main object of my investigation can be defined as the author's battle for outsidedness and, therefore, a battle for his or her self, for his

⁵⁸ Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1998]), p. 54.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 53. For the struggle for outsidedness, See 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', pp. 190–1

⁶² *Christianity in Bakhtin*, p. 53.

⁶³ 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', pp. 190–1.

⁶⁴ 'The Ethics of Subject Creation in Bakhtin and Lacan', p. 158. Clark and Holquist point out that Bakhtin's ideas about self/other relations ultimately feature the creation of the self by means of a quest: 'I go to the other in order to come back with a self'. *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 78.

or her own self-definition.

There has been a vast recourse to Bakhtin's ideas in search of a stable theoretical framework for textual analysis in children's literature.⁶⁵ Within this field of inquiry, the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, in particular, has been called upon in reply to Rose's argument about the impossibility of children's literature. David Rudd advocates a Bakhtinian reading of writing for children which

point[s] to the 'space in between' as precisely where things happen (in what [Bakhtin] terms 'the border zone'), instead of conceiving isolated authors (adults) in 'command', with passive readers (children) in danger of 'seduction', and insular texts waiting to trap readers with their baited 'image of the child'.⁶⁶

Rudd insists on the interactive nature of Bakhtin's model. In his view, within the sphere of children's literature the child, as a reader,

has both a sociocultural and an embodied sense of its location in society, from which vantage point it will respond, dialogically, to the various fictions proffered: liking some and rejecting others and, no doubt, liking some simply because fellow children say they like them.⁶⁷

Most importantly, Rudd maintains that 'literary texts are inherently "interrogative"' and that "this openness seems to be the case regardless of how "monologic" an author might intend a work to be'.⁶⁸ These last two statements are problematic, because they suggest that dialogism is intrinsic to any work of literature, and even to any form of human interaction, as long as language is involved. If we consider Bakhtin's later work as being, in some respects, a further expansion of the ideas expressed in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic*

⁶⁵ It is above all Bakhtin's concept of carnival which has attracted the attention of scholars of children's literature. For this discussion, see chapter 3 of this thesis, p. 241–3.

⁶⁶ David Rudd, 'Children's Literature and the Return to Rose', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 35.3 (Fall 2010), 290–310, p. 294.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 299.

⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 302.

Activity, we may be inclined to approach the issue of dialogism differently.⁶⁹ In Bakhtin's reflection the intersection of aesthetic perspectives, whereby I am responsible for the other's consummation and *vice versa*, is not something given, but always an achievement, and 'it takes an immense effort to be true to this dialogic understanding of existence'.⁷⁰ Rudd's reflection seems to stem from the need to put an end to the uncomfortable investigation of the power implications of any adult/child relationship. The present thesis draws on this investigation, but intends to explore the attempt at a responsible, objective, consummation of the child within children's literature in all of its complexity, as a quest in which, as Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist point out, 'I go to the other in order to come back with a self'.⁷¹

In this thesis, the pedagogical agency which children's authors seem to claim is discussed as partaking in the author's creation of the self which, as Bakhtin maintains, must occur in the very process of the recognition and reshaping of the other.

1.5. Playful Texts, Authors at Play

For my analysis of how Russian children's books published between 1990 and 2010 reveal a complex process of definition of the child and of the adult self

⁶⁹ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist warn against using Bakhtin's early philosophical essays as 'a canonical guide for measuring the correctness of conflicting interpretations of later works'. Nevertheless, when, in their treatment of these earlier essays, they analyse the Bakhtinian concept of Being as 'being with', they underline: 'this emphasis on simultaneity and sharing characterizes all Bakhtin's work. [...] His commitment to a kind of socialism was motivated by the necessity of sharing not only our material possessions, but our very selves'. *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 64; 77. Holquist expressed this vision of dialogism as exchange discussing the link between dialogism and Bakhtin's early philosophical works in his 'Introduction: The Architectonics of Answerability', pp. xvii; xli.

⁷⁰ Carol Adlam, 'Ethics of Difference: Bakhtin's Early Writings and Feminist Theories', in *Face to Face: Bakhtin in Russia and the West*, ed. by Carol Adlam et. al. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 142–59 (p. 149).

⁷¹ *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 78.

while a reconstruction of culture was taking place, I have selected texts which are characterized by humour and an overall wish to make child readers laugh. These texts often invert, or tease, the logic of common sense, thus the form of humour they display often merges with, or borders on, the absurd and nonsense. There are analytical theories which specifically address humour.⁷² However, I have decided to emphasise the playful nature of these works, and thus to associate these narrative strategies with the concept of play. There are many reasons for this choice. The first is cultural, because, as I discuss in the third chapter, the notion of play in Russian children's literature enjoys cultural prestige. Indeed literary icons such as the poets of the OBERIU wrote absurdist children's texts and associated these with the concept of play. The authors I focus on appear to introduce themselves as the heirs of this specific literary tradition, and their texts often refer to the notion of play. As I will discuss later in this thesis, I see these references as a way of enhancing the writers' own credibility and thus claim for readers' trust.

Play and playfulness are linked to each other not only by cultural bonds which belong to Russian culture. In this thesis, I adopt the standpoint of those scholars who have defined playfulness as a category of play. Brian Sutton-Smith, one of the main scholars of the phenomenology and the theory of play, has drawn attention to the complications of defining the concepts of play and playfulness. As he observes, "playful" refers more to a mood of frolicsomeness, lightheartedness, and wit. But there is nothing fixed about the distinction,

⁷² For a discussion of the main theories concerning humour, see Julie Cross, *Humour in Contemporary Junior Literature* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1–25. These are basically three: the so-called 'superiority theories', 'relief theories', and 'incongruity theories'. According to the first, through humour people enjoy the pleasure to feel superior to others, by laughing at their shortcomings or misfortunes. The second category of theories sees humour as a way to vent out anxieties and fears. 'Incongruity theories' consider humour as the product of the co-presence of two ideas or images which are not compatible with each other.

because play is also usually thought to include the playful'.⁷³ Drawing on Bateson, Sutton-Smith suggests that playfulness is a form of metaplay, an action which implies the message 'This is play'. In his view, nonsense, parody, paradox, and ridiculousness – features which abound in the children's texts I discuss in this thesis – are ways of playing with the expectations of play itself, 'with the frames of play'.⁷⁴ In her analysis of nonsense, Susan Stewart strengthens the link between play and playfulness. She maintains that any form of nonsense is a manipulation of a context, a reframing of language that creates its own rules of interpretation as is play.⁷⁵ The same, Sutton-Smith argues, can be extended to tricks, teasing, riddles, genre play or puns.⁷⁶

Once the link between play and playfulness is established, the question arises as to the function of this reframing of language. Human beings have tried to theorize play and its function for millennia, and have offered different standpoints.⁷⁷ Sutton-Smith has gathered these play theories together according to their ideological underpinning. Following his delineation, we have seven main 'ideological rhetorics', respectively associated with the notions of

⁷³ Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 2001[1997]), p. 147.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 147–8. Sutton-Smith here describes a common perception of playfulness and play, following which, compared to playfulness, play would be that which plays with the frames of the mundane and sticks to its purpose of being a stylized form [...] in which the expected routines or rules guide and frame the action in a steady way throughout' (*ibidem*, p. 148). However, play and playfulness for Sutton-Smith are not two separate things, and he treats playfulness as a form of play. For the notion of 'frame' see Bateson's 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy', pp. 184–6. 'Frame', a notion related to that of 'context', is for Bateson a psychological concept. Frame 'is (or delimits) a class or set of messages (or meaningful actions)'. *Ibidem*, p. 186.

⁷⁵ Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989 [first edition 1978]), pp. 27–8.

⁷⁶ *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 148.

⁷⁷ For an overview of the theories on play, see Pat Kane, *The Play Ethic: A Manifesto for a Different Way of Living* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan, 2004), pp. 35–64.

progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self, and frivolity.⁷⁸ Sutton-Smith does not attribute any negative overtone to the notion of rhetoric, and he does not necessarily regard the play theories he discusses as being wrong. He rather emphasises that they are associated with a set of specific interests, whereby, for example, artists have discussed play as imagination, and politicians or sportsmen have seen play as power.⁷⁹ One of the values of Sutton-Smith's study is that he encourages a discussion of the relationship between play and one or more sets of values, without necessarily addressing the issue of a single and definite definition of play, a *truth* about it.⁸⁰ In this thesis I focus on the significance of the notions of play and playfulness in the context of Russian children's literature, in other words on the set of values that the playful texts under scrutiny appear to be associated with. I will pay attention to three specific associations of the notion of play: play and renewal, play and identity, and play and progress.⁸¹ These three understandings of play are, in turn, variously interrelated with the concept of truth, and this relationship reveals contradictory aspects which, as I explain, complicate the position of the children's writer.

According to Stewart, play and ludic genres ('riddles, pranks, puns, jokes') are forms of renewal and reflexivity, that is to say metacommunication, which enables players to become aware of the notions of linguistic sign and conceptual categorizations.⁸² Stewart draws on Gregory Bateson's reflection on play among animals. He observed that these reproduced the gestures of a fight

⁷⁸ Sutton-Smith develops his argument throughout *The Ambiguity of Play*.

⁷⁹ See also Pat Kane, *The Play Ethic: A Manifesto for a Different Way of Living* (London: Macmillan, 2004), pp. 358–9. For Kane, Sutton-Smith's notion of rhetoric is akin to Michel Foucault's notion of 'discourse'.

⁸⁰ However, Sutton-Smith has expressed his own understanding of play as 'adaptive variability'. See *The Ambiguity of Play*, pp. 221–31.

⁸¹ For Sutton-Smith, the association between play and renewal ('transformation') belongs to the broader rhetoric of play as imaginary. See *ibidem*, pp. 147–8; 220.

⁸² *Nonsense*, pp. 38–40.

without being really fighting but playing. The two animals, Bateson argued, were showing awareness of a new code, in which those gestures, recontextualized, belonged to their usual categories only to some extent. Play, in its various reflexive manifestations, is necessary for the survival of the organism: it allows adaptation by loosening up the rules of communication.⁸³ Stewart, with Bateson, maintains that, because of their reflexive inherent nature, 'play and other types of reframing [...] prevent the organism from being trapped within one set of interpretative procedures'.⁸⁴ The object and the subject of play enter a liminal semantic field, an is/is not status: the two animals' gestures, reframed, belong and do not belong to the semantic field of *fight* and the two players are and are not fighting. It is by virtue of the awareness of cultural codes it enacts, Stewart maintains, that playfulness fosters cultural change.⁸⁵ According to this view, playfulness disrupts commonly accepted codes without reframing them into a definite system.⁸⁶

The frequent choice of playful strategies and the association of these with the notion of play in Russian children's literature of the post-perestroika period are underpinned by the wish to renew language and culture, getting rid of old and oppressive values, by making the community aware of their obsolete and oppressive nature. And yet, playfulness in these children's texts is not only a never-ending stream of meanings, the questioning of a cultural system by

⁸³ 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy', p. 179.

⁸⁴ *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality*, p. 31.

⁸⁵ 'Nonsense is not simply a safe place to work out a response to the world of common sense [...] it is also a field where one can critique the interpretative procedures used in manufacturing that world, and, with increasing self-consciousness, a critique of the interpretative procedures by which nonsense itself has come to be.' *Ibidem*, p. 206.

⁸⁶ See, for example, the anthropologist Handleman, who has defined playfulness as 'a condition of being in the world on its way to becoming someone or something else', and 'the simultaneity of multiplicity'. Don Handleman, 'Postlude: Framing, braiding and killing play', *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, 37 (2001) 145–56, pp. 145–6. Pat Kane draws on this definition of playfulness and develops a whole 'play ethics', which acknowledges that the universe is 'deeply mutable, open to possibility, irreducibly "in play"'. See *The Play Ethic*, p. 359.

means of the adoption of a never-ending liminality. The form of playfulness that some of these texts display is akin to the liminal stage which, in rituals, precedes a new reconfiguration of society and of the self, a new identity.

The anthropologist Victor Turner detects many play-features in rituals, especially in the liminal (from the Latin *limen*, threshold) phase entered by novices in rites of passage. Drawing on the work conducted by Arnold van Gennep, Turner distinguishes three phases in the rites of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation.⁸⁷ In other words, a rite implies a phase which establishes a boundary between the sacred and the secular space and time, and a phase in which ritual subjects enter an area of ambiguity, a symbolic – and sometimes literal – margin. The third phase is the one of ‘the return of subjects to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society’.⁸⁸ The separation phase can include symbols of reversal and inversion of any aspects of the social structure. These symbols mark the detachment of subjects from their previous social roles in a phase contiguous to that of transition. Turner emphasises that post-Industrial Revolution societies have kept (and reconfigured) the function and the features of the ritualistic liminal condition.

Liminality, in Turner’s view, is reached when cultural factors undergo a playful recombination, ‘in any possible pattern, however weird’.⁸⁹ For Turner, ‘in liminality people “play” with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them’, often by means of ambiguity or paradox.⁹⁰ As he points out, even though in

⁸⁷ Victor Turner, ‘Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology’, in *Play, Game and Sports in Cultural Contexts*, ed. by J. C. Harris and R. Park (Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1983), pp. 123–64 (p. 127). Turner refers to Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de Passage* (Paris: Nourry, 1909).

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 129–30.

many games and rituals subjects enter a liminal condition by turning the social order upside-down, liminality is not a rejection of socio-economic structures, but a possible source of new culture, a possible precursor of other structures. Thus, even more than an 'anti-structure', liminality is a 'proto-structure'.⁹¹ As I will try to demonstrate, some key playful children's books written in Russia in the 1990s and in the 2000s reveal ritualized narratives, and the transformation of subjects that these books appear to be attempting has affinities with ritualistic processes. In these children's books, however, the link between play and a possible reconfiguration of the adult self intertwines with an understanding of play as a mental process which fosters the child's development into an adult.

Developmental theories on play are central in the history of pedagogy. Besides Lev Vygotskii, its main European supporters, among whom are Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget, are known in Russia, and have influenced pedagogical practices.⁹² All these thinkers agree that play helps children to develop cognitive skills which are vital for their passage into adulthood. Sutton-Smith maintains that the notion of children's play as progress subjects child play to the aims of growth and education, ultimately serving as 'an ideology for the conquest of children's behavior through organizing their play'.⁹³

The linkage between play and individual progress received extensive theoretical consideration with the Enlightenment, in accordance with its trust in human beings as agents of progress in society. With Rousseau, the child

⁹¹ Ibidem, pp. 131; 136; 147.

⁹² I provide details on the popularity of these thinkers in the second chapter.

⁹³ *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 250. Sutton-Smith has harshly criticised Piaget's theory on play and the value of play for the lives of adults and children. See, for example, Brian Sutton-Smith, 'Piaget, Play and Cognition, Revisited', in *The Relationship between Social and Cognitive Development*, ed. by Willis F. Overton (Hillsdale, New Jersey, and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1983), pp. 229–49.

became the embodiment of the ideal of humankind's potential for progress. As Pat Kane observes, Rousseau's *Emile* 'was a major marker of the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism'.⁹⁴ As the idea of childhood as a privileged status, inherently genuine because in touch with nature and with primitive virtues that fade away with adulthood, developed, interest in children's progress remained acute.⁹⁵ Kane argues that this was due to the contrast between the ideal of the child as happy and primitive (which Romanticists developed) and the brutal reality of childhood in 19th century, marked by harsh work and an authoritarian system of mass education. In this context, educators such as Froebel and Pestalozzi drew inspiration from Rousseau and the ideals of European Enlightenment, and devised pedagogical approaches that, in Kane's words, 'could harness the playful passions of the child – who might themselves go on to build a better, less deforming society'.⁹⁶

This approach to children's play merges together ideals which seem to contradict one another, as the child is both teacher and pupil.⁹⁷ On the one hand, play and childhood are the quintessence of creativity, a guarantee of the possibility for man to access truth as an authentic, non-mediated, essence of life.⁹⁸ On the other, the child is seen as a would-be adult, as 'education makes

⁹⁴ *The Play Ethic*, p. 361, note n. 8.

⁹⁵ P. Robertson, 'Home as a Nest: Middle-class Childhood in Nineteenth-century Europe', in *The History of Childhood: The Evolution of Parent-Child Relationships as a Factor in History*, ed. by Lloyd DeMause (London: Souvenir, 1976), pp. 407–31 (p. 407).

⁹⁶ *The Play Ethic*, p. 43.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

⁹⁸ Friedrich Schiller expressed this idealization of play by stating: 'Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays'. Friedrich Schiller, 'Letter XV', in Friedrich Schiller, *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Raleigh: Hayes Barton Press, 1990), pp. 47–50 (p.50). For Schiller the play instinct brings together law and necessity, 'but emancipated from the pressures of both' (*Ibidem*, p. 48), aiming at beauty and true freedom (*Ibidem*, pp. 48; 50). Picasso included the child into his idealization of play as creativity, when he stated that 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up' (quoted in *The Play Ethic*, p. 45, no reference provided).

play functional, a key to healthy development, and thus an excuse for reform'.⁹⁹ This tension towards maintaining childhood as it is and transforming it occurred in Russia from the early 18th century on, but acquired specific nuances during the Soviet period, when the transformation of childhood was understood in revolutionary terms – the transformation of the child into an agent of the revolution – but, at the same time, required the child's obedience.

To summarise, this thesis does not address playfulness as a linguistic phenomenon. Terms which belong to linguistics (such as signifier and signified) are employed to address the cultural significance of play. I will adopt the view of play as a reframing of language that creates its own rules of interpretation and puts both the object and the subject of play in a liminal condition. As to the specific features and above all the functions of this liminal condition, the children's texts on which I focus in this thesis exhibit elements of the three discourses on play which I have here discussed – play and renewal, play and identity, and play and progress. As a result of the merging together of these discourses, the position of the adult in the book is complex, situated between the possibility of regenerating the self and that of regenerating child readers through play. In the Russian playful children's texts which I discuss in this thesis, the intersection between play and these different sets of values emphasises, or rather amplifies, the obstacles inherent to the consummation of the child other, and the quest for the self that this consummation implies.

1.6. The Use of Concepts Borrowed from Narrative Theory

In the exploration of the perspective, and thus of the inner structure of a work of fiction, I have chosen to use some concepts borrowed from narrative theory in

⁹⁹*The Play Ethic*, p. 43.

combination with content-oriented text analysis and a socio-historical approach. These concepts are the implied author, the narrative voice and the implied reader. The analysis of their interrelation is conducted by paying attention to the relationship between narrative aspects and the content. The discrepancy, or the points of contact, between narrativity and narrative, or, in other words, between 'how' and 'what' texts narrate, will be discussed. The relationship between the adult and the child in the book, the struggle between the wish to say 'I am here', and to offer child readers guidance, protection, and the benefit of one's own experience, and the wish to recognise the child readers' freedom as subjects will be investigated through this analysis. The figure of the real author will be taken into account as part of the context. Therefore, the discussion of real authors will disregard biographical issues, unless these have become intertextual features. It should be noted, however, that a proper narratological analysis, which includes matters of focalization and time, will be conducted in chapter four, in the discussion of Natal'ia Nusinova's novel *Prikliucheniia Dzherika* (*The Adventures of Dzherik*). The nature of Nusinova's text, indeed, lends itself to this kind of analysis, and specific categories of narrative theory will be appropriately discussed in the introduction to chapter four. The narratological analysis of Nusinova's text will contribute to the the argument of this thesis significantly.

The term narrative voice was coined by Gérard Genette in 1972, and was borrowed from the grammar of verbs. It refers, indeed, 'to a relation with the subject (and more generally with the instance) of the enunciation'.¹⁰⁰ As Genette argues, 'since any narrative [...] is a linguistic production undertaking to tell of one or several events, it is perhaps legitimate to treat it as the development [...]

¹⁰⁰ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, Foreword by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp.31–2.

given to a *verbal* form, in the grammatical sense of the term: the expansion of a verb'.¹⁰¹ The notion of *voice* is connected to the question Who speaks?, while *mood*, another central concept in Genette's method, is linked to the question Who sees?, and corresponds to the point of view, or, as he calls it, to the *focalization* of the narration.

In 1998 Richard Aczel observed that Genette's formula of voice and mood focused on the questions 'who speaks?' and 'who sees?', incorporating other interrogatives such as 'when?' and 'from where?', but did not put sufficient emphasis on 'how', that is on stylistic expressivity. Aczel suggested a more 'qualitative, as opposed to merely functional, question of voice'.¹⁰² The investigation of stylistic devices, Aczel contends, may lead to identifying the voice of the text more effectively than the focus on a self-referential narrator would. In this thesis I will adopt Aczel's definition and incorporate the analysis of stylistic devices (for example the 'playfulness' of the narrative, the tone through which a narrative voice approaches the implied child reader) into an analysis of the narrative voice more broadly drawn from Genette.

The questions of voice and mood are inevitably connected to the issue of the actual sender and the receiver of the message. Wayne C. Booth in 1961 first coined the terms 'implied author' and 'implied reader'. To the latter, Wolfgang Iser devoted a study in 1974,¹⁰³ and both notions became part of the scheme Seymour Chatman outlined in 1978 for describing the author-reader line of communication. Chatman's scheme is the following:

real author → implied author → narrator → narratee → implied reader → real

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 30.

¹⁰² Richard Aczel, 'Hearing Voices in Narrative Texts', *New Literary History*, 29.3 Theoretical Explorations (Summer 1998), 467–500, p. 467.

¹⁰³ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

reader¹⁰⁴

The notions of implied author and implied reader are constructs to be deduced only from the texts, regardless of the real authors' actual personality and expressed intentions towards the reader. Following Chatman's definition of it, I see the implied author as being:

the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way, had these things happen to these characters, in these words or images. [...] He, or better, *it* has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all the means it has chosen to let us learn.¹⁰⁵

As Wayne Booth, whose notion of implied author was almost fully accepted by Chatman, points out:

Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which *this* implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form.¹⁰⁶

There can be a discrepancy between the implied author's and the narrator's discourse, and when this discrepancy occurs it will be signalled in the analysis of the primary texts of this thesis. Whatever the relation between the implied author and the narrative voice may be, Genette, Booth, and Chatman posit that in any text there exists an expressive centre that has a *voice*. This does not exclude the existence of collective or impersonal narratives, and in this thesis I will adopt Chatman's standpoint that 'there is always an implied author, though there might not be a single real author in the ordinary sense'.¹⁰⁷

The counterpart of the implied author, that is the implied reader,

¹⁰⁴ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 73–4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp.73–4.

¹⁰⁷ *Story and Discourse*, p. 149.

corresponds once again to an entity described by the narrative itself; it is the work itself that implies an ideal reader, one with specific features and skills. Umberto Eco defined the implied reader by insisting on the presence, in the texts, of instructions for the reader, instructions manifested in statements, information and other signals. Rather than to an implied reader, he refers to a *Model Reader*, who is part and parcel of the text itself: ‘created with – and prisoners in – the text, [model readers] enjoy as much freedom as the text is willing to grant them’.¹⁰⁸ Real readers have to adhere to these instructions as much as possible for them to understand and possibly enjoy the text. Eco refers to this when he writes: ‘the author is but a textual strategy that is capable of establishing semantic correlations and that asks to be imitated’.¹⁰⁹

Eco does not hold the convergence between the real and the model reader to happen automatically. On the contrary:

In order to know how a story ends, it is usually enough to read it once. In contrast, to identify the model author the text has to be read many times, and certain stories endlessly. Only when empirical readers have discovered the model author, and have understood (or merely begun to understand) what it wanted from them, will they become full-fledged model readers.¹¹⁰

Here Eco calls for an endeavour, if not a scholarly effort, driven by the wish to recognise the instructions of a text in any proper reading. He suggests that readers must seek, sometimes strenuously, for the implied reader in the text in order to leave their innate naivety behind. Crucially, this is a search parallel to that for the implied author.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Paola Pugliatti, ‘Reader’s Stories Revisited’, in *Il lettore: Modelli, processi ed effetti dell’interpretazione*, numero monografico di VS 52/53, 1989, pp. 5–6, quoted in Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, p. 25.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 27. By ‘model author’ Eco roughly means the implied author, and therefore the whole narrative strategy of the text, the whole structure.

¹¹¹ See also Susan Suleiman: ‘the more novels one has read, the more one is able to engage in the kind of “play-acting” – or role-playing – that proper readings of novels

Zohar Shavit observes that the adult system of values implied in a children's book may be found by investigating within the child system, and it is here that the notion of implied reader becomes relevant in my study. While trying to define the child implied reader, we are defining the implied author: each reveals the other.¹¹² By adopting a narratological perspective, the implied author may be defined starting from the child implied reader *it* has produced.

Some scholars have emphasised that, as a matter of fact, children's books imply two readers: an adult and a child one.¹¹³ There are different kinds of relationship between the implied author and the two implied readers. Barbara Wall, in *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*, established a distinction between single, double and dual addresses in children's literature. In her view, we have the first case when the narrative voice addresses child readers and wants to be understood by them regardless of adults' response. In the double address, the narrative voice only appears to address a child, but actually addresses an adult, looking over the child's shoulder. A dual address, instead, is obtained when the narrative voice addresses the child and the adult equally, without discriminating against the first as a consumer of literature, as the double voice model ultimately does.¹¹⁴ In this thesis I will sometimes refer to Wall's categorizations, but, unlike Wall, I will put emphasis on matters of focalization.

require.' Susan Suleiman, 'Ideological Dissent from Works of Fiction: Toward a Rhetoric of the *Roman a Thèse*', *Neophilologus*, 60. 2 (April 1976), 162–77 (p. 169).

¹¹² 'Each of these social systems [the adult's and the child's] determines not only the others' boundaries, but defines its own patterns of behaviour and derives its own societal meanings from the existence of the other'. Zohar Shavit, 'The Double Attribution of Text for Children and How it Affects Writing for Children', in *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults*, ed. by Sandra L. Beckett (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), pp. 83–98 (p. 83).

¹¹³ See, for example, Zohar Shavit's *The Poetics of Children's Literature*, which devotes much attention to this issue in the chapter 'The Ambivalent Status of Texts', pp. 63–91.

¹¹⁴ Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 9; 35–6.

There are cases in which the narrative voice of a text for young readers is the one of a child. This does not prevent us from focusing on it in order to define the adult presence in the book. To this aim, all the possible connections among the elements of the narrative structure should be considered, including the child character. Nikolajeva indeed has modified the classic continuum implied author–implied reader devised by Chatman, as follows:

implied author → narrator → character–narrator → focalizer → (focalized)
 character → character–narratee → narratee → implied reader

This scheme will serve as a point of reference in my discussion of the primary sources which are the object of this thesis. When necessary, other modifications of a given narratological concept made for it to meet children's literature's specific features will be signalled.

Conclusions

The texts I will discuss in this thesis were written in a time in which adults' roles as providers of care and upbringing were the object of public debate. Added to this, political reforms gave new responsibilities to adults as parents and educators. Simultaneously, literature and the intellectual lost their prestige and progressively stopped being seen as centres of moral leadership. These socio-historical factors provide me with an ideal basis for discussing the issue of how adults can articulate their pedagogical and narrative agency through children's books. I decided to focus my attention on children's texts with a playful character because they are particularly representative of the difficulties posed for the adult in these conditions. Play, indeed, is often appreciated for educational issues, as if it could facilitate the child's progression into adulthood. At the same time, however, the concept of play is associated with selfhood, and is idealised as the state in which human beings have a more direct access to

truth. In this case, the child at play expresses the highest possible condition for a human being, which contrasts with the so-called developmental theories on play. The implied authors that I will discuss in this thesis seem to employ playful strategies which are characterized by this ambiguity, swinging between the position of the master player, who knows the rules of the game, to that of the simple player, who enjoys the game with the child readers.

Children's literature scholarship has demonstrated how adult narrative agency is often a form of colonization of the child worldview. Drawing on the work of the scholars who have emphasised the power imbalance between an adult and a child, in this chapter I have expressed my understanding of the process through which adults offer stories to children, being aware of knowing more than children do, but not necessarily self-confident about their own capacity to represent a point of reference for the younger generations.

In order to put emphasis on the process of writing for a child as implying a struggle for the recognition of the child as an independent other, I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's early essays. Bakhtin insisted on the fact that, for this objectification to occur, an author (whoever represents this role, a writer or each of us in our daily life) has to live through a struggle with him or herself. The object of my inquiry is precisely this struggle. The profound socio-historical changes that occurred in Russia with perestroika enacted a process in which the adult approached child readers with the wish to set them free from dull authority, and yet this enterprise inevitably entails a strong agency, a great deal of authority. These narrative voices can be seen as struggling to define their own selves, driven by their pedagogical vocation toward the child; driven by their commitment to offer guidance and protection.

The notion of the author is then two-fold. On the one hand it is, in

Bakhtinian terms, an external force, the result of the process for the recognition of the other and of the self at the same time. As an action which is aesthetic, cognitive and ethical altogether, the imposition of the adult's worldview onto the child reader is a possibility that must be discussed. This thesis explores the possible tensions behind this imposition, tensions which can be traced in the texts themselves. On the other hand, the author is a textual feature, the implied author responsible for the whole textual strategy, and that expresses the perspective on the child other. Perspective is expressed through specific narrative devices and a narrative structure.

In this thesis I will focus on the implied authors' pedagogical agency, on the way they express their own right to have authority over the child reader. I am convinced, with Genette, Chatman, Nikolajeva and other scholars, that any narrative has a narrator. I will mainly discuss the category of the narrative voice, unless the text bears evident signs of a discrepancy between the implied author's and the narrator's discourse. It should be noted that, although illustrations are sometimes discussed in relation to the texts, this thesis does not aim to make a detailed analysis of the relationship between texts and illustrations.

Chapter 2

Playfulness and Russian Children's Literature, from the Origins to the 1980s

*We also tend to simplify history; but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single unequivocal fashion, [...]; the greater part of historical and natural phenomena is not simple, or not simple with the simplicity that we would like. (Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by R. Rosenthal, 1988)*

*Слишком много есть в каждом
из нас
неизвестных, играющих сил...*

*There are too many unknown forces
at play in each of us...*
A. Belyi, 'Est' igra' ('There is a
Game'), 1913

The significance of the concept of play and its employment in children's literature of post-perestroika Russia cannot be fully understood without a discussion of the way in which this concept developed over the centuries. This concept has its own significance in adult culture, and is further reshaped in the specific field of children's literature. This chapter will adopt a long-period, diachronic approach in its discussion of the concepts of play and playfulness in adult culture and Russian children's literature, highlighting the reciprocal intersections as well as divergences. In particular, I will draw attention to folkloric and ritualistic forms of performance and to religious expressions which are linked to the concept of play and laughter in pre-Modern Russia. Special

emphasis will be put on *durachestvo* (foolishness) and its variants, including *iurodstvo* (holy foolishness), and *chudachestvo* (weirdness). A number of scholars, including Likhachev and Panchenko, have demonstrated that these cultural phenomena are relevant components in the history of play and laughter in Russia, and I will discuss how they express the possible linkage between play, laughter and the revelation of truth, and have thus become expressions of a pedagogical agency. The category of sorrow will be discussed in relation to play as the condition that, in certain conceptualizations of it, enables the revelation of truth. In the linkage between play and the epiphany of truth, the corporeal dimension becomes central. As this theme is vital in my discussion of playful children's books in the 1990s and in the 2000s, I will highlight instances in which Russian children's and mainstream texts associated with the concepts of play exhibited a specific approach to the child's body in pre-Soviet and Soviet Russia.

Western and Russian discourses on childhood have shaped conceptualizations of children's play and children's verbal games as the expression of a primitive state of humankind. Playfulness in Russian children's literature is strongly influenced by these discourses, and thus they receive attention in the chapter. Here, the ideas about childhood that emerged between 1890 and the 1920s, and the way they developed in the subsequent decades receive much emphasis. The concept of play and its employment in children's literature of the 1990s, indeed, appear influenced by attitudes towards children as a raw material to be transformed for the construction of the bright future, on the one hand, and as belonging to the perfectly happy state of childhood, which should be maintained as it is for as long as possible, on the other. This double attitude is very important for my discussion of Russian children's texts published

from 1990. The difficult construction of an adult authorial identity which took place from that time on relied on both the ideal of the transformation of children (of which adults, and no longer the state, were now in charge), and that of the absolute happiness of children (which encouraged children's authors to express their traumas and anxieties to a child audience imagined as invulnerable). I do not consider this double attitude to childhood as belonging only to Russian culture. However, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia are cultural contexts in which this phenomenon occurred to a very high degree.

The interconnections between the significance of playfulness in mainstream culture, including literature of childhood, and in children's literature are vital throughout the chapter. The texts written by the members of OBERIU, in particular, are central for the post-Soviet development of children's literature and its emphasis on playfulness. Another important passage in the chapter is Stalinism as a 'laughing ideology', as Dobrenko defined it, and the consequences of this for the development of playfulness in children's literature. This discussion will clarify the contours of the relationship between the adult implied author and the child implied reader within children's books with a playful character, in other words, books which feature the adult and the child at play. Indeed, the aim of the chapter is to establish a background for discussing the way in which adult narrative voices engage the implied child reader in play in the 1990s and in the 2000s.

The selection of authors and literary works has followed the development of the concepts of play and playfulness, and it was necessary, also for reasons of space, to exclude many authors and works which have marked the history of Russian children's literature (such as Evgenii Shvarts or Eduard Uspenskii). Furthermore, it is necessary to discuss books which do not belong to the playful

tradition, but in which we find a specific understanding of the concept of play. These are Arkadii Gaidar's *Timur i ego komanda* (*Timur and His Team*), Leonid Panteleev's *Chestnoe slovo* (*Upon my Word*), and Vladimir Zheleznikov's *Chuchelo* (*The Scarecrow*). These books have had an enormous relevance in the history of Russian children's literature. Most importantly, the questions they posed to the adult community became central in the Russian playful children's books in the 1990s and in 2000s.

2.1. Play and Laughter in Russia before Peter the Great

There is little doubt that the spoken word in Russian culture preceding Peter the Great was more important than the written one. Manuscripts and books were almost entirely religious in character, and although Russian Orthodoxy rejected secular entertainments on account of their being 'devilish',¹ nonetheless, performances of all kinds accompanied adults' and children's everyday lives, from readings of the Bible and the lives of saints to storytelling and games.²

In discussing children's folklore, we should bear in mind that this notion, in Russia as in the Western world, implies forms of expression which were created by adults, such as lullabies. However, there are folkloric forms which should be considered as children's own creations, which originated in children's play time or when children participated in adults' rites and leisure activities. Indeed, in pre-modern cultures children took part in adults' activities and started working next to adults at a very early age, often borrowing and reworking their culture.³ Russian children's folklore offers a variety of forms for each of these

¹ Catriona Kelly, 'The Origins of the Russian Theatre', in *A History of Russian Theatre*, ed. by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, associate editor Andy Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 18–40 (p. 19).

² *Ibidem*.

³ I. A. Arzamastseva, S. A. Nikolaeva, *Detskaia literatura* (Moscow: Akademiia, 2009),

categories. *Pestushki* (from *pestovat'*, to bring up) were rhymes pronounced by the mother while undressing the child or during other procedures connected to the child's body. Short rhymes including alliterations and play of words accompanied children's play, such as *prigovorki*, *pripevki*, *skorogovorki* (tongue-twisters), *schitalki* (counting-out rhymes), *nebylitsy-perevertysyki* (topsy-turvy rhymes), or *poteshki* and *pribautiki*, which were short compositions with a dialogic form.⁴ However, these children's rhymes are partly connected to magic practises in which the word had a magic power. *Zaklichki*, short rhymes on the forces of nature or animals, reveal most clearly this link.⁵ This rich performative world involving children and adults suggests we should look at the ritual dimension as the field in which specific concepts of play and laughter originated before being developed in children's literature under the co- influence of other social and cultural factors.

Once Christianity was introduced to Russia, pagan rites gradually took the form of folk games and festivals. The traditional festival seasons coincided with Christmas, the week before Lent in which the so-called *Maslennitsa* was celebrated, and Easter.⁶ Originally, *Maslennitsa* was a Pagan festival which celebrated the starting of spring before it was assimilated by Christianity.⁷ As a Christian festival, *Maslennitsa* celebrated the starting of Lent as the passage from Adam to Christ, that is from one's own sinner self towards his or her intimate resurrection.⁸ During this festivity, the inhabitants of Rus' reversed the

p. 38.

⁴ Information on Russian forms of oral children's folklore was taken *ibidem*, pp. 37–45.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁶ N. V. Ponyrko, 'Sviatochnyi i maslenichnii smekh', in D. S. Likhachev, A. M. Panchenko and N. V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v drevnei Rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), pp. 154–202 (p. 176).

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 178.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 180.

normal order of things, by mocking political and religious authority, abandoning themselves to alcohol, and playing with the concepts of life and death.⁹

As a carnival, *Maslennitsa* was not an interruption of the ritual dimension, but part of it. As Friedrich Nietzsche puts it in his *Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian and the Apollonian principles, chaos and logos, are 'two very different tendencies [which] run parallel to each other'.¹⁰ Russian carnivalesque reversals and other forms of laughter have been explained by D. S. Likhachev with the concept of *anti-mir* (anti-world), which seems to support the link between disorder and order, chaos and logos. The *anti-mir*, according to Likhachev, is an upside-down system which is not opposed to the actual societal structure, but rather to the ideal world.¹¹ In other words, the *anti-mir* is chaos as opposed to perfect order, an opposition which implies a strong mutual connection. As Likhachev explains, poverty, in the *anti-mir*, is not an actual social condition, but absence of richness, its double, and an upside-down prayer is not blasphemous, because it is not a rejection of faith, but rather belongs to the world of the absurd, the world of chaos.¹²

⁹ Ibidem. Throughout her essay, Ponyrko describes in details the symbols involved in the celebration of *Maslennitsa*, especially water, fire, and scarecrows.

¹⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: and The Case of Wagner*, translated, with commentary, by Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 33. James von Geldern defends a vision of carnival and ritual as celebrating the same religious holidays, rather than embodying innately incompatible spirits (see James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley, Calif, and London: University of California Press, 1993) pp. 55–8). This vision of carnival differs from Mikhail Bakhtin's, according to whom carnivals were 'sharply distinct from the serious, official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations [...]. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Columbus, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 5–6.

¹¹ D. S. Likhachev, 'Smekh kak mirovozzrenie', in *Smekh v drevnei Rusi*, pp. 7–71 (p. 17). For a broader discussion of the concept of *anti-mir*, see pp. 13–25.

¹² Ibidem, p. 16.

In Russian culture, *mir* and *anti-mir* are embodied by the *durak* (the idiot or fool),¹³ who laughs at himself facing public humiliation.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, he pretends foolishness, which implies disguising, playing, acting in a buffoonish way.¹⁵ The *durak* is actually the bearer of superior knowledge. In Russian folk tales, Ivan-durak embodies this anti-ideal, which is an ideal in its own right: despite demonstrating idiocy and helpless laziness he always triumphs, sometimes turns into an intelligent and handsome man and may even marry a beautiful woman.¹⁶ Truth, as logos, or a form of perfect harmony, is revealed to the *durak* without the involvement of rationality: the *durak* goes 'where his legs lead him to' ('kuda nogi nesut').¹⁷ As A. Siniavskii points out, there is an affinity between Ivan-durak and other characters of Russian folk tales, and in particular the thief, the *shut* (buffoon), and the magician. In his words, 'theft is an imitation of miracle-making [*chudo*].'¹⁸ The actions of these figures are variants of tricks which have a ritualistic origin – they are the expression of a superior knowledge which may be used with self-interest or with childish candour.

These variants of *durachestvo* in folk tales are linked to real-life figures that embody a mixture of culture and anti-culture, knowledge and ignorance in Russian pre-Modern society, and these are the *skomorokh*, usually understood as a street performer or minstrel, and the *iurodivyi*, the holy fool. According to Seth Graham, 'the minstrel, like the trickster, the jester, and the fool, is both a

¹³ In Russian culture, *durachestvo* (foolishness) implies a variety of figures which cannot always be translated into other languages without losing some of their substantial features. For this reason, throughout this thesis I will refer to each of these figures with its original in Russian: *durak*, *chudak*, *iurodivyi*, and so on.

¹⁴ 'Smekh kak mirovozzrenie', p. 15.

¹⁵ *Smekh v drevnei Rusi*, p. 4.

¹⁶ A. Siniavskii, *Ivan-durak: Ocherk russkoi narodnoi very* (Paris: Syntaxis, 1991), p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 50. For a discussion of the thief and the *shut* in Russian folktales, see *ibidem*, chapter 'Skazochnyi vor i shut-skomorokh', pp. 44–69.

character in and a transmitter of vestigially mythological narrative'.¹⁹ These figures, both in their historic origins and in their folkloric reshaping, occupy a large space in my discussion of the development of playfulness in children's literature. I will especially refer to their provocative playfulness, which can reveal substantial truths, but at the same time makes these figures ambiguous, leaving the audience with the question of how correctly recognise and interpret them.

Before the conversion of Kievan Rus' to Christianity in 988, *skomorokhi* were priests who attended ritual ceremonies by dancing, playing instruments and acting as ritual leaders. Once Christianity was introduced, they became minstrels, or '*veselye liudi*', 'joyful people'.²⁰ *Skomorokhi* were popular among the people, but were harshly condemned and persecuted by the church and by the government.²¹ Chronicles and other historical sources mention them from the 11th century onwards, contemptuously referring to their artistry as '*igry*', 'games'.²² *Skomorokhi* were associated with occult powers and scandalous 'games', since once Kievan Rus' accepted Byzantine Christianity, non-liturgical music was officially prohibited, as well as other aspects of Kievan culture.²³ Furthermore, *skomorokhi* were often accompanied by trained bears and, having become entertainers, they started wearing a brightly coloured tunic that made them different from the rest of the population. They also started including in their performances acrobatics and poetry, especially *byliny*, heroic poems. Soon they started travelling from village to village, and absorbed the folk repertoire,

¹⁹ Seth Graham, *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh: 2003, p. 46.

²⁰ Russel Zguta, *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 3.

²¹ In 1648 tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich signed an anti- *skomorokhi* ukaz. See A. A. Belkin, *Russkie skomorokhi* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), p. 54.

²² Zguta observes that *skomorokhi* were associated with *Rusalii*, a folk festival similar to Midsummer. Therefore, in these historical sources the term '*igry*' refers to the Pagan games of the *Rusalii*. *Russian Minstrels*, p. 6.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 4; 8.

developing, in the meanwhile, their own songs, tales and dialogues with a sharp wit and anti-clerical tone.²⁴ In the mid-13th century they were no longer despised by the church as pagans, but as sinners.²⁵ *Domostroi*, a 'household manual' of great importance in 16th century Muscovite Russia, condemned *skomorokhi* and their audiences to burn in hell.²⁶ Nonetheless, Ivan the Terrible, known for his wit as well as for his violent character, enjoyed the company of *skomorokhi*, and invited them to perform at court. Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich prohibited *skomoroshestvo* in 1648, and in 1657 the Church excommunicated them.

The second variant of *durachestvo*, the *iurodivyi*, was a form of holiness that Russia inherited from Byzantine Christianity, where he was called *salos*. The word *iurodivyi* comes from *urod*, which in Russian means abortion, monster. Although the first *iurodivye* appear in Russia in the 13th century, it is between the 15th and the 16th century that they become an important phenomenon in Russian society. The holy fool unmasked hypocrisy, defended the poor and the weak against the rich and the powerful, and pointed his finger at sin. He did this through his extremely provocative behaviour, using laughter and irony as a means of communication. The *iurodivyi* could be seen in prostitutes' company and attending those who were at the margins of society, but at the same time he dared to speak frankly to the Tsar, and still he was highly respected by authorities and by the people as a holy figure.²⁷ If the *iurodivyi* was given trust and reverence it was by virtue of his (or, in rare cases,

²⁴ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 46.

²⁵ *Russian Minstrels*, p. 32.

²⁶ *The "Domostroi": Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible*, edited and translated by Carolyn Pouncy (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 11. See also p. 118, for the reference to those 'who feed and keep bears'.

²⁷ Oliver Clément, 'Follia e santità', in S.S. Averincev, A. Poppe, V. Vodoff and others, *Forme della santità russa: Atti dell'VIII convegno ecumenico internazionale di spiritualità ortodossa: Sezione russa*, ed. by Adalberto Mainardi (Magnano [BI]: Edizioni Qiqajon, 2001), pp. 179–93 (pp. 184–93). The case of Vasillii, buried on the Red Square by will of Ivan IV, is emblematic.

her) exceptional spiritual path. This included, as a necessary condition, his departure from home and family. He had to be perceived as a stranger, as someone who had no relatives or acquaintances, nor a shelter of his own. Indeed, most of these people were strangers in the place where they ‘performed’ as fools.²⁸ This relationship between foolishness, foreignness (extraneousness) and holiness – which, to some extent, we also find in the figure of the *skomorokh* as a fool-priest – is central in my discussion of playful children’s authors in the 1990s and in the 2000s. In the 1990s, in particular, the issue of these authors’ relationship to the time they were living through, and to their past, required on their part a complex articulation of presence and extraneousness, commitment and non-participation, presence and absence. The adoption of variants of *durachestvo*, in my analysis, enables this complex articulation on the part of many children’s authors of the post-perestroika.

The *iurodivyi*’s departure from home had a strong spiritual significance. The road to *iurodstvo* required this step as the first and main feat or *podvig*: ‘a highly heroic gesture [which aimed to] leave the space of sin and enter the one of holiness’.²⁹ The *podvig* of the *iurodivyi* was an ethical act that transformed those who performed it. Only after this transformation could the fool ‘infringe spiritual stereotypes, “turn over what has been edified”, feign an irreligious spirit’,³⁰ because only then has he the right to enter a community as ‘a man from another world at the very heart of this world’,³¹ and who, most importantly, wishes to transform the latter ethically and spiritually.

²⁸ See Natalija V. Ponyrko, ‘Un folle in Cristo nella Russia del Seicento’, translated from Russian into Italian by Maria Cristina Bragone, in *Forme della santità russa*, pp. 195–209 (p. 205).

²⁹ Nina Kauchtschischwili, ‘La santità laica nella letteratura russa’ in *Forme della santità russa*, pp. 255–77 (p. 259).

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 185.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 182.

The value of departure from home for the would-be *iurodivyi* can be better explained by turning to the Greek term *apátheia*, defining a state of inner freedom.³² By leaving home and family, and in spite of his mad (mad “for Christ’s sake”, *Khrista radi*) public behaviour, the *iurodivyi* is someone that has reached this inner state, which enables him to master ongoing shifts from laughter to tragedy, from nonsense to sense, while involving the crowd in a performance (*spektakl*).³³ As A. M. Panchenko repeatedly maintains, this spectacle is a form of play, aimed at producing a reaction in the audience which corresponds to the *iurodivyi*’s actions: he throws stones at people so that these people throw stones at him, he insults them in order to be insulted.³⁴ Sometimes the desired reaction has to be in contrast with the fool’s gesture: he may laugh to have the crowd cry. The crowd is like a collective character, called upon to react to the *iurodivyi*’s emotional calls (*emotsional’nyi otklik*), and the *iurodivyi* is like a theatre director able to transform the crowd into his puppet.³⁵ The correspondence between the *iurodivyi*’s actions and the crowd’s reactions can be compared, in Panchenko’s view, to the one between an actor (the holy fool) and the choir (the crowd).³⁶

The reaction of the crowd is the sign indicating that the *iurodivyi* has succeeded in stirring people’s inner selves, their preconceptions, their hypocrisies. Indeed, ‘the fool confronts man with his true nature beneath the layers of the self-deception’.³⁷ The communicative means he employs in order to fulfil this aim include riddles and paradoxes. Panchenko goes as far as

³² See ‘Follia e santità’, p. 184.

³³ See A. M. Panchenko, ‘Smekh kak zrelishche’, in *Smekh v drevnei Rusi*, pp. 72-153 (in particular pp. 81–6).

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ John Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 29.

considering the riddle (*zagadka*) ‘the fundamental principle of the *iurodivyi*’s language’.³⁸ His words and gestures constantly appear to have the character of a paradoxical riddle, often able to shock those present. One of the most eloquent examples of this form of communication is related to Vasilii Blazhennyi, a very famous *iurodivyi* who lived in Ivan the Terrible’s time. It is reported that he once destroyed a stone image of the Mother of God, venerated as miraculous, under the bewildered eyes of the many devotees present. Hagiographers justify this gesture by specifying that behind the sacred image a devil had actually been drowned. As Panchenko maintains, though, this note should be considered as a later attempt to make acceptable and rational a gesture that is paradoxical, shocking, and at odds with the common code of behaviour. The *iurodivyi*’s language aimed to ‘tear the veil of appearances [and] show the abyss between this sacral theatre and the evangelic truth’.³⁹ It was important that the crowd was not fully aware of the *iurodivyi* being an actor, one who is simulating, wearing a mask,⁴⁰ otherwise the paradoxical and provocative nature of his gestures would have been jeopardized and the *iurodivyi* would have failed in his didactic aim to awaken (*razbudit*) souls. According to Sergei A. Ivanov, the *iurodivyi* does not consider himself a saint, but rather a sinner, a sinner who is nevertheless spiritually strong enough to take the other people’s sins onto his shoulders and name the sin, without concealing his faults. His ideal costume is nudity, which signifies the fact that he has got rid of self-deception, and is fully aware of being a sinner. The *iurodivyi* feels he is the only one who can teach the crowd and transform it for the reign of God to come on

³⁸ ‘Smekh kak zrelishche’, p. 101.

³⁹ *Follia e santità*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ See *Perfect Fools*, p. 25, ‘Smekh kak zrelishche’, pp. 85–6.

earth.⁴¹ By pointing to sin, through an extremely provocative and paradoxical mode, the *iurodivyi* testifies the reign of God: all his actions are inscribed into an eschatological vision, and proclaim ‘the conflict between this present world and the world to come’.⁴²

Both *skomorokhi* and *iurodivye* posed to the populace problems of interpretation and conscience. People were attracted by *skomorokhi*, and welcomed them in villages and in town squares,⁴³ but they did it in spite of the Church’s condemnation. This created a climate of tension that could not but affect their contacts with *skomorokhi*. It was believed that they had the power to cast a spell on the listener, and peasants could fear story-tellers (thus, *skomorokhi*) to the point that they avoided them in some parts of the year and of the day.⁴⁴ Russians did not play with riddles – an activity which Jack V. Haney closely associates with story-telling – during Orthodox feasts or during the summer, ‘all for reasons originally associated with the power of those who possessed the magic of the word’.⁴⁵ If the word has magic power, the laughter it can provoke has dangerous potential. After all, in tribal rites of passage the one who was to be initiated entered a liminal phase which was often marked by riddles and nonsensical speech, and was thought to be dangerous for the non-initiated.⁴⁶ These elements seem to suggest the existence of a link, in people’s perception, between the word and laughter as an empowering force, able to

⁴¹ Sergei A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 409–11. For nudity as the ideal costume of the *iurodivyi*, see ‘Smekh kak zrelishche’, pp. 92–3.

⁴² *Perfect Fools*, p. 26.

⁴³ *Russian Minstrels*, p. 54.

⁴⁴ D. Zelenin, ‘Religiozno-magicheskaia funktsiia fol'klornykh skazok’, in *Sergeiu Fedorovichu Ol'denburgu: K piatidesiatiletiiu nauchno-obshchestvennoi deiatel'nosti, 1882-1932: Sbornik statei*, ed. by I. Iu. Krachkovskii (Leningrad: Izd. Akademii nauk SSSR, 1934), pp. 215–40 (p. 221).

⁴⁵ Jack V. Haney, *The Complete Russian Folktale: An Introduction to Russian Folk-Tales*, Vol. 1 (New York: M. E. Sharpe: 1999), p. 37.

⁴⁶ ‘Liminal to Liminoid’, pp. 129–30.

reveal truths but also to deceive the innocent, or unprepared, mind. In other words, the *anti-mir* and the sabotage of truth were seen as dangerously adjacent to each other, and the boundary dividing the two dimensions was easy to cross in popular imagination.

The *iurodivyi's* behaviour also gave rise to problems of recognition. How was one to discern between real and pretended *iurodstvo*, or even between *durachestvo* (idiocy, foolishness) and mental illness? The response of the spectator of the *iurodivyi's* performance, or the reader of the hagiographic retelling of his life, was an active one: viewers and readers had to make a choice which could prove difficult and even dangerous.⁴⁷ This active participation of the addressee of sacred playfulness appears as a central part of the fool's didactic function: the ambiguity and the voids exhibited by the gestures of the *iurodivyi* had to be worked out and filled in by the reader/spectator.

This discussion of playfulness and sacred truths needs to consider Patristic literature, because it has influenced Russian Orthodox spirituality significantly and, in some cases, referred to the notion of 'divine play' to address the issue of incarnation. Play, in the reflection of some Church Fathers, has a double nature. As the scholar of Patristics Paul M. Blowers explains, for Gregory Nazianzen "play" in itself is semantically pliable, capable of being rendered at one extreme as a sheer diversion typifying the stealth of the Devil and at the other extreme as evoking the sublime freedom and felicity of divine life'.⁴⁸ Maximus the Confessor also defines the world as a 'divine game', as a

⁴⁷ Harriet Murav, *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Paul M. Blowers, 'On the "Play" of Divine Providence in Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor', in *Re-Reading Gregory of Nazianzus*, ed. by Christopher A.

metaphor for the infinite creativity of God.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the Patristic tradition is against the culture of amusement,⁵⁰ and therefore this concept of the divine play serves Maximus to express 'the perfect chemistry to rehearse the agony and the ecstasy, the misery and the mirth, that Christ and his creation enact in their reciprocal roles in the drama of cosmic transformation'.⁵¹ Furthermore, Maximus considers the human, and specifically the corporeal dimension, as a microcosm which reproduces the divine dimension, and he transfers the divine game into the body of man itself, which becomes a temple.⁵² The theologian Olivier Clément observes that, according to this vision, it is man, in the humanity of Christ, who saves the world, a 'you' saving the wholeness through play as 'cosmic liturgy'.⁵³ Aspects of this, detached from their religious context, can be seen in Soviet children's books (which will be discussed later in this chapter), such as Arkadii Gaidar's *Timur i ego komanda* (*Timur and his team*). This novel appears to be equally indebted to this religious vision as to Socialist Realist values, especially if we consider that Timur, the child hero mentioned in the title, refers to his commitment to helping others as 'playing'. However, traces of this vision are even more pronounced in some Russian children's books written in the 1990s and which are the object of a wider analysis in this thesis. In these

Beeley (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), pp. 199–217 (p. 201).

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 216.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 217.

⁵² Oliver Clément expressed this idea in the talk 'I Padri della Chiesa tra l'Occidente e gli Orientali', delivered at the conference 'Ex Oriente lux', which was held in Rimini on 28th August 1993.

<http://www.meetingrimini.org/detail.asp?c=1&p=6&id=1353&key=3&prefix>, [accessed 9 May 2013]. A further expansion of the idea of the temple of the body can be found in Oliver Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (London: New City Press, 2000), pp. 59–62. About the significance of the corporeal dimension in the theology of Maximus the Confessor, see Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), in which the author addresses the issue of the deified body.

⁵³ 'I Padri della Chiesa tra l'Occidente e gli Orientali' [accessed 9 May 2013].

books, which have a strong playful character, the violence to which the body of the child character is subject to will also be discussed as a 'deification' of the child's body, or, in other words, a way to make the body of the child a space for the epiphany of truth.

A sacred icon, usually called 'Virgin with Playing Child', expresses the complexity and the religious significance of the link between play, the corporeal dimension and divine truth, and also between play and the recognition of truth as a condition for the fulfilment of the potential of play. Originally called Pelagonitissa, from the Macedonian town of Pelagonia (now Betolia), this icon is considered a variant of the Virgin of Tenderness, or Eleusy, marked by emotional intensity.⁵⁴ The art historian Egon Sendler considers the subject of this icon to be very enigmatic.⁵⁵ The child is portrayed in movement: he caresses his mother while with the other hand seems to search for his mother's to keep him from falling. Both Mary and the child show an expression of grief. As Sendler notes, Jesus fidgets, not out of childish restlessness, but as if he were anxious and afraid. This has been interpreted as a foreboding of the Passion.⁵⁶ According to Sendler, it was Russian iconographers who re-baptized this subject as *Vzygranie mladentsa* (*The Child's Game*, from which derives the

⁵⁴ One of the most recent studies of this icon is the essay written by Lenia Kouneni, 'A Byzantine Iconographic Type of Virgin and Child in Italy? The Pelagonitissa Virgin Re-examined', *Arte cristiana*, 95. 838 (January–February 2007), 1–8. Less popular in Byzantium, which favoured more hierarchic poses in iconic representations until the 15th century, Pelagonitissa was welcomed in Slavic countries at least from the 12th century, where it appealed to local religious sensibility. The hypothesis, formulated by different scholars in the early 1910s, that the icon may originate in Italian iconography is rejected by the majority of scholars who have dealt with this icon, who consider that the type originated in Byzantine painting. (See *Ibidem*, p. 3, and I. A. Shapina, '«Vzygranie»', in *Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia pod redaktsiei Patriarkha moskovskogo i vseia Rusi Kirilla* <<http://www.pravenc.ru/text/158340.html>> [accessed 9 May 2013]).

⁵⁵ Egon Sandler, *Les icônes byzantines de la Mère de Dieu* (Paris: Desclé de Brouwer, 1992), p. 182.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 182. See also 'A Byzantine Iconographic Type', p. 2, and *Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia* for the Biblical references which may have inspired this iconographic subject, in particular the *Presentation in the Temple*.

title 'Virgin with the playing child').⁵⁷ We may read this icon as a representation of 'divine foolishness as a sublime inversion designed to lift finite minds to an ineffable truth',⁵⁸ a concept of play that is dear to Maximus the Confessor and to the Orthodox religiosity. In the tension between *mir* and *anti-mir*, logos and chaos, the child caresses his mother replicating the gestures which are typical of joyfulness, while he actually foresees the physical suffering of crucifixion. In this icon, divine knowledge and the human dimension intertwine with each other, like in other manifestations of ritual play or in the performances of the *iurodivyi*, and require an equally active response on the part of the believer who is being asked to interpret this enigmatic subject.

'The Virgin with the Playing Child' also introduces us to the theme of the child and the adult at play, and the way in which the dynamics between *mir* and *anti-mir* are reformulated in this situation. The icon reflects two questions which are central in my discussion of playful children's texts in the 1990s and in the 2000s. The first concerns whether the adult's intervention may jeopardise the delicate equilibrium between the child's play and the underlying truth. The second asks to what extent is the child allowed to play for the sake of play. When the child plays for the sake of it, he avoids the epiphany of truth, the transformation of his or her body into a temple. The pertinence of these questions for Russian culture and for the rise of Russian children's literature is confirmed by the fact that the first image of the child to appear in a Russian written source is that of a child who faces physical martyrdom. *Skazanie o Borise i Glebe (Tale of Boris and Gleb)*, written in the mid-eleventh century, reworks the story of Prince Vladimir's children, killed in 1015 by their elder

⁵⁷ *Les icônes byzantines de la Mère de Dieu*, p. 179.

⁵⁸ 'On the "Play" of Divine Providence in Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor', p. 203. This concept takes inspiration from Paul 1. Cor. 1:25.

brother Sviatopolk.⁵⁹ Boris and Gleb are the first Russian martyrs, or *strastoterptsy*, 'passion-bearers'.⁶⁰ In *Povesti vremennykh let* (*Primary chronicle*), probably one of the sources from which the tale took its subject, the younger of the two brothers, Gleb, was no longer a child at the time of the murder. However, *Tale of Boris and Gleb*, portrays Gleb as a small child, full of innocence, and still trusting in adults. According to I. Arzamastseva and S. Nikolaeva, with the martyrdom of Boris and Gleb, the image of the child as a victim (*rebenok-zhertvo*) becomes the main source for the development of the theme of childhood in Russian literature.⁶¹ At least from the 19th century, this image will combine with another in which childhood is, and has to be, a time of bliss and happiness. Modern Russian children's literature will bring together two concepts of children's play: a replication of the divine play, including the 'foolishness' of Christ's passion, on the one hand, and an expression of joyfulness as the child's most inherent quality, on the other.

2.2. Secularization and the Birth of Russian Children's Literature

The secularization of Russia, which coincided with Peter the Great's reforms,⁶² paved the way to other forms of playfulness besides those discussed above, and made possible the development of Russian children's literature. Notoriously, Peter's reforms were influenced by Western European societies and bewildered Russian people to such an extent that the Tsar was sometimes seen as the personification of the Antichrist. Peter encouraged distortions of this

⁵⁹ *Detskaia literatura*, pp. 71–2.

⁶⁰ Hugh Ragsdale, *The Russian Tragedy: The Burden of History*, with a foreword by Robert C. Tucker (New York: M. E. Shapre, 1996), p. 39.

⁶¹ *Detskaia literatura*, p. 72.

⁶² It should be noted that Russia opened up to modern theatre only in the second half of the 17th century, under Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (1645–76). Only then did Russia open itself to the idea of a dramatic repertoire. 'Teatr' and 'literatura', as Catriona Kelly observes, were terms imported from the West. See 'The Origins of the Russian Theatre', p. 18.

kind by subordinating the Church to the State and by ridiculing the church, for example through the ‘Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters’.⁶³ From the West Peter imported the *pridvornyi shut* (court jester), and literary portrayals of jesters became part of local oral narrative.⁶⁴ Jestors would then become an important part of the court’s life under the reigns of Anna Ioannovna (1730-41) and Elizaveta Petrovna (1741-62).

Between the 17th and the 18th centuries Russia became acquainted with a variety of forms of written humorous genres, such as the historical anecdote and the *facetia*, which had a long history in Europe. These humorous genres were popular among the educated classes, but towards the end of the 18th century they were left to the lower classes, where they came into contact with the folkloric corpus.⁶⁵ Humorous anthologies started to be published in the form of *liubochnaia literatura* (the Russian broadside), which had previously focused on religious subjects.⁶⁶

This flourishing of written and visual humorous genres concerned children’s literature only tangentially. From 1770 on, Russia saw the birth of children’s literature as a specific field, and by the end of the century over two

⁶³ See Russel Zguta, ‘Peter I’s “Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters”’, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 21.1 (1973), 18–28. Zguta suggests that, probably, the Synod was borrowed from the Western tradition of the Feast of fools, very popular in many countries at least from the beginning of the 13th century. However, in Europe this tradition took place once a year, and it was an opportunity for the minor clergy to mock ecclesiastical authority by departing from routine and the normal order. In Petrine Russia, The Synod of the Fool became a formal institution.

⁶⁴ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, pp. 47–8.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 52–3.

⁶⁶ The *lubok* was introduced in Russia in the 16th century, and at the beginning represented the Orthodox iconographic canon. See Yuri Ovsiannikov and Arthur Shkarovsky-Raffé, *Lubok/The Lubok* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1969), p. 5. The *lubok* started reproducing humorous texts (*facetiae* and anecdotes) and secular subjects from the early 18th century. In the early 18th century a 17th century French broadside appeared in Moscow, reproducing Gargantua at dinner with the name of ‘The Eat-all and Drink-all’ (‘Slavnoi ob”edala i veseloi podpivala’), *Ibidem*, pp. 14–15. According to the authors, the *lubok* remained an urban category which mostly addressed the middle classes. It gained a rural audience only in the 19th century (*ibidem*, pp. 17–18).

hundred children's books (most of which were translations) had been published.⁶⁷ These books were influenced by the first steps made within pedagogical theory in the second half of the 18th century, and in particular by Rousseau, who emphasized rational and emotional factors as essential in the development of children's personality for their transformation into perfect adults. This encouraged the publications of texts which could entertain the child while forming his or her personality.⁶⁸ *Detskoe chtenie dlia serdtsa i razuma* (*Children's reading for the heart and the intellect*), the first Russian journal for children, funded by Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov and issued from 1785 to 1789, is the main representative of this trend. It offered the children of the aristocracy a vast range of readings: from fiction to scientific essays, from moral aphorisms to encyclopaedic entries.⁶⁹ Novikov put great emphasis on the book as a means for providing education and up-bringing. 'A child without a book is like a soldier without a weapon', he stated.⁷⁰ The book had the power to refine not only children's reasoning skills or their behaviour, but also their tastes, their sense of beauty.⁷¹

The introduction of Western pedagogical theories and their reworking by the first Russian pedagogues shaped the statuses of the adult as an educator, of the child as learner and of the book as a teaching tool. Children's literature became mostly focused on the transmission of behaviours established by 18th century pedagogy, such as feelings of affection towards parents, sense of duty, respect for order, and distaste for laziness. Inner happiness could be achieved

⁶⁷ E. V. Kudriavtseva, *Dlia serdtsa i razuma: Detskaia literatura v Rossii xviii v.* (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2010), p. 12.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that these principles did not restrict significantly the range of readings which could be considered appropriate for children, so even an unfortunate love story or a short treatise of physics or sociology were thought to be enjoyable by a child. See *ibidem*, pp. 17–8.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

by pursuing an aim, by adopting a constructive approach to life.⁷² Catherine II, who made a significant contribution to the development of pedagogical thinking in Russia, put the idea of the child's happiness at the centre of her reflection. The child was not happy from birth, he or she had to reach happiness by bringing together rationality and virtue. The adult was called to guide the child on the route towards perfection.⁷³

This constructive approach did not exclude the idea of amusement, but the themes of sorrow and pain seem to have had a larger role than humour and playfulness in Russian 18th century children's literature. This can be explained by the fact that here the idea of entertainment was secondary compared to that of moral guidance. If informed about the conditions of squalor and unhappiness in which other people lived, a child could develop compassion and the wish to help other human beings.⁷⁴ Compassion was also seen as way of imitating God, who protects those who are afflicted.⁷⁵

In some children's texts written by Aleksandr Semenovich Shishkov, another central figure in 18th century Russian children's literature, comic devices are a narrative tool for introducing the idea of violent punishment for children who do not listen to adults' advice: the violent death of the disobedient young protagonist is comic.⁷⁶ This has a parallel with the European development of laughter in children's literature. European cultures between the 16th and the 17th century saw the rise of comical figures which embodied humanistic and folkloric elements, bringing together the high literary tradition of Erasmus, with its praise of foolishness, and the corporeal grotesque which is typical of the carnivalesque

⁷² Ibidem, p. 69.

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 87.

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 71.

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ See, for example, the short dialogue 'Koshka, mysh' and myshonok', reported in *Detskaia literatura*, p. 95. See also Shishkov's poem: 'Iagnenok'.

spirit.⁷⁷ Grobian in Germany or, later, Bertoldo in the Italian area embodied the positive character of the rogue who violated taboos and turned the social conventions upside-down. The Austrian scholar of children's literature Maria Lypp discussed Grobian as a pedagogic figure in children's literature and its development in the 18th century.⁷⁸ The pedagogic value of Grobian, who is greedy, lazy and so on, rested on the logic of the reversal: while laughing at Grobian, a child knew that the right behaviour was the opposite of what Grobian's actions suggested. In other words, it was a way of teaching through negative examples. In the 18th century, this character evolved into Struwwelpeter, who, like Grobian, was rebellious against norms and subverted established order, but he received a punishment for his irreverence.⁷⁹ The passage from Ivan-durak as a positive character throughout pre-Modern Russia to the disobedient child (or cub) hero who deserves a physical punishment in Shishkov's texts seems to follow the European pattern of development of cautionary literature.

Shishkov's texts, whose protagonists are often animals from folk-tales, started a significant consideration of the value of folklore for the formation of a national literature.⁸⁰ However, until the very end of the 18th century, folklore remained a marginal feature in Russian children's literature. It was the rise of Sentimentalism as a literary and cultural movement which substantially contributed to making legends, folk songs and tales a central source of

⁷⁷ On the grotesque body in carnival, see *Rabelais and his World* pp. 303–67.

⁷⁸ Maria Lypp, 'The Origin and Function of Laughter in Children's Literature', in *Aspects and Issues in the History of Children's Literature*, ed. by Maria Nikolajeva (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1995), 183–89.

⁷⁹ Lypp's study of Grobian is pertinent to Grigorii Oster's *Vrednye sovety (Bad Advice)*. In Chapter Three of this thesis I will further discuss Lypp's study in relation to Oster's work.

⁸⁰ *Slovesnost'*, meant as oral and literary expression, is a key concept in Shishkov's intellectual and specifically pedagogical work. See *Detskaia literatura*, pp. 91–2.

inspiration for children's writers.⁸¹ Nonetheless, this folkloric repertoire fed a feeling of melancholia rather than one of humour and playfulness.⁸²

2.3. 19th Century Children's Literature between Didacticism and Ideals of Children's Freedom

In the 19th century Russian children's literature became the object of scholarly investigation. This was encouraged by the development of printing and the book market, following which the educator was asked to mediate among writers, publishers and readership.⁸³ Didactic efficacy became the main criterion for evaluating children's books, and this should be understood as a concern for children's spiritual development: children's books had to merge together the spirit of the folk (*narodnost'*), humanism and erudition.⁸⁴ Particularly decisive in the debate were Vissarion Belinskii's and Nikolai Dobroliubov's pedagogic reflections. On the one hand, these reflections emphasised the role of children's books in the development of child readers into responsible adults.⁸⁵ On the other, they insisted on the need to 'retain the purity of soul', and on the children's book as a defensive tool against the evils of life which children would encounter in the process of growing up.⁸⁶ Thus, in the 19th century, children's literary scholarship in Russia appears to be split between developmental issues,

⁸¹ *Detskaia literatura*, p. 96.

⁸² Karamzin's fairy tales, for example, focused on the theme of love, and of the fight between Virtue and Doubt. *Ibidem*, p. 97.

⁸³ See Marina Balina, 'Creativity through Restraint: The Beginning of Soviet Children's Literature', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, ed. by Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 3–17 (p. 3).

⁸⁴ *Detskaia literatura*, p. 111.

⁸⁵ V. G. Belinskii, N. G. Chernyshevskii, and N. A. Dobroliubov, *O detskoi literature* (Moscow: Goz. izd. detskoi literatury, 1954), p. 42, quoted in Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova, 'Creativity Through Restraint: The Beginnings of Soviet Children's Literature', p. 4.

⁸⁶ Nikolai Dobroliubov, 'Obzor detskikh zhurnalov' (1859) <http://az.lib.ru/d/dobroljubow_n_a/text_1430.shtml> [accessed 9 May 2013].

with their focus on readers as future adults, and concerns for the need to preserve the ‘child’s essence’ – his or her purity – into adulthood.

These contradictory approaches to children’s literature are mirrored by the richness of the Russian production of readings for a child audience in 19th century. The fairy tales by Ershov, Krylov, or Pushkin are among the greatest achievements of Russian 19th century children’s literature, although they did not specifically address a child audience. However, rather than on the literary tale, for the purpose of my thesis I will focus on the work of Vladimir Fedorovich Odoevskii, whose work for children expresses a specific understanding of playfulness. Belinskii’s call to help child readers to develop their human potential and become aware citizens resonates in Odoevskii’s work as a children’s writer and a pedagogue, where the concept of play has a central role. A representative of Russian Romanticism and, at the same time, a passionate promoter of science and rationality,⁸⁷ Odoevskii believed that anyone who assumed a pedagogical role, including children’ authors, could awaken children’s feelings and their perceptive skills through children’s hidden fantasies and the dimension of day-dreaming.

In Odoevskii’s tales, children’s play moves from the play-ground to ‘that half-asleep state of [...] [the] young soul, when play of the imagination slip[s] into reality so miraculously’.⁸⁸ In his work, imaginative play is a free flux of

⁸⁷ In 1974, the critic V. I. Sakharov defined Odoevskii as ‘simultaneously a realist and a romantic, a teller of fairy tales and a pedagogue, a fantasist and an encyclopaedically educated scholar and a populizer’, V. Sakharov, ‘V. F. Odoevskii – pisatel’ i pedagog, 1804 –1869’, *Nachal’naia shkola*, 12 (1972), 65–9, in Neil Cornwell, *The Life, Times and Milieu of V. F. Odoevsky, 1804–1869* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), p. 174. Cornwell does not specify the page in which this quotation can be found in Sakharov’s essay.

⁸⁸ V. F. Odoevskii, ‘Igoshka’, in *Russkaia fantasticheskaia proza epokhi romantitsizma (1820–1840 gg.)* (Leningrad: Izd –vo leningradskogo universiteta, 1990), pp. 270–5 (p. 275). The tale first appeared in *Pestrye skazki s krasnym slovtsom, sobrannye Irineem Modestovichem Gomozeiko, magistrom filosofii i chlenom raznykh uchenykh obshchestv, izdannye V. Bezglaznym* (St Petersburg: 1833).

disquieting images and voices which disrupt the safety of the nursery. This ‘dark pastoral’, to use Roni Natov’s definition of this depiction of the ‘nightmare world of childhood’,⁸⁹ was for Odoevskii the route the child undertook towards rationality and a conscious adherence to ethical values, and away from useless impositions on the part of an authoritarian instructor.⁹⁰ At the same time, it was the educator’s duty to aid the child in undertaking this path. The tale ‘Igoshka’ is a telling example of this pedagogical approach. Here a child has a vision of a young boy with no legs or arms.⁹¹ The link with the dimension of play is established in the first lines, which introduce the starting of the child’s *reverie*:

я сидел с нянюшкой в детской; на полу разостлан был ковер, на ковре игрушки, а между игрушками — я;[...].⁹²

The child’s imagination, and the child’s very self, are presented as toys endowed with a high educative function. The adult is a facilitator with the duty to ease the process which leads the child from fantasy to reality. Odoevskii believed that children possessed acute intellectual skills on their own: ‘[they] were my best teachers’ he declared, ‘children showed me the whole poverty of my learning’.⁹³

⁸⁹ Roni Natov, *The Poetics of Childhood* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 119.

⁹⁰ Odoevskii’s works, as well as Pogorelskii’s *Chernaia kuritsa* (*The Black Hen*), 1828, were inspired by E. T. A. Hoffmann and his *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816). *Chernaia kuritsa* was the first fantasy tale in Russian literature, and the only work which Antonii Pogorelskii (Aleksei Alekseevich Perovskii) devoted to children. See *Detskaia literatura*, pp. 147–8.

⁹¹ This was the subject of a folk tale which V. Dal’ and M. Zabylin inserted in their respective collections of folk legends in 1880. See M. A. Tur’ian, “‘Igoshka’”. V. F. Odoevskogo (K probleme fol’klorizma)’, *Russkaia literatura*, 1 (1977), 132–6, pp. 132–3. On the occasion of the publication of his collection of works in 1844, Odoevskii gave the tale a new title: ‘Opyty rasskaza o drevnykh i novykh predaniakh’ (Sochineniia kniazia V. F. Odoevskogo, Volume 3, part 3, SPb 1844, pp. 47–56, quoted in *Russkaia fantasticheskaia proza*, p. 628).

⁹² ‘I was in the nursery with nanny, a rug was spread on the floor, toys were on the rug, and among the toys there was me.’ ‘Igoshka’, p. 270.

⁹³ *The Life, Times, and Milieu of V. F. Odoevsky*, p. 165. No reference provided.

By putting emphasis on the child's emotional experiences, Odoevskii was completing the line of thought of Belinskii and Dobroliubov, who wanted children's literature to focus on the child as a person, enabling him or her to follow virtue consciously and not as the result of an imposition. It was an ideal of free education, fostering the liberation of children from traditional forms of authority at home and in their learning environment. However, as Marina Balina points out, Dobroliubov's and Belinskii's approach implied the imposition of an ideological agenda on children's literature.⁹⁴ Dobroliubov, for example, demonstrated a rather rigid understanding of what readings were useful for the development of the child's inner self.⁹⁵ Ultimately, Russian pedagogical ideas in the 19th century laid the ground for a contradiction which would characterize Russian children's literature in the Soviet time. In Lisa A. Kirschenbaum's words, this contradiction rested in 'a commitment to liberating children and a desire to teach them'.⁹⁶ These pedagogical ideas contained the roots of the ideological character of Soviet children's literature, as well as of an opposite trend, the one which posed the question of whether the child was actually a source of knowledge for the adult.

Lev Tolstoi suggested that the child, and especially the peasant child, could be a source of knowledge in 1862, with the essay 'Komu u kogo učit'sia pisat', krest'ianskim rebiatam u nas ili nam u krest'ianskikh rebiat?' ('Are the

⁹⁴ 'Creativity through Restraint', p. 4.

⁹⁵ Nikolai Dobroliubov, 'Obzor detskikh zhurnalov' (1859) <http://az.lib.ru/d/dobroljubow_n_a/text_1430.shtml> [accessed 9 May 2013].

⁹⁶ Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (New York and London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), p. 24. See pp. 19–24 for Kirschenbaum's discussion of free upbringing, teaching needs and the first Russian kindergartens.

Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us? Or, Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?').⁹⁷ Here he writes:

It's impossible and absurd to teach and educate a child, for the simple reason that the child stands nearer than I do, than any grown-up man does, to that ideal of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness to which I, in my pride, want to raise him.⁹⁸

As a fervent reader of Rousseau, Tolstoi emphasised the value of the child's subjectivity and creativity. As Sara Pankenier outlines, Tolstoi characterised childhood and infancy as a political state dominated by the desire for freedom.⁹⁹ In an autobiographical fragment written in 1878, Tolstoi remembers how, as an infant, he rejected constraints, such as swaddling. A feeling of unheard suffering, summarized in the sentence 'la slab, a oni sil'ny' ('I am weak, while they are strong'),¹⁰⁰ is 'the first and strongest impression' in Tolstoi's life.¹⁰¹ Childhood is therefore a stage of human life characterized by a continuous challenge to the dominant system, a challenge exerted from a marginal position.¹⁰² Like holy fools, children inhabit the boundaries of language and society, turning their weakness into strength by virtue of their unity with God and with the maternal body, which occupies a special place in the Russian religious consciousness. In *Detstvo (Childhood)*, God and the maternal body

⁹⁷ L. N. Tolstoi, 'Komu u kogo učit'sia pisat', krest'ianskim rebiatam u nas ili nam u krest'ianskikh rebiat?', L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v devianosta tomakh*, t. 8 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1936), pp. 301–24. For an English translation, see, 'Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us? Or, Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?' in Leo Tolstoy *On Education*, translated from the Russian by Leo Wiener, with an introduction by Reginald D. Archambault (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 191–224. For a discussion of this essay, see Sara Pankenier, *In Fant Non Sens: The Infantalist Aesthetic of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1909-1939* (Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, 2006), pp. 32–4.

⁹⁸ 'Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us?', p. 222.

⁹⁹ *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 38–9.

¹⁰⁰ L. N. Tolstoi, 'Moia zhizn', in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v devianosta tomakh*, t. 23, pp. 469–74 (p. 470). 'Moia zhizn' is sometimes referred to as 'Pervye vospominaniia', because it was published with this title in the collection 'Russkim materiam', ed. by I. Gorbunov-Posadov in 1892. For further details on the history of this brief autobiographical text, see N. N. Gusev, «Moia zhizn'»: Istorii pisaniia i pechataniia, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v devianosta tomakh*, t. 23, pp. 561–3.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem.

¹⁰² See *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 49–50.

are sources of a superior creativity to which the child has access.¹⁰³ This dimension is irretrievable once swept away by experience, which leaves adults with reminiscences as ‘the source of best pleasures’.¹⁰⁴ If Odoevskii considered the inner world of the child as the source from which an educator should have drawn for leading back the child to reality, Tolstoi considers the entrance into experience, in other words into adulthood, as a tragic loss. According to Andrew Wachtel, Tolstoi’s writing and pedagogy, and above all the tale *Childhood*, marked ‘the advent of a specifically Russian conception of childhood’.¹⁰⁵ His glorification of childhood as a time of happiness and joyful innocence proved to be enormously relevant for later Russian approaches to the first years of one’s life, including children’s play.

2.4. The Century of the Child and the New Ideas about Childhood

The ideal of the child as innocent and pure merged, and sometimes was in contrast, with radically new ways of conceiving childhood that appeared in Russia between 1890 and the 1920s.¹⁰⁶ These ideas about childhood deserve attention because they entered the notion of children’s play, further reshaping it, and giving birth to playful children’s texts with contradictory ideological underpinnings. These concerned ideals of autonomy and, at the same time, of discipline. Furthermore, the child’s supposed capacity to actively transform the

¹⁰³ See *Detstvo* and the scenes in which the child protagonist prays by repeating his mother’s words (L. N. Tolstoi, *Detstvo/ Childhood* [Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993] pp. 47). In the same novel, the character of Grisha and the reverence that the child (the narrative ‘I’ as a child) feels towards him establish a parallel between childhood and holy foolishness (Ibidem, pp. 36–7). Pankenier provides an interesting analysis of these themes in *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 48–54.

¹⁰⁴ *Detstvo*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Children’s World*, p. 26.

world combined with the child's capacity to represent an oasis of purity, untouched by the world.

A lively and interdisciplinary debate on the child, which included artistic experimentation, gave birth to a synergy which transformed children's literature. The new concepts of childhood which arose at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th should be evaluated in the light of the European cultural and social ferment which inspired the treatise 'The Century of the Child', written by the Swedish feminist Ellen Key in 1900.¹⁰⁷ Key's treatise first appeared in Russian in 1905 and was republished several times.¹⁰⁸ She described the turn of the new century as a time of expectations for the future, but, at the same time as

a small naked child, descending upon the earth, but drawing himself back in terror at the sight of a world bristling with weapons, a world in which for the opening century there was not an inch of free ground to set one's foot upon.¹⁰⁹

Key's work represented a turning point in the way children's rights were conceived,¹¹⁰ and was significantly influenced,¹¹¹ by the reflections of Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud on childhood.¹¹¹ These reflections were centred on the idea of the infant condition as primitive or animal, and they further encouraged the construction of the child as a an artistic genius, which had been started by the Romantics.¹¹² Charles Darwin, in *On the Origins of Species* (1859),

¹⁰⁷ Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1909).

¹⁰⁸ See *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 83–4.

¹⁰⁹ *The Century of the Child*, pp. 1–2.

¹¹⁰ This can be evinced already from the first chapter, entitled: 'The Right of the Child to Choose His Parents'.

¹¹¹ See *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 83.

¹¹² On the theme of childhood in Romanticism, see Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), and Ann Wierda Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), especially the chapter 'Infancy, poetry and the origins of language', pp. 67–108.

describes the embryonic state as animal.¹¹³ In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), to which I will return later in this chapter, Nietzsche idealizes childhood as the highest state of being. The philosopher departs from the Romantic ideal of the naive child when he sees children as endowed with a force which is creative and destructive at the same time. For Nietzsche, the child is a primitive, invoked to destroy the past and usher in the start of new way of experiencing life.¹¹⁴ Sigmund Freud also challenged that Romantic ideal: his ideas on children's sexuality and interiority introduced an idea of childhood as the site of urges which are decisive in the formation of the adult's psyche.

'The century of the child' in Russia was influenced by the above-mentioned Western ideas, but it also had its own specific features. According to Arzamastseva, 'khozhdenie v narod' ('the move towards the people'), which had marked the intellectual and social activity in the 1870s, turned into 'ukhozhdenie k detiam': an escape from the past, and from the delusions and the mistakes of the previous generations, towards children.¹¹⁵ A worldwide interest in childhood merged with internal socio-political events, making the child the centre of a vast theoretical speculation, as well as of poetic and artistic experimentations. A

¹¹³ See also Charles Darwin, 'A Biographical Sketch of an Infant', *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*, 2 (1877), 285–94

<<http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F1779&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>> [accessed 10 July 2013]. Here the infant is compared to an animal or a primitive, or his previous *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). As to Sigmund Freud, see *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, (1905); in which the child's sexual drives are equalled to those of the primitive and the animal. Pankenier discusses these works and their link with the construction of the child as primitive in *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 68–80.

¹¹⁴ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, translated by Thomas Common (A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, University of Pennsylvania State University, 1999).

¹¹⁵ I. N. Arzamastseva, "*Vek rebenka*" v *russskoi literature 1900–1930 Godov*, (Moscow: Prometei, 2003), pp. 80; 214. Arzamastseva especially refers to Kornei Chukovskii, who was born during the Russian famine of 1882. Lisa A. Kirschenbaum detects a similar but larger trajectory, which starts from the so-called generation of the 1840s and their idealism and passes through the generation of the 1860s. The members of the latter identified themselves with the notion of 'children', and rebelled against patriarchal authority, as we see in Turgenev's novel *Ottsy i dety* (1862). See *Small Comrades*, pp. 16–17.

circular relationship between the avant-garde and the new studies in the fields of folklore, pedagogy, psychology and psychoanalysis took place in Russia and contributed towards transforming children's literature under the aegis of play.

My discussion of playfulness within Russian avant-garde movements and early Soviet children's literature relies on a broad understanding of play as a creative approach towards life, in which ever new connections between objects, and between signifier and signified are possible. The artistic reproduction of the child's speech, including the pre-verbal sounds, the imaginative leaps of nursery rhymes or of fairy tales, laughter and jokes all expressed a desire for social and cultural renewal of which the child, or rather, the figure of the child, was the main protagonist. Play was considered as the essence of the infantile dimension. Through play, the child stirred the established order of things and created chaos, and, at the same time, was able to master chaos. At the heart of this notion of play was a tension between dynamics of revolution and rationalization which was to shape the relationship between the adult and the child in children's literature throughout the Soviet and the post-Soviet period.

Playfulness and infantilism were central concepts for Russian avant-garde groups at the beginning of the new century, and the imaginative play which is associated with the folk tale represented an important component in their notion of childhood. In 1928, the poet Andrei Belyi explained the core of his symbolist poetics also by means of childhood memories and his passion for fairy tales:

The doctor says I am too excitable and that my fairy tales should be taken away, and I feel that the saving grace of this play of images is being taken away from me by external force and that in their absence I will be thrown into the abyss of gibberish; if adults had understood my childish fear of

losing fairy tales, they would have expressed it thus: 'He's struggling for the integrity of his ego, so as to avoid a nervous breakdown'.¹¹⁶

For Belyi, the production of symbols which occurs in the 'play of images' is a defence against 'the explosion of inner feelings', 'a way to overcome the early stages of lemur-atlantic chaos and move into something concrete and logical'.¹¹⁷ As Aleksandr Etkind remarks, Belyi's words were not influenced by psychoanalysis.¹¹⁸ He points out that when Freudian psychoanalysis entered the Russian cultural environment in the 1910s, 'the place was occupied': the Symbolist movement was already 'prescrib[ing] refined methods of interpretation, correlations between meanings and signs, emotional experiences and symbols, and dreams and worlds'.¹¹⁹ The imaginative play that in the above-quoted excerpt Belyi associates with fairy tales was a way of experiencing powerful emotions and, at the same time, keeping powerful inner forces under control.

Belyi's words introduce us to the concept of phantasmagoria. With this term, Brian Sutton-Smith refers to a tendency to violence and dark images which, as his extensive studies on children's play and creativity demonstrate, is a central feature of children's imaginative world, full of intense emotions, violence and representations of disasters,¹²⁰ as much as fairy tales are.¹²¹ According to Sutton-Smith, this is a form of play, the logic of which is the distortion, and not the reproduction, of everyday events. Phantasmagoria is 'a fantasy of emotional events', a ludic construction and deconstruction of one's

¹¹⁶ Andrei Belyi, *Pochemu ia stal simvolistom* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982) p. 3, quoted in Aleksandr Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia*, translated by Noah and Maria Rubins (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), p. 68.

¹¹⁷ 'Pochemu ia stal simvolistom', quoted *ibidem*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

¹²⁰ See *The Ambiguity of Play*, chapter 'Child Phantasmagoria' in particular, pp. 151–72.

¹²¹ See *The Poetics of Childhood*, pp. 119–21.

inner world.¹²² A similar function, Sutton-Smith carries on, can be found in adults' festivals, in the carnival, which represents a way '[of] react[ing] emotionally to the experience of living in the world and how to temporarily vivify that experience by transcending its usual limits'.¹²³ In other words, the phantasmagorical play is a way of playing with disorder emotionally, before coming back to the safe boundaries of order, which are strengthened as a result.¹²⁴ The notion of phantasmagoria is important in my discussion of playful Russian children's literature. I maintain that, at least in the first decades of the Soviet period, the emotional distortion of reality through playful children's texts gave adults the possibility of escaping the choice between ideology and meaningless laughter, allowing them to support another kind of truth, an emotional one. In the post-Soviet period, children's authors liberated themselves from the need to adhere to ideology but were once again involved, as they were in the 1920s, in a cultural reconstruction. Then too, this emotional distortion – a form of play – was often associated with the adoption of forms of *durachestvo*, and allowed these authors to strengthen their pedagogical profile. With the collapse of external truths, they had the possibility of advocating an emotional truth.

The idea of the child as a centre of intense emotions went hand in hand with that of the child as an artistic genius. In 1908, the exhibition "Art in the Life of the Child", held in St Petersburg, intensified the interest in children's

¹²² *The Ambiguity of Play*, pp. 158–9; 166–71. Sutton-Smith follows Greta Fein's theories on child fantasy play, in particular those expressed in Greta Fein, 'Pretend Play: Creativity and Consciousness', in *Curiosity, Imagination and Play*, ed. by D. Gorlitz and J. F. Wohlwill (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1987), 281–304.

¹²³ *The Ambiguity of Play*, p.159. See also p. 162 for other examples of adults' phantasmagorical play.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 162.

creativity.¹²⁵ In this interest in the child, Russia was part of a worldwide trend: exhibitions, collections and imitations of children's drawings were to be found in other European countries.¹²⁶ As Brian Sutton-Smith puts it, commenting on this world-wide interest in children's art,

What develops in the twentieth century is a complex of ideas in which the child's play and art are brought together with ideas about the imagination, about the child as primitive, an innocent, an original, and, in effect, the true romantic, because he or she is untouched by the world and still capable of representing things in terms of an unfettered imagination'.¹²⁷

Children's art is understood as play, full of freedom, originality and autonomy.¹²⁸ For the avant-garde movements, play became the concept which expressed best the ideal of 'art for art's sake' and of the lack of inhibitions which was considered necessary for an artistic renewal to take place in Russia.¹²⁹ In other words, avant-garde artistic groups, such as Neo-primitivists and Cubo-futurists, were ready to learn from the child, and their artistic production was strongly influenced by children's drawings. However, as Sara Pankenier underlines, this was an aesthetic ideal – the subjectivity or the agency of child had no relevance for avant-garde artists'.¹³⁰

Another distinctive mark of the playfulness of the Russian avant-garde between the 1910s and the early 1920s, in particular of the Cubo-futurist group, were joyful mask shows, love for the circus, clowns, and lively street

¹²⁵ See *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 110. For a brief history of the perception of children's art in Russia, see "Vek rebenka", pp. 85–8.

¹²⁶ For example, an exhibition called 'The Child and Art' was held in Germany in 1905. Sara Pankenier mentions a variety of essays devoted to children's art in Europe. See *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 110–11.

¹²⁷ *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 133.

¹²⁸ Aleksandr Benois, one of the leaders of the artistic movement Mir isskustva (World of Art), reviewed the 1908 exhibition stating that 'all children's play is art'. Aleksandr Benois, 'Vystavka "Iskusstvo v zhizni rebenka"', *Rech'*, 289 (Nov. 26, 1908), p. 3, quoted in *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 113.

¹²⁹ See *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 103–4. Neoprimitivists did not imitate children's art only, but also the lubok, praised for the simplicity of its style. See Aleksandr Benois, 'Povorot k lubku', *Rech'*, 75, (March 18, 1909), p. 2, quoted in *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 113.

¹³⁰ *In Fant Non Sens*, pp. 85–6.

performances by young and irreverent poets.¹³¹ If the Symbolism of Blok and his fellow poets – through pantomimes and the masks of the *Commedia dell'Arte* – could express a melancholic core and even the tragedy of life,¹³² the Cubo-futurists' fascination for the circus, its clowns, fancy dresses and witty jokes conveyed a desire for radical renewal in culture and society. Their eccentricity expressed the will for a brand new world, while the old principles and values were now felt as 'irreparably polluted'.¹³³ Playfulness for these intellectuals and artists amounted to an explosion of energy, and laughter expressed their rejection of the old world. This did not exclude melancholy: the Italian scholar Angelo Maria Ripellino, who sees Maiakovskii's art as rooted in Cubo-futurism, observes that 'uproarious impudence has its reverse in a sense of loneliness, of nervous irritation, of bewilderment'. Thus Futurists' irony and extravagance may at times conceal unease, however, we can say that their art wished to take down 'the past/by hurling in the air confetti of an outmoded culture'.¹³⁴

The portrayal of children's minds as 'primitive' was encouraged also by Russian scholars who made original contributions to the study of the child's psyche at the beginning of the new century. In 1909, for example, Ivan Sikorskii published *Dusha rebenka (The Child's Soul)*. Sikorskii insisted on 'cheerfulness', 'joy in life' and 'independence of the mind' as elements constituting childhood.¹³⁵ And yet, in his view, in the earliest stages of their development children manifested unmanageable feelings such as anger, fear

¹³¹ See Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Majakovskij* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002 [1959]), chapter 'Majakovskij e il Circo' (Maiakovskii and the Circus'), pp. 213–24.

¹³² See Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Il trucco e l'anima* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002 [1965]), pp. 123–7. See also *Majakovskij*, pp. 61–2.

¹³³ Gian Piero Piretto, *Il radiosso avvenire: Mitologie culturali sovietiche* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), p. 3.

¹³⁴ V. Maiakovskii, *150 000 000* (1919), lines 1562–642

<http://az.lib.ru/m/majakowskij_w_w/text_0180.shtml> [accessed 9 June 2012]

¹³⁵ See *Children's World*, p. 40.

and shame.¹³⁶ Folklorists confirmed that children were not as naive as they had been portrayed in the past. In 1925, for example, Georgii Vinogradov publishes *Detskaia satiricheskaia lirika (Children's Satirical Verse)*, described by Catriona Kelly as 'a rich inventory of scabrous taunts and rhymes, many including words that could not be printed for Vinogradov's adult public at the time when he wrote it'.¹³⁷

This reformulation of childhood as a primitive state, in which the here and now could be experienced intensely, also implied the promise of a future renovation of society. Nietzsche's thought and his idea of the superman exerted here an enormous influence and underwent a specific reworking in Russia.¹³⁸ *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was a well-known book in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.¹³⁹ In the first of his speeches, Zarathustra says that the spirit will undergo three metamorphoses, by turning into a camel, a lion, and, eventually, a child. The camel is the stage of unlimited endurance – this animal patiently takes upon itself the hardest ordeals. In the second stage, the spirit turns into a lion, representing absolute freedom. The lion replaces 'I ought' with 'I want', and creates the conditions for the creation of new values. But only the child, the third and last metamorphosis of the spirit, has the power to start the game of creation:

Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Ibidem, p. 39.

¹³⁷ Ibidem, p. 83. Previously, in her study *Zhivoe detskoe slovo (The Living Language of Children, 1925)*, Elizaveta Shabad recorded children's sentences like the following ones: 'I won't let you in, I'll bweak *your* house down'; 'I've got a gun that fires cowks, I'll kill you', or 'God died in our church and now he's cwying'. E. Shabad, *Zhivoe detskoe slovo* (Moscow: 1925), pp. 15; 16; 19; p. 50, quoted in *Children's World*, p. 83. The translation provided is by Catriona Kelly.

¹³⁸ On the influence of Nietzsche's thought in Soviet culture, see *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, ed. by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹³⁹ See *Eros of the Impossible*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁰ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 35.

In Russia, the Nietzschean child, this 'starting-over', this tabula rasa, became synonymous with primitive strength and creativity as much as with pliability. As Etkind points out about the Russian reception of Nietzsche's thought, 'merely conceptualizing the *Übermensch* [Superman] was not enough; he had to be produced as well. [...] The philosophy, sociology, and psychology of modernism therefore became practical disciplines, aspiring to influence human life in the most direct sense.'¹⁴¹ Etkind points out that the malleability of the child started being conceived long before the establishment of the Soviet power. As early as 1909, the poet Innokentii Annenskii wrote:

Children – those absurd, wilful creatures, those semi-conscious passivities...children are our grotesques, just as they are sketches of our creation. Such is the world in which our Modernism finds it so pleasant to sing and prattle.¹⁴²

This, as Etkind remarks, inevitably led to children being approached as raw material.¹⁴³ Accordingly, in the field of pedagogy, models based on the ideal of the child's freedom of expression blended with, before being progressively replaced by, much stricter approaches. Western ideas on free education had been circulating in Russia for a long time.¹⁴⁴ As early as the 1860s, some Russian disciples of Friedrich Froebel started to work with local children in St. Petersburg, while Maria Montessori's work was translated into Russian in 1910.¹⁴⁵ However, it was the 'child-study movement', or 'paedology', established in Northern America and bringing together pedagogy and all forms of research into child development and socialization, which became particularly influential in

¹⁴¹ *Eros of the Impossible*, p. 40.

¹⁴² I. Annenskii, 'O sovremennom lirizme', *Apollon*, vol. 3 (1909), p. 55, quoted in *Eros of the Impossible*, p. 41.

¹⁴³ *Eros of the Impossible*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁴ See *Children's World*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 36–7.

Russia. This broad science of the child highly evaluated children's capacity for innovation and their rebellion against what was imposed by adults.

As Kelly observes, the main theorists of paedology in America conveyed an idea of childhood which implied a contradiction: the child was an innovator, but also a primitive, one who 'preserved perceptions going back to the "beginnings of things", to the dawn of human nature'.¹⁴⁶ In Soviet Russia, paedology underwent an original development, and was mostly referred to with the term *pedologiya*.¹⁴⁷ Progressively, it replaced psychoanalysis, and became the science in charge of shaping children into perfect Soviet citizens, more and more reinforcing the concept of the plasticity of man and human behaviour, and emphasising the value of the environment in conditioning the child's development.¹⁴⁸ Already in 1931, however, *pedologiya* began to be defined as 'pseudo-Marxism', and accused of 'political perversions'. Its methods, based on the observation of the child in his environment and on surveys among teachers, school children and working teenagers, revealed that Soviet society was extremely heterogeneous in terms of objective conditions of life, political awareness of its members, models of behaviour, and attitudes towards the leaders of the Party or the historical past, including the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁴⁹ The year 1936 saw the definite decline of paedology.¹⁵⁰ The overall idea of child

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 38. Kelly refers to Briton James Sully's work *Studies of Childhood*, published in 1895 and translated into Russian in 1909.

¹⁴⁷ *Russian Child Science in International and Contemporary Contexts*, pp. 4–5. <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/russianchildscience/WebBooklet.pdf> [accessed 20 May 2013]. This is a research project that is being conducted by Dr Andy Byford at Durham University.

¹⁴⁸ *Eros of the Impossible*, p. 276. For a discussion of paedology in Soviet Russia, see chapter eight of the same volume: 'Pedological Perversions', pp. 25–85.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 278–80. Besides, paedology was accused of organizing independent organizations in the schools. *Ibidem*, pp. 281–2.

¹⁵⁰ See *ibidem*, pp. 283–5, and notes 69 and 70 for a list of the decrees issued in 1936 which liquidated pedagogical institutions and offices.

autonomy was steadily replaced by a greater emphasis on discipline,¹⁵¹ becoming more and more repressive until the 1950s.¹⁵²

The insistence on the idea of the child as a future adult implicitly enhanced the sanctity of children. As Kelly observes, this accounted for a paradox: ‘a sentimental idea of childhood as a space – perhaps the only space in Soviet culture – that lay beyond politics’ was still cherished in a time of growing rigidity towards the issue of the shaping of personality.¹⁵³ As Kelly underlines, it was adults responsible for children’s deficiencies, rather than children themselves.¹⁵⁴ This paradox is very relevant for a discussion of the linkage between playfulness and adults’ pedagogical momentum. Indeed the non-political aspects of childhood, that is to say childhood as an oasis of laughter and play, had a very profound political and ideological core. It was adults who were responsible for the safeguarding of this core. Therefore, the choice of playfulness could be seen as a way to inhabit the oasis of childhood, but, all the same, the issue of progress, of the transformation of children according to an ideal of truth was something that adults could not put completely aside. Nor could adults put aside the idea that they could jeopardize the fragile balance, for which they were held responsible, between innocence and political awareness, pure joyfulness and ideology. Ultimately, the transformations of the concept of childhood at the end of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th gave birth to a series of paradoxes which put the adults who were responsible for children, including children’s authors, into a

¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, Kelly underlines that the ideals of free education continued to be considered a valid approach to children who were below school age at least until the early 1940s. See *Children’s World*, pp. 113; 67–79. See also Wladimir Bérelowitch, ‘De l’Enfant a l’Homme Nouveau: Le “futurisme pédagogique” des l’années 1920’, *Revue des Études Slaves*, t. 56, 1 (1984), 115–25. Kelly considers Bérelowitch’s account of the shift from free education to its opposite as too neat.

¹⁵² *Children’s World*, pp. 128–9.

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

difficult position. In approaching children they had to take into account their strength and their vulnerability. In other words, adults were confronted with children's capacity for social and political transformation, which they were asked to foster, on the one hand, and with their need for protection against harmful influences, including those coming from adults, on the other. Furthermore, children were seen as future adults, but also the bearers of a childish essence which still could be preserved. The employment of the concept of play in Soviet children's literature expressed these contradictions.

2.5. Early Soviet Children's Literature as Play

Until the late 1920s many Russian and Soviet artists and authors felt entitled to explore new dimensions of reality through children's literature, and to involve the child reader in this exploration. This enterprise acquired the features of playfulness, that is to say of joyfulness, and the creation of new, unexpected connections between objects and meanings, which amounted to the disruption of old expectations. In early Soviet children's literature playfulness was the mode through which many artists and authors explored the world imaginatively. Playfulness was also the means through which they tried to negotiate conflicting demands besides their own vocation for exploration – especially the wish to attribute to the child a new agency and the need to shape children into citizens of Soviet society. Playfulness, because of the above-described features (the recombination of objects and meanings, the creative exploration of new aspects of reality) was thought to be a fitting didactic means in a time of revolution. For a while, artistic experimentalism merged with the needs of political power, and artists were allowed to interpret the revolutionary time they were going through with some freedom. However, there was no longer place for the concept of 'art

for art's sake': children's books were supposed to have a didactic message and an ideological significance.¹⁵⁵

Children's literature was appropriated by the Soviet state for forming and manipulating children into a rational and politically aware collective.¹⁵⁶ Children's texts had to contribute towards defeating illiteracy, and promoting socialization and correct hygienic habits. Given that it saw children as future Soviet citizens who needed a new aesthetic, emotional and political education, children's publishing was a priority for the new Soviet government. Pre-revolutionary books for children were declared to be dull and sugary, unattractive for workers' sons and daughters, useless for the building of the new Soviet citizen. Now Russian children's authors and avant-garde artists such as Vladimir Lebedev produced books supposed to attract and instruct, to express everyday life and convey the sense of the time.

Early Soviet children's literature expressed two concepts of the relationship between the child and the adult: one focusing on the concept of development, requiring an adult able to guide and shape the perceptions of children, and one which asked adults to model themselves into ideal children. Revolutionary events, indeed, brought children and adults together as 'primitive', both endowed with the task of building a new world. The primitive nature of the new man implied severing generational ties: the young adults rejected their fathers, and children were exhorted to 'exercise leadership of "backward" adults, even those senior to them in the family, such as parents'.¹⁵⁷ Thus adults' cultural background and perceptions, not to mention their own

¹⁵⁵ *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, p. 83.

¹⁵⁶ *Children's World*, p. 67. See also Felicity O'Dell, *Socialization through Children's Literature: The Soviet Example* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

¹⁵⁷ *Children's World*, p. 77. As to the 'generation without fathers', see 'Zametki o pokoleniakh v sovetskoi Rossii', pp. 74–5, in which Chudakova discusses the 'generation with no fathers' of the mid-1920s.

past, could not be shared and become a point of reference in the assumption of a pedagogical function without restrictions.¹⁵⁸

The ideological and didactic intent coupled with the primitive nature of the new adult resulted in dynamics of both the coming together and separation of adults and children. Straight after the Revolution, public readings were organized during which, for example, Aleksandr Blok read his long poem *Dvenadtsat'* (*The Twelve*) followed by Kornei Chukovskii reading his children's tale *Krokodil* (*The Crocodile*).¹⁵⁹ An example of the proximity of adult and child culture in the early 1920s is offered by the ROSTA windows (political posters) which educated the masses by means of concise texts and illustrations with bright colours and neat contours. Russian picture books in the 1920s educated child masses by means of the same aesthetics, and often the same artists.¹⁶⁰ Early Soviet children's books, however, such as Samuil Marshak's *Detki v kletke* (*Children in a Cage*, 1923), show a clear distinction between what is right and what is wrong, and instruct their audience, therefore establishing a dividing line between adults (or, at least, children's authors) and children.¹⁶¹ Often, they involve child readers in a playful comparison between different categories, which, however, never loses sight of *What is Good and What is Bad*, to mention

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, Marina Balina, 'Crafting the Self: Narratives of Prerevolutionary Childhood in Soviet Literature', *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, pp. 91–111.

¹⁵⁹ *Vek rebenka*, p. 12. Arzamastseva does not provide precise data, but refers to Chukovskii as being a debutant, so supposedly it was 1918.

¹⁶⁰ For a discussion of the function of the visual code in the Rosta windows and in the first Soviet children's picture books, see *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic*, pp. 83–90. The revolution encouraged the involvement of artists in children's literature, but they became involved also because the October Revolution destroyed the art market, and children's publishing represented a source of income, albeit precarious. See Evgeny Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades: Revolutionary Artists and the Making of Early Soviet Children's Books* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 14.

¹⁶¹ Oushakine shares this point of view, and he especially refers to *Detki v kletke*, where children learn about the cubs through mistakes. Sergei Ushakin, "My v gorod izumrudnyi idem dorogoi trudnoi:" Malen'kie radosti veselykh chelovechkov', in *Veselye Chelovechki: Kul'turnye geroi sovetskogo detstva*, ed. by I. Kukulin, M. Lipovetskii, M. Maiofis (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008), pp. 8–60.

Vladimir Maiakovskii's 1925 picture book (*Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho?*).¹⁶²

In such works, 'play' is a broad signifier, a dimension in which the need to dispel the old world and the need to bring in new conceptual categories found room. Through play, the neat distinction between what is right and what is wrong, what is new and what is old, could be replaced by modalities of representation that aimed to blur away the distinctions between categories. Russian picture books until the 1930s appear to be focused on conveying a sense of vertigo at the end of an era and the start of a new one. Evgeny Steiner has reviewed many children's books produced in Russia between the late 1910s and the late 1920s which conveyed 'a latent sense of a world in which people's usual surroundings are somehow out of joint and in which their settled, "cultured" space – their psychological comfort zone – has ceased to exist'.¹⁶³ Illustrations reproduced the modernist imagination, in which 'all that is solid melts into air'.¹⁶⁴ In Samuil Marshak's *Zagadki* (*Riddles*, 1925), illustrated by Petrov-Vodkin, objects and bodies appear to be in the midst of falling, inclined in different directions; in Kornei Chukovskii's *Moidodyr* (*Wash'em Clean*, 1923), with illustrations by Iu. Annenkov, everything in the protagonist's bathroom flies and whirls around; in Vladimir Lebedev's *Slonenok* (1922, a translation of R. Kipling's *The Elephant's Child*), the images have no shadows and stand out

¹⁶² See also Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev's *Vchera i segodnia*, 1925, as another example of playful and instructive comparison between two ideas.

¹⁶³ *Stories for Little Comrades*, p. 61. Claire Roosien and Robert Bird emphasised the same visual features as conveying 'overwhelming sense of non-belonging'. See their introduction to the web exhibition on Soviet children's literature 'Adventures in the Soviet Imaginary: Children's Books and Graphic Art' sponsored by the University of Chicago Library in 2011

<<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/webexhibits/sovietchildrensbooks/futurestyle.html>> [accessed 23 April 2013].

¹⁶⁴ This famous sentence taken by Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* is the title of Marshal Berman's study on the relationship between modernism and economic transformations. *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso Editions, 1983).

against a completely white background, a virginal space where any contextual trace has been deleted. These images best represent a 'world of dynamic angles, shift, collisions, movement',¹⁶⁵ equivalent to a state of mind. It was the expression of a floating world, an unfinished one. In Steiner's view, a programmatic intention lay behind this aesthetics: to inculcate in children the sense of a finished era, and, by contrast, the starting of a new one, waiting to be shaped by the new man.¹⁶⁶ Robert Bird echoes Steiner's positions, outlining that these illustrative strategies, which reached their apex in the late 1920s and the early 1930s and had disappeared by the beginning of WWII, aimed at an effect of defamiliarisation. By virtue of this effect, children would not relate their own daily experiences to the illustrations of the book, which amounted to a form of training to 'expect the unexpected'.¹⁶⁷

Nonetheless, these books made references to a language with which children were familiar. Some of the books Steiner discusses draw upon pagan themes and images which belonged to fairy tales, such as those authored by the members of the group of children's writers and illustrators 'Segodnia' ('Today'), established in 1918 and led by Vera Ermolaeva.¹⁶⁸ Not only references to motifs taken from fairy tales, but also abrupt shifts from tranquillity to danger or from joy to fear and melancholy appear to be modelled on folklore and on the child imagination.¹⁶⁹ The result was, in some cases, an emotional language, a phantasmagoria, which coincided with the features of the

¹⁶⁵ *Stories for Little Comrades*, p. 63.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

¹⁶⁷ Robert Byrd, 'The Future's Style'

<<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/webexhibits/sovietchildrensbooks/futurestyle.html>>

[accessed 23 April 2013].

¹⁶⁸ *Stories for Little Comrades*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁹ In her study of Russian children's poetry, Elena Sokol offers some interesting examples among the categories of '*pesenka* (little song)' and '*pribautka* (an especially witty song)' in which an unexpected, almost illogic, violent accidents occur. Elena Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p. 33.

imaginative play.¹⁷⁰ The above mentioned *Children in a Cage*, which helped small children to recognise animals (for example, one of the animals turns to the reader with the words: ‘Don’t come too near, I’m a tiger cub, not a kitten!’),¹⁷¹ mixed the liveliness of the animals of the zoo (all cubs, thus children, *detki*) with accents of profound melancholy, in which a young animal longed for its homeland.¹⁷² These emotional shifts were also typical of symbolist harlequinades, which, as discussed above, found in folktales and in children’s imagination a source of inspiration. In other words, folk and high literary culture, rationality and emotionality, familiarization and defamiliarization processes appear to be merged together in early Soviet playful children’s literature.

These features are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the well-known children’s verse story *The Crocodile* by Kornei Chukovskii. It was written in 1916 and published in 1917 with illustrations by Re-Mi (N. V. Remizov), just before the actual establishment of Soviet power. The final version of the *skazka* was written during the February Revolution, and the text resonates with references to the war and the revolutionary events.¹⁷³ Throughout the tale, child and adult readers, and the adult authorial self, experience a chaotic status in

¹⁷⁰ For example, in *Zverushki* (*Little Beasts*, 1921), a collection of verses by Natan Vengrov illustrated by Natan Al’tman (a member of the group *Segodnia*), one of the poems, ‘Pro zaiku solnechnogo’ (‘The Sun Bunny’) tells of a bunny which is actually a reflection of the sun on a broken mirror surface. The text draws upon the language of folk fairy tales in the repeated use of diminutives and alliteration, and the illustration accentuates the playful nature of the situation: the little beast appears to jump repeatedly from the mirror surface upwards. Its last jump, though, is surprisingly downwards, right into a wolf’s wide open mouth. *Stories for Little Comrades*, p. 17.

¹⁷¹ Samuil Marshak, *Detki v kletke* (1923)

<<http://www.lib.ru/POEZIQ/MARSHAK/detskaya.txt>> [accessed 20 June 2013].

¹⁷² See, for example the poem ‘L’vitsa’, *Ibidem*.

¹⁷³ Irina Luk’ianova reports that, according to Irina Paperno and Mikhail Gasparov, *Krokodil* is a parallel poem of Blok’s *Dvenadtsat’*. Irina Luk’ianova, *Kornei Chukovskii*, series *Zhizn’ zamechatel’nykh liudei* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), p. 284. No reference provided, but Luk’ianova refers to B. Gasparov and I. Paperno, “‘Krokodil’ K. I. Chukovskogo: k rekonstruktsii ritmiko-semanticheskikh illiuzii, in *Tezisy 1 Vsesoiuznoi (Sh) konferentsii “Tvorchestvo A. A. Bloka i russkaia kul’tura XX veka”* (Tartu: Gos. un-t. Tartu, 1975), pp.165–9.

which society falls apart and the adult and the child's worlds merge together, before harmony is restored. This pattern, indeed, is significant for the further development of the playful tradition in post-perestroika children's literature: this was another period of revolution in which the relationship between the adult and the child within the book acquired a new social relevance.

In the story a crocodile goes for a walk in Petrograd and is suddenly attacked by local citizens, who do not accept his strange appearance. The crocodile reacts to people's attacks with violence, terrifying the whole population, and is eventually defeated by Vania, a brave and independent little boy who 'walks the streets without a nanny'.¹⁷⁴ Irina Luk'ianova points out that 'the child in *Krokodil* is the hero, the saviour, the winner, and not a naive guest, shaped by adults, of a world which is not his own'.¹⁷⁵ Vania is not naive, but this character all the same falls into the realm of adults' construction of childhood. He is the Nietzschean child, a destroyer and a constructor, containing within himself the Dionysian and the Apollonian principles. The child described by Nietzsche is able to give birth to new values thanks to his capacity for play, in the sense of an open attitude to change and to life. At the end of the tale, when peace is restored, Vania shows his Apollonian self, his capacity to represent the Logos, after Chaos.

Throughout the tale, chaos is first of all featured by merging together varied sources: 'newspapers headlines, slogans, Pushkin, Nekrasov, folk dance

¹⁷⁴ Kornei Chukovskii, *Krokodil: Poema dlia malen'kikh detei, stishki Korneia Chukovskogo, kartinki Re-Mi* (Tver': Prometei, 1995, based on 1919 edition), p. 8. On Vania as the first city hero in Russian children's literature, see *Kornei Chukovskii*, p. 285. Luk'ianova draws on Iurii Tynianov's essay 'Kornei Chukovskii', *Detskaia literatura*, 4 (1939), republished in *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo Korneia Chukovskogo*, ed. by Valentin Berestov (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1978), pp. 11–17. For further discussion of the character of Vania, see *Children's World*, pp. 48–9.

¹⁷⁵ *Kornei Chukovskii*, p. 286.

rhythms (*pliasovye ritmy*), and the *feuilleton* (*vul'garno-romansnaia sfera*).¹⁷⁶ To this list we may add nursery rhymes, folk tales, the tones and the lexicon of the playground, and biblical motifs.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, words and objects have a twofold meaning. For example, because of its proximity to the Peter and Paul Fortress, the city's zoo symbolized the prison, but literary reminiscences suggested also the opposite interpretation, making the zoo the symbol of Eden.¹⁷⁸ Likewise, the appearance of Vania's toy weapon may provoke laughter and tenderness among adult readers ('i vzmakhnul svoei sablei igrushechnoi'¹⁷⁹), but this child character is actually pitiless, and the crocodile's tears for his children away in Africa do not move him.

The *skazka* stages violence and aggressiveness as a blind force which animals and people use against others. The Crocodile has just arrived in Petrograd and is suddenly attacked by a dog which bites him, while people 'pull at him, offend him'.¹⁸⁰ Violence and fear are, in the tale, expressions of a community whose components are completely disjointed from one another. The scene in which animals from Africa and from the Petrograd Zoo are spreading terror in the town and little girl named Lialia is kidnapped by a female gorilla is

¹⁷⁶ "Krokodil" K. I. Chukovskogo: k rekonstruktsii ritmiko-semanticheskikh illiuzii', quoted in *Kornei Chukovskii*, p. 284. No page number is provided.

¹⁷⁷ Maria Nikolajeva observes that all Chukovskii's verse tales seem to have been written after overhearing children in a playground. See *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, p. 88. For some observations on the biblical reminiscences in *Krokodil*, see *Children's World*, p. 48.

¹⁷⁸ Arzamastseva refers to Viacheslav Ivanov's poem 'Mladenchestvo', in which the zoo is a symbol of Eden. *Vek rebenka*, p. 215.

¹⁷⁹ 'And hit the Crocodile with his toy sabre'. *Krokodil*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem, p. 4. This was a recurrent aspect in British nonsense poetry and nursery rhymes. Humphrey Carpenter points out that in Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense*, first published in 1846, which became a 'common property of English nurseries', the public world often reacts with violence and mad contempt to eccentric individuals. See Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (London and Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks, 1987 [1985]), pp. 11–12. Chukovskii had spent a year in England between 1903 and 1904, falling in love with British nursery rhymes, the work of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, and studying them thoroughly. Samuil Marshak, Chukovskii's fellow founder of modern Russian children's literature, spent almost two years there, from 1913 to 1914. See Elena Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp. 4; 95.

the most telling example of this disjunction. The animal takes her to the roof of a high building, rocks her for a while as if Lialia were her daughter, and then jumps down with her, screaming.¹⁸¹ What is striking in this scene is the disruption of the sacred union of mother and child, the one Tolstoi had included in his definition of the holy dimension of childhood. The gorilla's gestures and the final scream while jumping down the roof are endowed with enough drama as to allow a comparison to the famous final scene of the movie *King Kong* (1933).¹⁸² The evocation of the vertical tension which was typical of pre-revolutionary utopias, and the final jump downwards as a victory of gravity over those utopian drives, further characterises the chaotic atmosphere of the *skazka*.¹⁸³ Indeed vertical tension in avant-garde experimentalism has been interpreted as 'refusal of horizontal order, of regularly articulated paths, in the

¹⁸¹ The scene is a re-elaboration of an episode of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which Chukovskii greatly loved and translated.

¹⁸² Bizarre links bring together Chukovskii's tale, the novel *Gulliver's Travels* and the movie *King Kong*. Neither the director and co-author of the screen play, Merian C. Cooper, nor the animator of *King Kong*, Willis O'Brian, ever declared any connection between this scene and the one described by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. See Ronald Gottesman and Harry Geduld (eds.), *The Girl in the Hairy Paw: King Kong as Myth, Movies and Monster*, (New York: Avon Books, 1976), pp. 10–13. Nevertheless, in the special *King Kong* issue of *Midi-Minuit Fantastique* (October–November 1962), Jean Bouillet first proposed that Jonathan Swift be seriously considered as the main source of inspiration for this scene of *King Kong* (see *Ibidem*, p. 52). Interestingly enough, after the last remake by Peter Jackson in 2005, some Russian spectators noticed the similarity between this scene and Chukovskii's fairy tale, and even spread the story on the web according to which Merian C. Cooper, who had spent a year in a Russian prison between 1920 and 1921 learned some Russian there by training on Chukovskii's books. Once back in the USA he was supposedly inspired by *Krokodil* for his masterpiece. See: <<http://www.business.ua/i678/a22461/>> <<http://tolkienguide.livejournal.com/41402.html?mode=reply>> [accessed 13 May 2010].

¹⁸³ For a discussion of the expression of vertical tensions in 1910s Russian avant-garde, see *Il radioso avvenire*, pp. 20–2. The vertical tension became a feature of the post-revolutionary avant-garde. Constructivism, in particular, showed interest in architectural experimentalism, and often expressed desire for ascension (*Ibidem*, p. 20). Ripellino noticed the same vertical tension also in Maiakovskii's verses, in particular in *The Fifth International* (1920), where the poet cranes his neck over the clouds. See *Il trucco e l'anima*, pp. 281–2.

name of structures representing (...) alienation, chaos, having a revolutionary character.¹⁸⁴

The *skazka* ends with Chukovskii in his living room, having tea with the Crocodile. Vania rushes in, and kisses his previous enemy. Harmony is restored; children are no longer fighters, but 'children' again:

Вот и сочельник–весёлая ёлка
Будет сегодня у серого Волка.
Много там будет весёлых гостей.
Едемте, дети, туда поскорей!¹⁸⁵

In the illustration to this section, Chukovskii sits in an awkward pose, leaning forward and touching his feet, in spite of the presence of a guest, the Crocodile, whose fine stovepipe hat lies on the floor. By bending forward, he makes himself Vania's size: the 'ukhozhdenie k detiam' is symbolically completed, and the authorial self has followed the child in his metamorphoses from a Dionysian primitivism, for which chaos is the ideal environment, to an Apollonian quietness. The representation of a 'world of dynamic angles, shift, collisions, movement, equivalent to a state of mind' is here a form of play which is lived through intensely on the part of the adult, who constructs and deconstructs not external events and literary culture, but his own perceptions of these, by deforming them, and forging 'a quest for emotional truth'.¹⁸⁶ This quest is undertaken by means of ongoing disruptions, which, in early Soviet children's literature, sometimes coexist with a rigid categorization of reality into – to draw an image from Marshak's book – 'zoo cages'.

2.6. *Malen'kie Deti*: Nonsense as Mental Play

¹⁸⁴ *Il radioso avvenire*, p. 20.

¹⁸⁵ 'Christmas Eve – Today the grey wolf /will set up a joyful tree/ There will be many jolly people at his place/ Quick, children, let's rush over there!' *Krokodil*, p. 36. In later versions, the word *sochel'nik* was replaced by *kanikuli* (holidays),

¹⁸⁶ *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 165.

The Crocodile is a typically playful text by Chukovskii. It starts with a crocodile smoking a cigar and having a walk in St Petersburg and it ends with the same character drinking tea at the narrator's house. The constant reversal of the common relationship between objects and functions that we notice in this text was, for Chukovskii, at the core of children's mental play. He defined nonsense as a form of mental play through which children expressed their rational skills. This idea was contained in his famous essay *Ot dvukh do piati* (*From Two To Five*), in which he conducted an analysis of children's mental processes and the value of play. First published in 1928 with the title *Malen'kie deti* (*Small Children*), the essay was a tribute to children's natural way of mastering reality and developing rationality. Having observed children's language and behaviour for years, and having developed a profound knowledge of British nonsense poetry and Russian folklore, Chukovskii came to the conclusion that children showed a real passion 'for the incongruous, for the absurd, and for the severing of ties between objects and their regular functions'.¹⁸⁷

Chukovskii refers to this passion as a mental play, resulting in a form of nonsense, such as the sentence 'The bird rings, the bell flies!'¹⁸⁸ This is only apparently a form of disruption, because, according to Chukovskii, in this way children who are in the early stages of their development test their progressive mastery of knowledge: there would be no playful ringing bird without the firm awareness that it is actually the bell that rings and the bird that flies. In other words, 'every departure from the normal strengthens [the child's] conception of

¹⁸⁷ Kornei Chukovskii, *From Two to Five*, translated and ed. by Miriam Morton, Foreword by Frances Clarke Sayers (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963) p. 98. The edition on which this translation is based is the thirteenth, published in 1959. In the poem 'Putanitsa' (Muddle), written in 1924, Chukovskii fully adopts this device of the inversion: here, for example, kittens are fed up with meowing, and they want to grunt like piglets. The result is chaos which, again, has been interpreted in Aesopian terms as a satire of the Bolshevik revolution. See *Kornei Chukovskii*, pp. 301–3. Luk'ianova rejects this kind of interpretations.

¹⁸⁸ *From Two to Five*, p. 99.

the normal'.¹⁸⁹ Thus, by establishing chaos, children actually try to resolve it, and by laughing at substitutions of functions between objects they defeat the anarchy by which they feel surrounded, and which is frightening. In Chukovskii's view, the educational value of nonsense as a mental play does not end here. Since the child is 'an unacknowledged genius of classification, systematization, and coordination of things',¹⁹⁰ the mental play posed by nonsense gives the child the opportunity to practise these processes: in topsy-turvy rhymes, for instance, there is a perpetual search for new connections among things. However, these skills for cataloguing go hand in hand with an extremely pliant concept of reality: the child is sometimes ready to accept as real two or more possibilities which adults consider to be opposed to each other, such as the following: 'there is a God, but, of course, I don't believe in him'.¹⁹¹ Thus, this contradictory notion of reality is, for the child, a truth (*istina*), the numberless and contradictory facets of which can be comprehended only by means of a playful leap of the mind.¹⁹²

These ideas drew on previous pedagogical theories, on diaries kept by parents and on Chukovskii's own observation of children,¹⁹³ and in them we can find an echo of Odoevskii's argument about imaginative play as the route which leads the child to master reality. However, Odoevskii assigned the teacher, or the writer, the role of the one who awakes children's torpid senses. Chukovskii's study exalted the child's independent, self-sufficient imaginative play,

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem, p. 102.

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 104.

¹⁹¹ *From Two to Five*, p. 26; *Ot dvukh do piati*, in Kornei Chukovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, T. 1 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964), pp. 335–725 (pp. 448–9). The version that we find in this collection was published in 1963.

¹⁹² 'Ochevidno, v takie minuty istina kazhetsia emu mnogoobraznoi, plastichnoi, dopuskaiushchei neogranichennoe chislo variantov', *Ot dvukh do piati*, p. 449.

¹⁹³ See *Children's World*, p. 88; and *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932*, pp. 156–7.

contributing to the construction of childhood as an island of happiness and invulnerability which adults could join. The child, whose most natural form of expression is play, goes through chaos and remains all the same undamaged. This concept shows debt to the Nietzschean ideal of the child who would overcome any physical and moral obstacle and lay the foundation of the new world, but it is not far-fetched to see in it the traces of the patristic concept of play as the only way to access paradoxes such as the Christ's passion. In *From Two to Five*, Chukovskii expressed his idea of children's literature as a literary field able to instil in children the wish to share other people's joys and sorrows:

[Цель сказочников] заключается в том, чтобы какую угодно ценную воспитать в ребенке человечность – эту дивную способность человека волноваться чужими несчастьями, радоваться радостям другого, переживать чужую судьбу, как свою.¹⁹⁴

The formula expressing this goal was 'soperezhivat', sostradat', soradovat'sia' ('to share worries, suffering, joys').¹⁹⁵ Many people interested in literature, including children's literature, would support this idea. And yet this idea risks leading to a way of conceiving the child reader as *strastoterpets*, a 'passion-bearer', one who takes upon his shoulders the sorrow of the world, and in particular the sorrow, fears and frustrations of adults. This trust in the child's capacity to experience empathy is not distant from Tolstoi's vision of the child as a *iurodivyi*, perceiving emotions such as compassion and bliss with great intensity. In Chukovskii's work the child experiences empathy as a human being immersed in the dimension of play, constantly bringing together and uncoupling what in real life is destined to stay separate, including the boundary between

¹⁹⁴ 'The goal of storytellers [...] consists of fostering in the child, at whatever cost, compassion and humaneness —this miraculous ability of man to be disturbed by other beings' misfortunes, to feel joy about another beings' happiness, to experience another's fate as one's own'. *From Two to Five*, p. 138, *Ot dvukh do piati*, p. 570. This section was published in 1956, however, Chukovskii's early works are evidently underpinned by these ideas.

¹⁹⁵ Kornei Chukovskii, *Ob etikh skazkakh*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, T. 1, 163–71, p. 171.

the self and the other, one's own experiences and the others'. In *The Crocodile*, the adult narrator has stimulated the child's emotional play, and he himself has entered the same playful dimension. The boundaries of the child's play have worked as a safety net, thanks to which the adult has worked out his emotional distortion of the world, deconstructing and constructing again his inner world, in a process that resembles Sutton-Smith's notion of phantasmagoria.

2.7. Soviet Children's Literature as an Aesopian Language

Chukovskii's approach to the child's imaginative play and cognitive processes assumed that children were observed in their home environment, supposedly in a traditional family, in which the child was developing a specific personality, away from the principles of collectivism. Chukovskii and his fellow children's writers were soon harshly criticised for their supposed irrationalism, defined as typically bourgeois.¹⁹⁶ His conceptualization of the child's creative power was informed by pedagogical models based on the free expression of the child's self during the same period in which paedology was developing approaches aimed at the creation of the perfect citizenship through education. Artistic expressions such as Chukovskii's *The Crocodile*, Marshak's and Lebedev's *Yesterday and Today*, or *Circus* and so on were the fruits of a cultural environment in which the revolutionary future was still open to interpretation. Avant-garde artists' desires had not been completely structured 'inside a historical continuum that, at the same time, contained their force'.¹⁹⁷ The avant-garde experimentalism in the early 1920s was marked by a variety of discourses about the meaning of time,

¹⁹⁶ See K. Sverdlova, 'O "chukovshchine"', *Krasnaia pechat'*, 9/10 (1928), p. 93, quoted in "'Tarakanišche" Stalina', note 7, p. 238. Other excerpts from this article can be found in Valerii Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms: Zhizn' cheloveka na vetru* (St Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2008), p. 247.

¹⁹⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworlds and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 43.

and the future in particular, and was followed by the moment when artists started being asked to legitimize Bolshevik power by sharing its political task and not simply by showing openness to new cognitive and emotional experiences.¹⁹⁸ Across the 1920s, with Lunacharskii as Commissar of Enlightenment, political commitment became progressively more important than artistic style.¹⁹⁹

In 1928, with an article on *Pravda*, the portrayal of chaos in *The Crocodile* was severely criticised by Nadezhda Krupskaja, who accused Chukovskii of hiding political, bourgeois-oriented intentions.²⁰⁰ She was particularly concerned with the depiction of people in the text: ‘people shout, are angry, drag others to the police; people are cowards, they tremble, they scream from fear.’²⁰¹ The folk tale (*skazka*) became ‘one of the most persecuted genres in Soviet literature’.²⁰² It was accused of expressing the ideology of the ruling classes and exerting a negative influence on children’s consciences, and Krupskaja was one of its most vehement opponents.²⁰³ However, the *skazka* underwent periods of rehabilitation as well,²⁰⁴ and between 1934 and 1936 even triumphed as a children’s literary genre able to convey political meanings in an attractive way.²⁰⁵ As Kelly stresses, ‘an outcome of the promotion of the *skazka* was that children’s literature became, after 1934, the sole, though constantly

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem, p. 49.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 49–59.

²⁰⁰ Nadezhda Krupskaja, ‘O “Krokodile” Chukovskogo’, *Pravda*, 1 February 1928, the translation provided can be found in *Russian Poetry for Children*, ‘Appendix’, p. 207.

²⁰¹ Ibidem.

²⁰² ‘Creativity through Restraint’, p. 7.

²⁰³ Ibidem. It should be noted, however, that in the 1920s many voices were raised in the defence of the *skazka*. See *Children’s World*, p. 90.

²⁰⁴ *Children’s World*, pp. 99–100.

²⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 99. See also Mark Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy: Discovering the Soviet Uncanny’, in *Russian Children’s Literature and Culture*, 263–83, p. 264, for a further discussion of the way fairy tales actually could meet the needs of Socialist realism. In 1943, indeed, Pavel Bazhov’s collection of fairy tales *Malakhitovaia shkatulka* (*The Malachite Jewellery Box*) was awarded the Stalin prize (ibidem, p. 263.)

endangered, refuge of writers who wished to publish work on non-realist themes'.²⁰⁶ As a matter of fact, also before the mid-1930s, writers turned to children's literature as a sphere in which they could express themselves more freely, sometimes venting subversive political views, overlooked by the authorities.²⁰⁷

The narrative strategy by which subversive intentions were expressed behind an ideologically orthodox surface is usually defined as 'Aesopian language'. Children's literature, especially texts which were not associated with realism, such as fantasy novels or playful poetry, became one of the main fields in which this strategy was employed. According to Lev Loseff, this strategy even accounted for the shaping of children's literature as a genre.²⁰⁸ Loseff defines Aesopian language as a 'special literary system, one whose structure allows interaction between author and reader at the same time that it conceals inadmissible content from the censor'.²⁰⁹ In order to carry out this covert communication, Loseff maintains, the author of any Aesopian text intentionally uses 'screens' (elements that hide the subversive content), and 'markers' (elements that lead the reader to the actual meaning of the text).²¹⁰ Larissa Klein Tumanov defines Aesopian language as an 'anticensorship tactic [which] relied heavily on ambivalence'.²¹¹ In children's literature, the concept of

²⁰⁶ *Children's World*, p. 101.

²⁰⁷ See, for example, Nikolajeva's comments on Iurii Olesha, *Tri tolstiaka* (1924), as an allegory about the Revolution. *Russian Children's Literature Before and After Perestroika*, p. 108.

²⁰⁸ Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1984), pp. 193–4. The other genre in which, according to Loseff, this strategy (the Aesopian codification) played a crucial role is translation.

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. x.

²¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 51–2.

²¹¹ Larissa Klein Tumanov, 'Writing for a Dual Audience in the Former Soviet Union: The Aesopian Children's Literature of Kornei Chukovskii, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and Daniil Kharms', in *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children*

Aesopian language implies adults as hidden addressees, and parodic strategies as a device to maintain a 'dual orientation – toward both ambiguity and simplicity'.²¹² Klein Tumanov draws on Loseff's lexicon, referring to children's literature itself as one of these typical screens, thanks to which, during the Soviet time, some authors were able to 'mask' the actual content of their works, getting around the censor.²¹³

As Loseff himself admits, however, sometimes totally 'innocent' children's texts could be read as Aesopian,²¹⁴ and his model has sometimes been criticised by other scholars.²¹⁵ The significance of Aesopian language for my discussion, however, is not linked to the issue of whether or not children's authors actually adopted this language. Aesopian language helped shape the

and Adults, ed. by Sandra L. Beckett (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), 129–48, p. 130.

²¹² *On the Beneficence of Censorship*, pp. 193–4.

²¹³ *Writing for a Dual Audience in the Former Soviet Union*, p. 131.

²¹⁴ *On the Beneficence of Censorship*, pp. 119–21.

²¹⁵ For example, the Finnish scholar Janniliisa Salminen points out that Loseff's model implies a censor who is not as insightful as the reader to whom the ostensibly subversive message of the text is addressed. Besides, Salminen writes, Klein Tumanov's and Loseff's view of the Aesopian language in children's literature implies an author who sees child readers as representing the lowest possible level of reading comprehension. Salminen suggests that more emphasis should be put on the elements of the texts, rather than on the separation of the audience according to qualitatively different levels of perception (Janniliisa Salminen, *Fantastic in Form, Ambiguous in Content: Secondary Worlds in Soviet Children's Fantasy Fiction* (Turku: Turun Yliopisto, 2009), pp. 154–5). Mark Lipovetsky and Irina Arzamastseva also have expressed their doubts on a too rigid understanding of the Aesopian language such as the one proposed by Loseff, and they both referred to Chukovskii's *skazki*. See Mark Lipovetskii, 'Tarakanišche Stalina', in *Sovetskoe bogatstvo: Stat'i o kul'ture i kino*, ed. by Marina Balina, Evgenii Dobrenko, and Iurii Murashov (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002), 220–40. Drawing on Propp's study of the folk tale, Lipovetsky maintains that the same nature of the *skazka* encourages strategies of narrative masking, a form of play with the duality of sacralisation and teasing, superficiality and profundity. According to Lipovetsky, beyond the possible existence of covert, politically subversive, intentions, the *skazka* became a mediator between official ideology and mass consciousness, repressive regime and liberal intelligentsia, 'the abstract language of the totalitarian power and the lively language of the people whose mentality was shaped by this power' (ibidem, p. 238). Arzamastseva suggests we should go beyond the reading of Chukovskii's *skazki* as being intentionally subversive in a political sense. She maintains that, influenced by Nietzsche's thought, Chukovskii turned to forms of culture able to unleash powerful emotions, and he first and foremost found these forms of culture in children's culture and language, which included folklore to a large extent (*Vek rebenka*, pp. 211–14).

perception of children's texts which reproduced the playfulness of children's folklore, parody, bizarre reversals and humour.

The idea of Aesopian codification seems to have enhanced the status of non-realistic children's literature as a practise of truth-telling and political subversion in a time of censorship and lack of freedom. With perestroika and, later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of censorship, playful strategies remained part of a high cultural code, synonymous with truth-telling. Sometimes, although not necessarily, in association with the idea of an underlying Aesopian code, playfulness in Soviet children's literature was perceived as a form of dissidence and as '*vnutrennaia emigratsiia*' (internal emigration),²¹⁶ that is, a sphere which had allowed Soviet writers to step out of a system of values which they did not share. Moreover, Aesopian language was perceived as a way by means of which children's authors had defended their own pedagogical agency against State-sanctioned ideology and addressed this agency both at children and adults, contributing towards strengthening the link between generations. Through the Aesopian codification, in other words, children's authors had, at least supposedly, 'nurtur[ed] generations of Aesopian readers, and [...] elaborated this method of recounting tales to children in such a way that adults too were captivated, inspired, or put to shame'.²¹⁷ As Loseff highlights with specific reference to Chukovskii, children's authors had 'prepared generation after generation of future Russian readers to search out a subtext in the works which they read'.²¹⁸ When, in the 1990s, children's authors felt entitled to adopt a didactic position towards children and adults, and to re-

²¹⁶ Mikhail Iasnov, 'Vosled ukhodiashchei epokhe (Zametki o zhizni i stikakh Olega Grigor'eva)', *Detskaia literatura*, 5 (1998), 9–14, p. 10.

²¹⁷ *On the Beneficence of Censorship*, p. 198. Loseff here specifically refers to Chukovskii.

²¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

establish structures of trust which were perceived as eroded even in the sphere of personal relationships, the Aesopian tradition in children's literature represented an historical background that legitimized them in this enterprise.

2.8. Daniil Kharms and the Oberiuty

The association of playful children's texts with truth-telling and a highbrow intellectual profile was also fed by the impact that the biographic and intellectual destiny of some of these playful children's authors had on Russian culture. Daniil Kharms and the avant-garde group of writers and poets called OBERIU ('Ob"edinenie real'nogo iskusstva', 'Association for the Real Art') embody the tragedy and the productivity of this destiny in Russian children's literature. The significance of these poets and prose writers, and in particular of Daniil Kharms, is enormous for the development of the playful tradition in Russian children's literature. Due to the originality of their absurdist verses and tales as well as their tragic destinies, Kharms and the Oberiuty would become models and myths for post-Thaw and post-perestroika children's writers and critics.²¹⁹

The Oberiuty, who were, in Paul Jaccard's view, the last Russian avant-garde artists, were chosen by Steiner as a point of reference for his definition of playfulness in Soviet children's literature of the pre-Stalin years: 'a sort of enormously expanded OBERIU game'.²²⁰ The group formed in 1926, and in 1927 took part in many public events. Kharms and other Oberiuty started writing for the children's magazine *Ezh* (an acronym for *Ezhemesiachnyi Zhurnal*,

²¹⁹ See, for example, A. Gerasimova, 'On tak i ostalsia rebenkom', *Detskaia literatura*, 4 (1988), 32–5; Anatolii Aleksin, 'Daniil Kharms: Stikhotvoreniia', *Detskaia literatura*, 4 (1989), p. 73; the collection of children's short stories by Valerii Ron'shin, *Zdravstvuite, Gospodin Kharms!* (St Petersburg: IMA- Press, 1993), or 'Vosled ukhodiashchei epokhe', in which Mikhail Iasnov discusses the influence of Kharms in the work of Oleg Grigor'ev.

²²⁰ *Stories for Little Comrades*, p. 11.

Monthly Magazine, 1928–1935) in 1928.²²¹ Later on, in 1930, they started collaborating with the children's magazine *Chizh* (an acronym for *Chrezvychno interesnyi zhurnal*, *Extremely Interesting Magazine*, 1930–1941).²²² For these artists, writing for children was their only possibility to publish and make a living.²²³ Daniil Kharms and his fellow poets of the OBERIU, indeed, wrote poetry whose style was at odds with the aesthetics of a time in which Socialist Realism was soon to be proclaimed.

Sara Pankenier, however, argues that children's literature was actually akin to the poetics of the OBERIU, which was rooted in an ideal of play as openness and renewal. Elena Sokol also remarks that '[The Oberiuty's] vision of the world prominently includes the myriad incongruities that adults are conditioned to overlook, filter out, repress'.²²⁴ The manifesto with which the OBERIU group introduced itself in 1928 best describes these authors' texts for adults and children:

We are poets of a new world view and of a new art. We are not only creators of a poetic language, but also founders of a new feeling for life and its objects. Our will to create is universal. It spans all genres of art and penetrates life, grasping it from all sides. [...] We, people who are real and concrete to the marrow of our bones, are the first of those who castrate the world and make it into a powerless and senseless mongrel. In our work we broaden the meaning of the object and of the word, but we do not destroy it in any way. The concrete object, once its literary and everyday skin is peeled away, becomes a property of art. In poetry the collisions of verbal meanings express that object with the exactness of mechanical technology...
Art has a logic of its own, and it does not destroy the object but helps us to know it.²²⁵

²²¹ Daniil Kharms, p. 236. This probably happened on Marshak's suggestion. Elena Sokol reports that as a matter of fact Shvarts and Oleinikov invited them after attending a reading of the OBERIU, but 'very likely under Marshak's urging'. *Russian Poetry for Children*, p. 125.

²²² Daniil Kharms, p. 256.

²²³ In Jean-Philippe Jaccard, *Daniil Harms et la Fin de l'Avant-garde Russe* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 492, we read: 'et il convient d'insister là-dessus, Harms collaborait à Detgiz pour ne pas mourir de faim.'

²²⁴ Sokol, *Russian Poetry*, p. 126.

²²⁵ 'The Oberiu Manifesto', in George Gibian, *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 193–202 (p. 195).

In these words we can find that openness to incongruities that Chukovskii, in *From Two to Five*, considered essential in children's approach to the world. Kharm's and the Oberiuty's poetics was centred on the idea of seeing things 'with naked eyes',²²⁶ as if for the first time. As Jean-Philippe Jaccard observes, the notion of absurd presupposes the fracturing of the world, while the Oberiuty's absurdist poetry and prose aimed above all to broaden the 'meaning of the object and of the word'.²²⁷ Jaccard identifies a feature of Kharm's literary playfulness that was employed only in his work for children: the effect called *kaleidoskopichnost'* ('kaleidoscopicity').²²⁸ This is obtained by forging new and unexpected associations between words one of which remains the same, and acquires new meanings or gives birth to new images time after time.²²⁹

In the work of Kharm's and of his fellow members of the OBERIU, play amounts to the reconfiguration of the relation of signifier and signified at the lexical level as well as on the one of the plot. For example, in the tale '*Uchitel' geografii*' ('The Geography Teacher', 1928) written by Nikolai Oleinikov – a member of the OBERIU – and published in *Ezh* in 1928, Ivan Ivanovich, a geography teacher, falls asleep and wakes up only ten years later. Russia has changed completely since 1918, and the teacher tries to overcome his bewilderment with the aid of a doctor. As Valerii Shubinskii points out, the

²²⁶ 'The Oberiu Manifesto', p. 196.

²²⁷ Jean-Philippe Jaccard, 'Daniil Kharm's in the Context of Russian and European Literature of the Absurd', *Daniil Kharm's and the Poetics of the Absurd. Essays and Materials*, ed. by Neil Cornwell (New York: St. Martin's Press 1991), pp. 49–70 (p. 55).

²²⁸ *Daniil Harms et la fin de l'avant-garde russe*, p. 29.

²²⁹ In children's poems such as *Ivan Ivanich Samovar*, which appeared in the first number of the magazine *Ezh* in 1928, we find some examples of this narrative device.

dialogue between Ivan Ivanovich and the doctor at lunch is a piece typical of the OBERIU absurdist spirit:²³⁰

Когда посадили суп, Иван Иванович спросил:
 — Что это такое?
 — Суп!
 Иван Иванович обрадовался.
 — Суп? — переспросил он. Так и называется – суп?
 — А то как же иначе? — удивился я.
 — Я думал, — сказал Иван Иванович, — что у вас все называется по-новому.
 Так вы говорите, это суп?
 — Да. Суп.
 — А это салфетка?
 — Да, салфетка.
 — А это ложка?
 — Да, ложка.
 — А как вы думаете, сказал Иван Иванович, — дадут мне теперь какое-нибудь место? Ну, скажем, почтальона?
 — Отчего же, — сказал я. Но для этого вам надо основательно изучить названия городов и улиц.
 — Постараюсь, — сказал Иван Иванович.
 И начал грустно есть суп.²³¹

In this tale with an absurdist plot a sense of disruption is paradoxically conveyed on the lexical level by strengthening the common relation between a signifier and a signified: soup is soup, a spoon is a spoon.²³²

²³⁰ We find this spirit in the short tales written by the contemporary Russian children's author Artur Givargizov, whose work draws inspiration from the OBERIU. See Chapter Four of this thesis for a discussion of his work.

²³¹ 'When soup was served, Ivan Ivanovich asked: 'What is it?'

'It's a soup!'

Ivan Ivanovich was pleased.

'Soup?' he asked again. 'Is that what you called it, soup?'

'How else should we call it?' I replied surprised.

'I thought' said Ivan Ivanovich, 'that here everything had a new name. Is that how you call it, this is a soup, right?'

'Yes. Soup.'

'And this is a serviette?'

'Yes, a serviette.'

And this is a spoon?'

'Yes, a spoon.'

'What do you think' said Ivan Ivanovich, 'Will I ever get any job? Well, for example, as a postman?'

'Of course!' I said. 'But for that first of all you need to learn the names of towns and of streets.'

'I'll try to', said Ivan Ivanovich.

And sadly started to eat his soup.'

Nikolai Oleinikov, 'Uchitel' geografii' quoted in *Daniil Kharms: Zhizn' cheloveka na vetru*, pp. 254–5.

There is another aspect of the Oberiuty, and in particular of Kharms's absurdist work, which is particularly relevant for the subsequent development of playfulness in Russian children's literature, and which Sara Pankenier discusses thoroughly. She observes that, in Kharms's work, play and children's lore do not only represent an aesthetics able to renew objects, 'once [their] literary and everyday skin is peeled away'.²³³ In the infantile aesthetics of the Oberiuty, Pankenier maintains, 'the infant/child also serves as a symbolic victim with the potential to reveal the ethical and existential implications of the text'.²³⁴ In contrast to Bergson's claim that 'laughter has no greater foe than emotion',²³⁵ Pankenier observes that laughter has ethical implications and thus an emotional appeal, which Kharms expressed by drawing inspiration from children's logic and lore.²³⁶ In a fragment called *Incubation period* (1935), for example, the narrative 'I' reports his memories as an infant in the incubator.²³⁷ As Pankenier observes, this short text 'evokes an image of a self-aware homunculus held captive in an incubator, or an adult mind in an infant body'.²³⁸ This and other texts written by Kharms reveal elements of dark humour which involve the child's understanding of the world and his body and, Pankenier underlines, appear to be modelled on children's lore itself, which is full of violence and death. She points out that the comic cruelty of Kharms's absurdist prose exposes comic embarrassment, by means of which, as Freud claims, 'we feel

²³² The employment of an Aesopian code here is evident: the tale is mocking the Soviet project of transformation of society and man.

²³³ 'The Oberiu Manifesto', p. 196.

²³⁴ *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 298.

²³⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), p.10.

²³⁶ *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 298.

²³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 295.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 296.

again the helplessness of the child'.²³⁹ The following excerpt from the tale

'Starukha' ('The Old Woman') is an example of Kharms' s dark humour:

С улицы слышен противный крик мальчишек. Я лежу и выдумываю им казнь. Больше всего мне нравится напустить на них столбняк, чтобы они вдруг перестали двигаться. Родители растаскивают их по домам. Они лежат в своих кроватках и не могут даже есть, потому что у них не открываются рты. Их питают искусственно. Через неделю столбняк проходит, но дети так слабы, что еще целый месяц должны пролежать в постелях. Потом они начинают постепенно выздоравливать, но я напускаю на них второй столбняк, и они все околевают.²⁴⁰

Even Kharms's declared distaste for children,²⁴¹ Pankenier maintains, is actually a provocation which employs children's lore and deconstructs the cult of childhood fed by the writings of Tolstoi and further supported by the Russian avant-garde movements.²⁴² While mocking Tolstoi, and his fairy tale full of moral messages,²⁴³ while deconstructing childhood, Kharms actually finds comic licence in the marginal condition of childhood.

Kharms wrote children's verse between 1928 and 1938. He was arrested, for the third time, in 1941 and died in a psychiatric hospital a few months later. His fellow OBERIU writers, Oleinikov and Aleksandr Vvedenskii also died in prison after being arrested in 1941. Kharms's works for children, with few exceptions, were not as popular as those by Chukovskii, Marshak or

²³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (Translated by A. A. Brill, London: Routledge, 1999), p. 367, quoted in *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 297.

²⁴⁰ 'Disgusting noises made by boys are coming in from the street. I lie and think up punishment for them. What I like best of all is to give them tetanus paralysis so they will stop moving. Their parents drag them to their houses. They lie in their beds and can't even eat, because their mouths will not open. They are fed artificially. The paralysis goes away after a week, but they are so weak that they have to stay in bed for a whole month more. Then they gradually begin to get better, but I give them tetanus a second time, and they die.' Daniil Kharms, *Starukha*, <http://lib.ru/HARMS/staruha.txt> [on 10 May 2013]. English translation by George Gibian, 'The Old Woman', in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, pp. 86–115 (p. 87).

²⁴¹ Kharms is the author of statements such as 'It is cruel to poison children. And yet, something should be done with them.' Furthermore, between 1927 and 1928, those who visited Kharms's room could see a drawing of a house with the following label: 'Here children are killed'. In this regard, see *Daniil Kharms: Zhizn' cheloveka na vetru*, p. 235.

²⁴² *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 303.

²⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 303; 305.

Maiakovskii, and they were forbidden from the late 1930s until the Thaw.²⁴⁴ From that time, however, they become one of the symbols of the marginalization of the Soviet intellectual and artist, and of the repression of individual expression during Stalinism.

2.9. Playfulness under Stalinism: ‘Life Has Become More Joyful, Comrades!’

As the tragic destiny of the Oberiuty exemplifies, under Stalinism, the task of reshaping society and the world could not be tolerated any longer as a creative game, that is to say, in the multiform expressions of the avant-garde, and needed to be transformed into something much more regulated and controlled. Progressively, the state employed the physical suppression of those who were not, or would not become, aligned to this new order. It was the State which would manage playfulness and laughter now. As Piretto and Dobrenko point out, fairs, parks and exhibitions were the expression of a ‘Stalinist carnival’ in which the Soviet people experienced the illusion of an upside-down life, a faked Dionysian chaos where every-day life could be forgotten.²⁴⁵ In the Stalinist park ‘the present was experienced as if it were the future [...] in the belief in the goodness and the authenticity of that illusory world’.²⁴⁶ Dobrenko remarks that

The popular culture of laughter survives under the most unfavorable conditions, under any ideological stamp of seriousness of authority, but it is powerless when faced with a laughing authority. And from this begins the symbiosis which engenders the unique phenomenon of a laughing ideology, a laughing state, and laughing authorities. The laughter of authority is so radical that it is practically impossible to separate it from the laughing masses.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that Chukovskii praises Kharms as a children’s writer in the second edition of *Malen’kie deti*, published in 1929. See *Daniil Kharms: Zhizn’ cheloveka na vetru*, p. 264.

²⁴⁵ *Il radioso avvenire*, pp. 140–5.

²⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 96. See pp. 94–6 for a further discussion about this topic.

²⁴⁷ E. Dobrenko, ‘Soviet Comedy Film; or, the Carnival of Authority’, *Discourse XVII*- 3 (1995), 49-57, p. 52. See also, by the same author, ‘The Singing Masses and the

Thus satire and literary humour became delicate issues during Stalinism, because their employment in literature left no space for individual laughter, and for the reversal of values that the masses had to identify with. As Yurii Leving observes, this status of laughter during Stalinism is demonstrated by Marshak's article 'O bol'shoi literature dlia detei' ('On Great Literature for Children', 1934),²⁴⁸ in which he struggled to defend satire and humour as valuable educating tools, and, in Leving's words, 'cautiously called for an expansion of the limits of what was considered acceptable at the time'.²⁴⁹

In 1937, the journal *Detskaia literatura* (*Children's Literature*) opened a debate on humour and children's books which is telling of the transformation which the concept of playfulness went through in children's literature at this time. The children's author Leonid Panteleev (Aleksei Ivanovich Eremeev) took part in this debate with an article entitled 'Iumor i geroichestvo v detskoj knige' ('Humour and Heroism in the Children's Book').²⁵⁰ Here, Panteleev states that 'humour instils in people humanity' ('iumor pridaet cheloveku chelovechnost'), and that comic moments and heroic deeds should be described as a duality which is part of everyday life, and which is commonly present in oral folk

Laughing State in the Musical Comedy of the Stalinist 1930s: The Problem of 'Popular Spirit in Socialist Realist Aesthetics', in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. by Lesley Milne (London: Anthem Press, 2004), pp. 131–46.

²⁴⁸ Samuil Marshak's essay 'O bol'shoi literature dlia malen'kikh' first appeared in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 41 (20 August 1934), but he author published a new, expanded version in 1957. This version can be found at <<http://s-marshak.ru/works/prose/prose06.htm>> [accessed 10 May 2013].

²⁴⁹ Yuri Leving, 'Mr. Twister in the Land of the Bolsheviks: Sketching Laughter in Marshak's Poem', *Slavic Review*, 70, 2 (Summer 2011), 279–306, p. 281. On the status of laughter in Soviet official culture, see also Serguei Alex. Oushakine, 'Laughter under Socialism: Exposing the Ocular in Soviet Jocularities', *Slavic Review*, 70, 2 (Summer 2011), 247–45.

²⁵⁰ L. Panteleev, 'Iumor i geroichestvo v detskoj knige', *Detskaia literatura*, 5 (1937), 36–41. The article was accessed through the electronic library of the State Children's Library of Moscow <<http://www.rqdb.ru/>> the access was possible thanks to the staff's help.

culture.²⁵¹ These words represent a reshaping of the link between playfulness, folklore and the realm of childhood and of their direct access to fundamental truths.

These truths, substantiated in the notion of *chelovechnost'*, were no longer associated with ideals of the child at play as primitive. It is possible to understand what Panteleev meant by *chelovechnost'*, and in what way could laughter inspire it in children, by focusing on his tale 'Chestnoe slovo' ('Upon my Word', 1941). This tale does not only reveal the function which official children's literature attributed to laughter during Stalinism, but also a specific conceptualization of play. The adult narrator meets a child who cries, alone, in a public garden of Leningrad, when darkness has already fallen. Only after repeated questions, followed by bizarre answers, does the narrator understand what has happened. It all started with a game: many hours earlier, a group of elder children had asked the child to play war, and to defend an ammunition dump. After receiving the child's word that he would attend to his task, the children disappeared, but because of the promise, the young sentinel cannot go home, even if he understands he has been forgotten. The 'humour' and the 'heroism' of the situation are stressed by a comment of the narrator:

Я уже хотел засмеяться, но потом спохватился и подумал, что смешного тут ничего нет и что мальчик совершенно прав. Если дал честное слово, так надо стоять, что бы ни случилось - хоть лопни. А игра это или не игра – все равно.²⁵²

If the tale has some comic component, this is at the expense of the child character, who is actually experiencing physical (it is very late, and he is

²⁵¹ Ibidem.

²⁵² 'I was about to burst into laughter, but then I realized that there was nothing to laugh about, and that the child was absolutely right. Once you have given your word, then you have to stay and watch, whatever may happen, at all costs. Game or no game— it doesn't matter.' L. Panteleev, 'Chestnoe slovo', in L. Panteleev, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, (Leningrad: Detskaia literatura, 1984) <<http://www.lib.ru/RUSSLIT/PANTELEEV/cheslovo.txt>> [accessed 10 May 2013].

hungry) and inner suffering. Child readers are supposed to be amused by the child hero's naive determination to keep to his word. At the same time, they should learn from his radical devotion to moral values. Furthermore, it should be noted that, while merging the comic and the heroic spheres together, the tale abolishes the boundary between play and life, but in a direction opposite to that of the avant-garde. If Cubo-Futurists or the OBERIU transformed life into a play, it is play that now inherits the laws of life, becomes life. This notion is not completely extraneous to playful children's authors of the 1990s. In some cases, they appear to conceive the exploration of life as a harsh game, implying violence and sacrifice, but which has to be played.²⁵³

'Upon my word' followed the publication of one of the most beloved novels of the Soviet time, Arsenii Gaidar's *Timur and His Team* (1940). There are substantial affinities between the two children's texts: they link heroism, play and self-sacrifice to one another. In *Timur and His Team*, however, play is not only a test of individual capacity to keep faith to one's sense of duty, but children's way to defend human values such as mutual help and compassion in a time of violence and desperation. Chukovskii's ideal of the child's play as an independent mechanism of understanding and empathy only partly mediated by adults ('summarised in the formula 'sharing worries, sorrow, and happiness') is here transformed into a vision of children's play as an island of humanity. The idea of the playing child who takes upon his or her shoulders the chaos, including the sorrow, of the world and remains untouched reaches here its apotheosis.

In Gaidar's novel, Timur is the leader of a group of children who protect people from child hooligans in a country village, and help whoever is in need,

²⁵³ In particular, I am referring to Andrei Usachev's *Umnaia sobachka Sonia*, and Grigorii Oster's *Vrednye sovety*.

especially families of the Red Army soldiers: elderly mothers, young wives and children. Vasia Vasil'chikov, the child hero of *The Crocodile*, was also the saviour of the community, but Timur differs from Chukovskii's character in his emotionality and capacity for empathy.²⁵⁴ From this point of view, Timur rather embodies the child implied reader of Chukovskii, the playful *strastoterpets* who is able to 'share worries, sorrow, and happiness'. It is vital to bear in mind that Gaidar's hero refers to his actions in support of the others as 'playing'.²⁵⁵ That this is a new game, unknown to the elder generation, becomes clear during a dialogue between Timur and his uncle, who does not understand his nephew's behaviour:

—Дядя, — остановил его Тимур, — а когда вы были мальчишкой, что вы делали? Как вы играли?
 — Мы?... Мы бегали, скакали, лазили по крышам, бывало, что и дрались. Но наши игры были просты и всем понятны.²⁵⁶

Because of the children's total commitment to the community's good, Evgenii Dobrenko defines this novel as the archetypal text of Socialist Realism in children's literature, 'comparable to Gor'ki's *Mother* for adults'.²⁵⁷ In Dobrenko's view, Gaidar was able to 'blend the violence that saturated the very air of the 1930s into infantile discourse, into play, into children's self-initiated activities'.²⁵⁸ Timur and his friends' games are, Dobrenko maintains, a literary representation of the pedagogic ideas of Anton Makarenko, who in his *Pedagogicheskaiia poema (Pedagogical Poem, 1933)*, told of the establishment

²⁵⁴ My discussion of *Timur i ego komanda* draws on Oksana Lushchevska's unpublished paper 'Soviet Children's Literature: Reconstructing Russian Classics', presented at the ChLA conference in Boston on 15 June 2012.

²⁵⁵ Arkadii Gaidar, *Timur i ego komanda* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1965), p. 98.

²⁵⁶ — Uncle, — Timur stopped him, — what did you do were you were a kid? How did you play?

— Us?... We run, climb on roofs, now and then we tangled with each other. But our games were simple and everybody understood them'. Ibidem, p. 91.

²⁵⁷ Evgenii Dobrenko, "The Entire Real World of Children": The School Tale and "Our Happy Childhood", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 49, 2 (2005), 225–48, p. 226.

²⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 230.

of the Dzerzhinskii Commune for homeless children (*besprizorniki*) and supported the idea of violence as an educative tool when the collective and the organs of the collective had not been created yet. According to Dobrenko, Gaidar introduced the concept of the 'self-generation (*samozarozhdenie*) of the organization of children through play'.²⁵⁹ In other words, through this novel, Gaidar supposedly showed children who were free, but who had interiorized discipline, and adhered to it consciously. The State, Dobrenko continues, had appropriated infantile consciousness, and 'violence went from being visible to invisible'.²⁶⁰

And yet violence, meant not as political oppression, but as the horrors of war, is visible in Gaidar's novel. I suggest that *Timur and His Team* should be understood not only in the context of the need to inculcate collective values, but also as adults' response to ideological and physical violence. Violence as a foundation of the Soviet State had become tangible in the vision of millions of children abandoned and reduced to 'total destitution and want' following civil War, the First World War and the Famine Along the Volga.²⁶¹ As Balina points out, these children, until a decade earlier to the publication of Gaidar's novel, were an opportunity, and even 'a much desired raw material, as it were, a human *tabula rasa* on which the Soviet government could write its glorious and

²⁵⁹ Ibidem.

²⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 232.

²⁶¹ As Catriona Kelly demonstrates, between 1921 and 1922 the 1.5 million children receiving food aid constituted barely a tenth of those actually requiring help (*Children's World*, p. 193). As late as 1930, it is estimated that over 200,000 abandoned children lived alone in Russia. Masses of children occupied Moscow and St Petersburg squares and rail stations, sleeping under bridges and hiding in abandoned houses, the prey of criminals who exploited them, and people reacted with a mixture of fear and pity towards them. See Allan M. Ball, *And Now My Soul Is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1928–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 16, quoted in Marina Balina, "'It's Grand to be an Orphan!": Crafting the Happy Citizens in Soviet Children's Literature of the 1920s', in *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style*, ed. by Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko (London, New York, Delhi: Anthem Press: 2009), pp. 99–114 (pp.101–02).

happy future'.²⁶² However, the Soviet State had to admit that this tragedy was not inherited from the Tsarist past, but rooted in the present. Since then, it was only during the perestroika period that a clear debate emerged about the sufferings of Soviet children. Then, I maintain, many children's authors responded to the shocking revelation of children's sorrow by turning play into children's natural defence against adults' violence. Also then, by virtue of this natural defence, children were supposed to bear the burden of adults' sorrow, and to relieve it by becoming figures of redemption. Gaidar's novel, in my analysis, represents the expression of an important passage towards the development of this approach to children's play and playfulness in the 1990s.

In Gaidar's novel, Timur and his friends have interiorized not only ideology, as Dobrenko states, but an absolute *pietas*, a capacity for compassion which makes them emotionally vulnerable, and yet destined for victory. Timur, in particular, the chief of this group of children whose favourite game is to save the world, suffers for being constantly misunderstood by various members of the community, who takes him for a hooligan. In his capacity to endure suffering and alleviate other people's sorrow, Timur is a Christ-like figure, an image highlighted in the episode when Zhenia, a young girl who will soon become a member of 'the team', has just been helped by a mysterious Timur. When she asks her elder sister, Ol'ga, whether God exists, and having received a negative reply, she carries on asking who Timur is.²⁶³ At this point in the novel, Timur has not appeared as a character yet, and this dialogue between Zhenia and Ol'ga

²⁶² Ibidem, p. 103.

²⁶³ *Timur i ego komanda*, p. 19. Marietta Chudakova points out that this dialogue about the existence of God is the only passage of Soviet literature between 1930s and 1940s in which this theme is addressed. Marietta Chudakova, 'Doch' komandira i kapitanskaia dochka: K 100-letiu so dnia rozhdeniia Arkadiia Gaidara.' *Russkii zhurnal*, 22 January 2004 <http://old.russ.ru/culture/literature/20040122_mch.html> [accessed 7 May 2013]. On the other hand, we should not forget that Socialist Realist heroes could have Christ-like features. See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 120.

introduces Timur as a terrestrial god, or, more specifically, Christ returned back to earth. However, Timur distances himself from the Christ-like figure in that, through his infinite *pietas* and enduring, he does not die, but rather triumphs in a happy ending. In the character of Timur, the glorification of Socialist collectivism, on which Dobrenko puts emphasis, merges with the need to respond to collective suffering and violence, which had been the price adults and children had been, and were being, asked to pay for the establishment of collectivism. Thus Gaidar's novel is not only the prototype of the Socialist Realist novel for children but also the response of the adult world to a society founded on violence.²⁶⁴ Children, who had been defenceless victims of the foundation of this society, become its figures of redemption. *Timur and his Team* was published as a novel and made into a movie in 1940, and the success of both was enormous. The Central Committee of the Komsomol and the Central Radio organized a 'Timur Movement' (the famous *Timurovtsy*), and millions of Soviet children joined it.²⁶⁵ The novel remained a children's favourite in the 1990s and beyond,²⁶⁶ becoming part and parcel of adults' representation of the child in Russia.²⁶⁷ In the interpretation of *Timur and His Team* which I suggest above, this novel ultimately expresses adults' need for a space in which they could find a balance between the obligation to respect ideology and that to express individual experiences and perceptions. The concept of children's play seems to allow this form of cultural mediation.

²⁶⁴ For the relationship between Socialist Realism and violence, see Evgeny Dobrenko, 'Nadzirat' — nakazyvat' — nadzirat': Sotsrealizm kak pribavochnyi produkt nasillia', in *Revue des études slaves*, 73.4 (2001), 667–712, especially pp. 692–711, in which Dobrenko addresses the issue of Soviet pedagogy, with special emphasis on Makarenko.

²⁶⁵ "The Entire Real World of Children", p. 232. The film was directed by Aleksandr Razumnyi.

²⁶⁶ *Children's World*, p. 461.

²⁶⁷ In chapter four of this thesis, I will discuss how the influence of Gaidar's novel is still very strong in Russian children's literature of the 2000s.

A second development of play in children's literature of the Stalin period to which I would like to draw attention sees also the rise of the trickster as a figure strongly associated with play, and which embodies another form of cultural mediation between individual expression and collective values. Aleksei Tolstoi's *Zolotoi kliuchik, ili Prikliucheniiia Buratino* (*The Golden Key, or The Adventures of Buratino*, 1936) features the image of the trickster, which is crucial for my reading of Russian playful children's literature in the 2000s.²⁶⁸

The *Golden Key* was an adaptation of Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 1881). It became a theatre play in 1938 and a film in 1939. Tolstoi's version of *Pinocchio* is strongly ideologised: Buratino leads his friends towards a dreamland which corresponds to Soviet Russia, in which the poor find happiness and the end of exploitation.²⁶⁹ Nonetheless, in his analysis of the whole 'project Buratino' (that is, of the book, the theatre play and the cinema script), Lipovetsky detects the existence of a counter utopia in Tolstoi's version of *Le avventure di Pinocchio*: 'the utopia of the free puppet'.²⁷⁰ Buratino lies freely, for pleasure, and his lying is the art of story-telling itself, which is play, the element at the heart of any 'mischief, pranks, tall tales [*nebylitsy*] and adventures'.²⁷¹ While Collodi's Pinocchio longs to be a human being, in *The Golden Key* there is no separation between people

²⁶⁸ The origins of the figure of trickster are examined in chapter four.

²⁶⁹ Marina Balina, 'Introduction', in *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales*, ed. by Marina Balina, Helena Goscilo, and Mark Lipovetsky (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005), pp. 105–21 (p. 11).

²⁷⁰ M. Lipovetskii, 'Buratino: Utopiia svobodnoi marionetki', in *Veselye chelovechki*, ed. by I. Kukulin, M. Lipovetskii, M. Maiofis, pp. 125–52.

²⁷¹ Ibidem, p.129. Lipovetsky supports his argument by underlining the differences between Collodi's Pinocchio and Buratino: Pinocchio's nose gets long only when he lies, while Buratino was born with a long nose, as if lying were part of his very substance.

and puppets, because ‘the puppet is a person, and life is a game’.²⁷² According to Lipovetsky, in this way Tolstoi was seeking reconciliation between Modernism, and its ideal of art and life as free play, and Soviet culture. Buratino is the one who performs this mediation by means of his wrongdoings, by constantly crossing boundaries and disregarding rules. These features make him the perfect embodiment of the mythological trickster, in all of its metamorphoses throughout time: the Titan, the magician, the clown, or the swindler. According to Lipovetsky, by fostering this mediation, the authorial voice itself becomes a trickster who mediates between two systems of values without belonging to any of them and is not interested in truth-telling.²⁷³

Timur and Buratino represent two poles of the concept of play: play as the child’s privileged access to substantial truths (Timur), and play as the overcoming of the duality of truth and untruth, play for play’s sake (Buratino). Even if their coexistence should not be seen as specific to Soviet children’s literature,²⁷⁴ some features of Soviet society make the phenomenon of this coexistence of opposite ideals of play more significant than in other literary traditions. Since the first years of the Soviet Union, children had been seen as small adults, asked to exhibit a high degree of political awareness.²⁷⁵ Stalinism

²⁷² M. A. Chernisheva, ‘Utverzhdaia igru...(Iz tvorcheskoi istorii “Zolotogo kliuchka” A. N. Tolstogo)’, in *A. N. Tolstoi: Novye materialy i issledovaniia* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1995), p. 117, quoted in ‘Buratino: Utopiia svobodnoi marionetki’, p. 129.

²⁷³ ‘Buratino: Utopiia svobodnoi marionetki’, pp. 129; 139.

²⁷⁴ In R. Dahl’s *Matilda*, for example, we find a child who embodies the highest degree of knowledge and wisdom and of naivety at the same time. The main character is a Christ-like figure, constantly committed to helping other people, endowed with deep wisdom, culture and divine powers. On one occasion her teachers even tells her: ‘If you did that, then it is just about the greatest miracle a person has ever performed since the time of Jesus’. At the same time, Matilda and her teacher have the following dialogue: “Do you think that all children’s books ought to have funny bits in them?” Miss Honey asked.

“I do,” Matilda said. “Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh.” Roald Dahl, *Matilda* (Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1989), pp. 173; 81.

²⁷⁵ See *Children’s World*, p. 64; and Sergei Ushakin, “My v gorod izumrudnyi idem dorogoi trudnoi”, p. 20.

and the pedagogical principles expressed by Makarenko reinforced this stance.²⁷⁶ At the same time, however, the concept, or rather the imperative, of Soviet happiness, explicit in Stalin's statement 'Life has become more joyful' in 1935, had not the same value for adults and children. As Kelly outlines, during Stalin's time a binary divide separated the Soviet holiday or celebration from the ordinary days, and leisure from business. Soviet Children, instead, were not involved in this strict separation between *dosug* (leisure) and *delo* (business).²⁷⁷ Between 1934 and 1935, in songs, in the press and in official discourses, Soviet childhood became a land of never-ending joyfulness for which Stalin (and therefore the Party and the State) was thought to be directly responsible.²⁷⁸ This 'dogma', Kelly carries on, remained valid throughout the Soviet period and beyond.²⁷⁹ Therefore, throughout Stalin's time, the idea of children as raw material to be forged into perfect adults (expressed by Makarenko) coexisted with an idea of childhood as a perfect state of bliss. Behind Timur, the child who plays at saving the world, and Buratino, the puppet-child who plays for play's sake, lays the same idea of childhood as an independent state which, at least potentially, possessed all the features necessary for perfection.

2.10. The Thaw and Stagnation: 'May There Always Be Sunshine!'

The idea of the independence of childhood had an upsurge from the 1950s. The Thaw introduced a new wave of creativity and fantasy into children's literature, however, in Kelly's words, 'childhood was understood as a stage to be lived

²⁷⁶ Arkadii Nedel' points out that, during Stalin's time, 'the child cannot and must not be identified as a child, he possesses no inherent value, he only has excess value that he receives as a result of numerous symbolic additions.' Arkadii Nedel', 'Razmeshchias' v neizbeznom: Eskiz stalinskoi metafiziki detstva', *Logos* 24 (2000), 54–100, quoted in "The Entire Real World of Children", p. 228.

²⁷⁷ Catriona Kelly, 'A Joyful Soviet Childhood: Licensed Happiness for Little Ones', in *Petrified Utopia*, pp. 3–18 (p. 5).

²⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

²⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

through: less a vision of the “bright future” than a golden age set in the past’.²⁸⁰ Following the revelation of Stalin’s crimes, the relationship between childhood and the past changed from the previous decades. Children were no longer reminded of their being more fortunate than the generation of their parents, and the past was not supposed to have any relevance in children’s life experience now. As Kelly points out, this accentuated the mythic dimension of childhood, and the *skazka* acquired a new centrality in children’s literature.²⁸¹

A decisive event for the development of children’s literature, especially in regard to playfulness, was the rehabilitation of the OBERIU poets, and in particular of Daniil Kharms.²⁸² In 1962 the publisher Detskii mir (Children’s World), the editor of which was Iurii Timofeev,²⁸³ published a collection of poems by Kharms and entitled it *Igra (Play)*. During his years at Detskii mir, Timofeev encouraged new writers and illustrators to work for children recuperating the spirit of the 1920s and, as Kelly remarks, many children’s authors of these years showed a ‘zany and skittish’ character.²⁸⁴

Among the writers who renewed the playful tradition in Soviet children’s literature, Boris Zakhoder occupies a special place, for his portrayal of rebellious characters. In 1955 he published *Na zadnei parte (At the Back of the Classroom)*.²⁸⁵ In this piece of ‘comic epic’, as Elena Sokol defines Zakhoder’s poetry,²⁸⁶ we find child characters who are ‘enfants terribles’: constantly getting low marks at school and hiding from teachers by sitting at the back of the

²⁸⁰ *Children’s World*, p. 142.

²⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

²⁸² About the relevance of the re-discovery of the OBERIU poets for the circles of Moscow and Leningrad poetry, see Emily Lygo, *Leningrad Poetry 1953–1975: The Thaw Generation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 99–100.

²⁸³ He held his post from 1956 to 1964.

²⁸⁴ *Children’s World*, p. 137.

²⁸⁵ *Russian Children’s Poetry*, p. 178. See also pp. 179–81 for the discussion about this and other children’s writers of the time.

²⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 178.

classroom. This was the expression of a general downplaying of moralism in children's literature of the Thaw.²⁸⁷ In Nikolai Nosov's *Priklucheniia Neznaiki i ego druzei* (*The Adventures of Ignoramus and His Friends*, 1954²⁸⁸), the main hero lacks all the virtues which had been considered necessary in the Soviet child: Ignoramus tells lies, is lazy and untidy, and, as his name suggests, he simply knows nothing.²⁸⁹ The adaptation, and the huge success, of the works written by the Swedish children's author Astrid Lindgren, such as *Karlsson på taket* (*Karlsson-on-the-roof*, 1955, in Russian *Malysh i Karlson, kotoryi zhivet na krishe* (*The Child and Karlsson-on-the-roof*), 1957) should be seen in the light of the same disavowal of imposed values and the wish for freedom of expression.²⁹⁰

The post Stalin years were not uniquely a time of relative freedom and diminished ideological pressure. As Kelly stresses, the toy store *Detskii mir* (Children's World) faced the headquarters of the KGB, on Dzerzhinskii Square in Moscow:

The pairing of the treasure house of treats for children and the headquarters of the secret police dramatically confronted children with the alternatives to which the two extremes of possible behaviour – obedience and delinquency – might lead.²⁹¹

Chukovskii's famous poem '*Pust' vseгда budet solntse*' ('May There Always Be Sunshine' 1960)²⁹² had its counterpart in Sergei Mikhalkov's poem '*Diadia Stepa–Militsioner*' ('Uncle Stepa is a Policeman', 1954), in which the protagonist

²⁸⁷ *Children's World*, p. 138.

²⁸⁸ The translation of *Neznaika* as *Ignoramus* is proposed by Kelly in *Children's World*, p. 138.

²⁸⁹ *Children's World*, p. 138.

²⁹⁰ See *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, pp. 38–43. On the Soviet *Karlsson* as a novel and a cartoon, see Ol'ga Maiofis, 'Milyi, milyi trikster: Karlson i sovetskaia utopiia o "nastoiashchem detstve"', in *Veselye chelovechki*, ed. by I. Kukulin, M. Lipovetskii, M. Maiofis, pp. 241–275.

²⁹¹ *Children's World*, p. 144.

²⁹² The poem was published in *Literatura i zhizn'*, 14 December, 1960. See *Children's World*, p. 616, note 23.

showed his love for good children and harshly punished naughty ones.²⁹³ Thus children's literature of the Thaw shows a particularly pronounced tension between the ideal of setting the child free from impositions, on the one hand, and issues of discipline, on the other.²⁹⁴

The rejection of imposed values associated with the Stalin era that we can observe in some children's works of the period was accompanied by efforts on the part of some intellectuals to convey to children an alternative sense of national history, and therefore to give back to childhood an historical past, strengthening the continuity between generations. In Leningrad, for example, the poetry Club 'Derzanie' ('Daring'), established in 1937, organized a trip every summer, and in the 1960s these trips included stops at places linked to 'the bearers of culture that was disappearing',²⁹⁵ such as Konstantin Paustovskii's house, a visit to Marina Tsvetaeva's daughter, or to Mandel'shtam's wife.²⁹⁶ Within children's literature, the very reference to authors such as Chukovskii, Marshak, who had long been unpublished, or to the Oberiuty,²⁹⁷ can also be seen as a way of bringing childhood back to a less mythical dimension, in which great personalities of Russian cultural history showed their faithfulness to their own values.

With the return of a more rigid cultural and political climate at the end of the 1960s, we see children's mass culture becoming more strongly oriented

²⁹³ See *Children's World*, p. 144. On the cycle of poems on Diadia Stepa as the 'abecedario of Soviet civilization', see Elena Prokhorova, 'A Traditionalist in The Land of Innovators: The Paradoxes of Sergei Mikhalkov', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, pp. 285–306 (pp. 291–3).

²⁹⁴ *Children's World*, p. 142.

²⁹⁵ Elena Pudovkina, 'Klub "Derzanie"', *Pchela*, 26–7 (2000), 75–81, p. 79, quoted in *Leningrad Poetry*, p. 51.

²⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁹⁷ Emma Moshkovskaia, for example, pointed at Chukovskii, Marshak and Kharms as her main points of reference, and specified that she had discovered their works as an adult, having spent her childhood in 1930s. Zakhoder dedicated one of his topsy-turvy poems, 'Kit i kot', to Chukovskii. See *Russian Poetry for Children*, pp. 178; 183.

towards the depiction of childhood as ‘svet i radost’ (‘light and joyfulness’) than in the previous decades.²⁹⁸ As Oushakine points out, the cartoon *Katerok* (*The Small Boat*, 1970), with its famous song ‘Chunga changa’ (‘chudo-ostrov, chudo-ostrov, zhit’ na nem legko i prosto’ is the refrain)²⁹⁹ represents the epitome of this understanding of childhood.³⁰⁰ Oushakine maintains that childhood is now not simply featured as a carefree time, but as a period of collective happiness determined by age, in which children *have to* be joyful.³⁰¹ The issue of the passage from childhood to adulthood, he maintains, lost the relevance it had had throughout Soviet history. Now adulthood is seen as an unknown stage, the uncertain contours of which provoke anxiety.³⁰² In other words, with the period of Soviet history which is usually called the Stagnation, the passage towards a better stage of life was projected not onto the future, but backwards, onto childhood, to which adults struggled to return.³⁰³ Adults started seeing themselves as former children, and, as such, polluted human beings, and they doubted their capacity to show to younger generations the difference between evil and virtue. This moral disorientation can be observed in Agnia Barto’s poems ‘Poprobui dogadaisia’ (‘Try to Guess’, 1975), or ‘Ia dumal, vzroslye ne vrut...’ (‘I Thought Adults Didn’t Lie’, 1978),³⁰⁴ in which the moral authority, and even the identity, of adults is questioned. Children’s popular culture was now populated by ‘veselye chelovechki’ (‘joyful characters’) which Oushakine interprets as being hybrid figures expressing the incapacity of

²⁹⁸ “‘My v gorod izumrudnyi’”, p. 14.

²⁹⁹ ‘Marvellous island, marvellous island, it’s simple and easy to live here’.

³⁰⁰ The author of the script was Zhanna Vitentson, the director was Inessa Kovalevskaia and the author of the lyrics of the songs inserted in the cartoon was Iurii Entin.

³⁰¹ “‘My iz gorod izumrudnyi’”, p. 14. Oushakine quotes the song ‘Detstvo –eto ia’ (‘Childhood is me’), in which we find the words ‘dolzhny smeiat’sia deti’ (children have to laugh).

³⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 15. Oushakine quotes the song ‘Ty pogodi’ (1970).

³⁰³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

³⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

language to refer to a clear set of meanings.³⁰⁵ He explains this disorientation in Lacanian terms:

The rhythm of meaning breaks up. The chain of signs is disjointed. The web of relationship smashes. The symbolic order turns into a carnival.³⁰⁶

If in Marshak's *Children in a Cage* (1923), each animal was classified, and had its own cage, Cheburashka, the creature invented by Eduard Uspenskii in 1965 and which became a much loved cartoon in 1969, is not accepted at the zoo, because it does not fall into any of the known categories.³⁰⁷ According to Oushakine, Cheburashka, as much as Karlsson, especially in the cartoons which had these characters as protagonists,³⁰⁸ were monsters, the function of which is not to show the norm, as the etymology of this word would let suppose, but to reveal the impossibility for the subject to find a specific place within the existing set of classifications.³⁰⁹ For Oushakine, Cheburashka exhibits a disruption; this creature is the embodiment of a topsy-turvy world which, however, does not suggest the right relationship between signifier and signified, nor a possible new reconfiguration between the two. Cheburashka is a form of nonsense which does not express the possibility of a cultural change, like Stewart's interpretation of nonsense and play would suggest, but, rather, cultural stillness, in a word, stagnation.

Oushakine's analysis is convincing, and offers an interesting point of view for the understanding of the process which led towards the *chernukha* aesthetics at the beginning of the 1980s and the pedagogic crisis that was at its heart. If we follow Oushakine's line of thought, we can assume that, at least

³⁰⁵ Ibidem.

³⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 32.

³⁰⁷ Ibidem, pp. 26–27.

³⁰⁸ See Maria Maiofis, 'Milyi, milyi trickster: Karlson v sovetskaia utopiia o nastoiashchem detstve', in *Veselye chelovechki: Kul'turnye geroi sovetskogo detstva*, ed. by I. Kukul'in, M. Lipovetskii, M. Maiofis, pp. 241–86.

³⁰⁹ Ibidem, p. 29. The word *monster* originates from the Latin verb *monere*, to show.

from the late 1960s, those involved in the production of children's culture, including children's authors, exhibit signs of an identity crisis as adults, and this crisis provoked a renunciation of pedagogic agency, and a retirement into the 'Neverland' of Chunga-changa. The *veselye chelovechki* are inhabitants of liminality, of ambivalence, of a land which is neither dissidence nor adherence to a specific set of values.

In an essay on Oleg Grigor'ev, another author who was forced into children's literature by social and cultural circumstances, Mikhail Iasnov refers to the poet's condition of 'marginality'.³¹⁰ In the attempt to convey the sense of this marginality, Iasnov describes the poet's passage from drunkenness and exile from the adult literary environment into children's literature, then from this field into the disappearance from published literature, to fall again into drunkenness, homelessness and death.³¹¹ Grigor'ev's tragic incapacity to find his place into 'the existing set of classifications' found expression into a form of foolishness which Iasnov refers to as *chudachestvo*, 'weirdness'.³¹² Like the Cheburashka discussed by Oushakine, the *chudak* (weird fellow) follows norms of behaviour which cannot be categorised, and which the rest of the community cannot but define as strange, weird. *Chudaki*

(*Weird Fellows*, 1971), Grigor'ev's first collection of poems for children, features a variety of these eccentric figures. Iasnov inscribes *chudachestvo* into a literary tradition which originates in the 1920s, and which specifically belonged to children's literature. Indeed, Samuil Marshak's 'Vot takoi rasseiannyi' ('What an Absent-minded Fellow', 1930), Nikolai Oleinikov's 'Uchitel' geografii' ('The Geography Teacher', 1928), or Daniil Kharms's 'Iz doma vyshel chelovek' ('A

³¹⁰ 'Vo sled ukhodiashchei epokhe', p. 10.

³¹¹ Ibidem.

³¹² Ibidem, p. 13.

Man Set Out from Home', 1937) are all examples of *chudaki*. However, Marshak's poem appears to be associated with the principle of 'learning through mistakes', which informs a long tradition in children's literature.³¹³ Playful children's literature of the Thaw, discussed by Oushakine also with reference to cartoons and children's songs, seems to move away from this tradition. Iasnov further emphasises the difference between Grigor'ev's poetry of the absurd and that of previous traditions, by specifically referring to the OBERIU:

The Oberiuty brought the literary absurd to life, affirming its status as a real aesthetic category. Grigor'ev brings life to the absurd, exposing the poor [nizovuiu] aesthetics of its reality.³¹⁴

The *chudak* of late Socialism is the inhabitant of an absurd life, a hybrid living a hybrid life, rather than the promoter of absurd and play as an aesthetic category in which things can acquire a new meaning, and signified and signifiers can combine in ever new ways and enrich life, such as we find in the poetry of the OBERIU. Oushakine and Iasnov offer a neat portrayal of how playful children's culture and children's literature of late Socialism expressed a cultural Stagnation. Iasnov excludes that Grigor'ev's poems may have an ethical value, and admits that they are 'uncomfortable' in their 'cross-breed' ('*promezhutochnoi*') nature:³¹⁵ it remains unclear, he states, whether they are about 'children through the eyes of adults or adults through the eyes of children'.³¹⁶

The children's novel *Chuchelo* (*The Scarecrow*, 1981), by Vladimir Zheleznikov, can be read as an expression of this aesthetic and existential labyrinth, and at the same time as a desperate cry of 'What is to be done?'

³¹³ Marshak's 'absent-minded' *chudak*, for example, wears his trousers as if they were a shirt and so on. Samuil Marshak, *Vot takoi rasseiannyi* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1930).

³¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

³¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

³¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

addressed to society, children and adults alike. It is the story of a twelve-year-old girl named Lena Bessoltseva, who moves to an ancient small town to live with her grandfather. Far from her parents, possessing an insecure character, and wishing to be accepted in her new environment, Lena starts attending the local school, where her classmates give her the nickname of Scarecrow because of her awkward appearance. She falls in love with Dimka, the only young boy who does not treat her with hostility. Dimka seems to embody the perfect requisites of the Soviet Pioneer: kind, responsible, courageous, handsome and ready to help those who are in need, such as Lena. However, a series of circumstances turn all the categories of Soviet culture upside down, transforming the school and the playground into a hell of violence and desperation for which all the members of this community appear to be responsible.

Everything starts with a problem with class scheduling, following which the children decide to leave the school and go to the cinema. Dimka comes back to the class because he has forgotten the money the group of children had collected, but finds his teacher there, and confesses what the class's plan is. The teacher punishes the children by prohibiting them from taking part in a much desired and long-awaited trip to Moscow. The tension rises among the classmates, who are determined to discover who the betrayer is. Lena, who knows that it is Dimka who has informed the teacher, decides to protect him and states that it was she who has betrayed the class. From that time on, the children exclude her completely from the group, and start a fierce campaign of revenge made of daily insults and physical aggressions. Dimka, who was supposed to be the epitome of the Pioneer hero, remains silent.

In this novel Lena, the victim of her classmates' blind ostracism and violence, suffers not in the name of Soviet values, like so many child characters in Soviet children's literature, but because of them.³¹⁷ Indeed in their dialogues and their actions, children, and especially Mironova, called '*zheleznaia knopka*' ('iron button'), strictly adhere to the Soviet principle of devotion to the collective. Nonetheless, the novel exposes this principle in all of its inhumanity and in its capacity to suppress subjects' capacity to make individual choices and experience sensibility towards others. If *Timur and His Team* featured 'the self-generation of the organization of children through play', the games of the children of *Chuchelo*, who are left alone by parents and teachers, produce violence and sorrow, and the collapse of the community. Both Mironova's rigid adhesion to Soviet values and the mocking of Soviet slogans which is so frequent in the other schoolchildren's dialogues, appear as the codes of monsters. If Timur was a figure of redemption, *The Scarecrow* 'questions whether there is anybody left to be redeemed at all',³¹⁸ as Aleksandr Prokhorov observes, commenting on the cinematic version directed by Rolan Bykov.

Arguably, Zheleznikov's novel constitutes a central passage in the development of playfulness and of the concept of play in Russian children's literature, because it questions the notion of life and literature as free play, away from the assumption of responsibility and individual choice. In a final and unexpected outburst which takes place at school in the presence of her classmates and teacher, Mironova seems to accuse culture, the family, and the

³¹⁷ Larissa Rudova, 'From Character-Building to Criminal Pursuits', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, pp. 19–40 (p. 26).

³¹⁸ Alesandr Prokhorov, 'Arresting Development: A Brief History of Soviet Cinema for Children and Adolescents', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, pp. 129–52 (p. 146).

playground – as the children’s own space – for having allowed themselves to be turned into a meaningless ‘*chunga-changa*’:

— Все из–за нее! Из–за нее! [...] Из–за матери моей... Она считает, что каждый может жить как хочет... и делать, что хочет... И ничего ни с кого не спросится. Лишь бы все было шито–крыто!...И вы такие же! Все! Все! Такие же!...
 — Каждый свою выгоду ищет! — радостно крикнул Валька. — Что, неправда?³¹⁹

The Scarecrow and the examples of children’s literature written during the Stagnation I discussed above share the same ‘strong sense of lethargy, even despair’,³²⁰ as Elena Sokol ascribes to the cultural climate of the Stagnation. Mironova’s words are a recognition of the underlying despair behind the utopia of the *chunga changa* and its reversal, the blind adherence to the Soviet system of values in search of a stable web of meanings in which subjects can find their place, their category, even if this category is bestial. ‘My detki iz kletki’, one of the pupils states with a gloomy tone, after Mironova’s speech, echoing Marshak’s notorious children’s book, ‘[...] Nas nado v zverintse pokazivat’... Za den’gi’.³²¹

The Scarecrow is reminiscent of Dostoevskii’s works, and of their central idea: ‘If God does not exist, than everything is permitted’. Zheleznikov’s novel does not make a religious point, but expands this idea by asking the audience whether, in Soviet society, one can still find resources for the reconstruction of a new humanism. *The Scarecrow* provides an answer in the final gesture of Lena’s grandfather. Throughout his life, he had collected the paintings made by

³¹⁹ ‘All because of her, because of her! Because of my mother... She thinks that everyone can live as he wishes to... and do whatever he wants. Without asking anything from anybody. What is important is that nobody finds out!... And you are like her! All of you! All of you! Just like her!...’

‘Everyone looks for his own benefit’. Val’ka joyfully cried out, ‘What, isn’t that true?’ Vladimir Zheleznikov, *Chuchelo* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1981), <http://www.litmir.net/bd/?b=30869> [accessed 10 June 2013].

³²⁰ *Russian Poetry for Children*, p. 205.

³²¹ ‘We are cubs from the cages. [...] We should be shown at the zoo... For money’. *Chuchelo*, <http://www.litmir.net/bd/?b=30869> [accessed 10 June 2013].

his own grandfather, a former serf. Many of these paintings are portraits of the members of the Bessol'tsev family: peasants, but also a teacher in the same school attended by Lena, and a doctor killed by fascists. The pictures hang on the wall of his house, and provide him with a strong sense of belonging. Eventually, before leaving with Lena, he gives his own house and the collection of paintings to the town, for it to become a public museum. Thus the novel suggests that a starting-over is possible by returning to Russian cultural heritage and history, and bringing generations together in a re-evaluation of the culture and the life experience of the earlier generations.

The Scarecrow reached a very wide audience thanks to the film based on the novel and directed by Rolan Bykov in 1983. It shocked Russian society at large and became the starting point for discussions which included parents, teachers, and children.³²² I maintain that playful children's literature of the 1990s constitutes an attempt to find a reply to the same questions posed by *The Scarecrow*: what can be done to counteract the 'everything is permitted' mindset, and what are the resources on which society should draw in order to re-join generations together? Soviet underground humour will become an important tool for 'instilling humanity in people', to use Panteleev's words. However, by assuming a pedagogical role through humour and transforming themselves into 'pedagogical fools', many children's authors of the 1990s were forced to ask themselves what their own *chelovechnost'* (humanity) consisted of. In spite of the last note of hope that we find in *The Scarecrow*, both the novel and film exposed a huge problem for those who were responsible for the care of

³²² Nancy P. Condee and Vladimir Padunov, 'Children at War: Films by Gubenko, Evtushenko and Bykov', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 30/31 (1986), 16–34, p. 28. See also 'Russian Children's Literature Before and After Perestroika', p. 108.

the younger generations. As Nancy P. Condee and Vladimir Padunov explain, in *The Scarecrow*:

the children reproduce in the isolation of their own gang a mentality and behaviour patterns strikingly reminiscent of the Stalinist period, complete with community ostracism, false confession, denunciation, purge, moral passivity, and lack of individual courage.³²³

In other words, they seem to have inherited and to have reproduced in their microcosm the features of the past generations, in a chain reaction which has violence and tyranny as the only real generational bonds.

In the same years in which *The Scarecrow* appeared as a novel and a film, mainstream culture saw the rise of the phenomenon known as *chernukha*: plays, novels and films with highly violent content and young protagonists with no values.³²⁴ While other scholars have discussed *chernukha* mostly in aesthetic terms,³²⁵ Eliot Borenstein highlights that it was motivated by social, and especially pedagogical, concerns. ‘Viewers and readers’, Borenstein maintains, ‘their eyes opened to the suffering that surrounded them, were supposed to take a renewed interest in social action’. *Chernukha*, in Borenstein’s analysis, was rooted in the idea of the social function of art.³²⁶ Nonetheless, these films and literary works exposed the social bleakness and

³²³ ‘Children at War’, p. 30.

³²⁴ One of the first examples of this aesthetic was Liudmila Razumovskaia’s play *Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna*, written in 1980 and staged for the first time in 1982. See Robert Russell, ‘The Tragic Vision of Liudmila Razumovskaia’, *The Slavic and East European Review*, 71, 4 (October 1993), 656–675, p. 657. The play became a film directed by El’dar Riazanov in 1988. In the field of cinema, another typical representative of the *chernukha* aesthetics was *Malen’kaia Vera*, directed by Vasiliï Pichul in 1988.

³²⁵ See, for example, Seth Graham, ‘*Chernukha* and Russian Film’, *Studies in Slavic Cultures*, 1 (2000), 9–27.

³²⁶ See Andrei Zorin, ‘Kruche, kruche, kruche... Istoriiia pobedy: Chernukha v kul’ture poslednykh let’, *Znamia*, 10 (1992), 198–204 (p. 202), in which it is stated that these writers and filmmakers wanted to heal the country through their works. In his discussion of *chernukha*, Borenstein draws on Zorin’s essay. Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky support this analysis of *chernukha* as being driven by moral intentions during perestroika. See Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), p. 37.

the country's suffering without offering a solution. As Borenstein cogently observes,

in its zeal to expose, [*chernukha*] quickly subverted even the humanist impulse that helped spawn it. [...] With its unapologetic pessimism as a counterpoint to earlier official Soviet optimism, *chernukha* skewered the old Soviet myths of cultural achievement and radiant future, not through the pointed political satire of earlier critics of the regime [...] but through a preponderance of counterevidence.³²⁷

With its 'confessional spirit' which was typical of perestroika, *chernukha* was overly negative, and eventually ended up in a blind alley for the adult's pedagogical agency, a blind alley which was already visible in *The Scarecrow*. The ultimate Truth, with capital T, that these authors tried to convey with their moral crusade consisted of the ubiquitousness of violence, and the idea that adults had infected young generations and perpetuated violence.

The children's texts I will discuss in the following chapters, and which turn to the concept of play as a way of conveying to children a set of values different from the Soviet, cannot evade the issue of this chain reaction, and of the possibility of being themselves a damaged generation, thus unable to give birth to a new pedagogy without being themselves agents of violence and tyranny.

Conclusions

Ideas of childhood, both from a European context and specific to Russian culture, have progressively constructed an image of the child as the centre of intense passions, seen with admiration as a source of creativity and bliss, but also with concern, as a possible threat to the social order. The development of the concept of children's play in Russia has been strongly influenced by the mythologization of children's creativity and 'primitive' soul, as well as by fears

³²⁷ *Overkill*, p. 17.

about the child's autonomy. Russian children's writers have approached playfulness and children's play with conflicting ideas, oscillating between ideals of liberalization and discipline, and between the wish to enjoy children in their creative approach to life, on the one hand, and the affirmation of their own pedagogical agency, on the other. Throughout the Soviet period, the assumption of this agency had to reckon with the ideologisation of children's literature and the official role of the children's author as a promoter of ideology. Playfulness seems to have been a space where children's authors could negotiate these contradictory demands.

A central idea in the chapter is that the concept of children's play gave children's authors the possibility of articulating an idea of children as inherently happy and, at the same time, wishing to take upon their shoulders adults' sorrows. Children's supposed natural openness to play seems to enable them to take on this particular kind of 'strastoterpstvo' ('worship for suffering'). Children's play, indeed, seems to have been seen in different periods of Russian history as a defensive armour, making children and, possibly, adults who join children at play, invulnerable, and able to endure the most intense emotions. Here too, however, the position of adults reveals its complexity. From the 1960s on, adults appear to go through an identity crisis which, during perestroika, gives birth to distressing associations of children (and children's play) with suffering and violence. *Chuchelo* and the so-called *chernukha* aesthetics vented the fear that adults could jeopardize the delicate equilibrium between children's capacity to share suffering and, at the same time, experience bliss. In literary and cinematic expressions, adults are featured as compromised human beings, able to involve new generations in a spiral of violence and oppression. It was precisely during this period that the Soviet

populace was given new pedagogical responsibilities at school and in the family.

Chapter 3

Commitment in a Time of Self-Doubting: Playfulness in Russian Children's Literature from Perestroika to *All Bad Advice*

Давай полакомимся селедочкой, –
предложил мне папа. И воткнул в
селедочную банку консервный нож.
А банка ка-а-ак бабахнет! Селедка ка-а-
ак разлетится!
Летает она по квартире и кричит:
– Швабода! Швабода!

'Shall we feast on herrings?' Dad
suggested. Then he thrust the opener into
a herring can. But the can goes baaang!
And the herring takes such a flight!
It flies all over the apartment shouting:
Freedòm! Freedòm!
Oleg Kurguzov, 'Seledka na svobode',
[*Tramvai*, 12]1990

Как бы трудно тебе ни было, помни
всегда, что ты – счастливчик.

Hard though life may be for you, always
remember that you are happy.
Tramvai, 6 (1993)

The question posed by Zheleznikov's novel *The Scarecrow* as to what the future of society can be like when the only bond linking generations to one another appears to be violence and tyranny, was the core of a public debate between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In this climate, many children's authors embarked on the construction of a non-authoritarian culture through literature, a way of exchanging experience, providing guidance, and encouraging children's capacity to think independently. The idea of a non-authoritarian culture inevitably intertwined with that of a non-*totalitarian* culture, and, implicitly, with the liberation of the adult's self from the fear of bearing traces of Stalinism. In other words, re-constructing culture went hand in hand with re-constructing the self, with adults' attempt at a rebirth as individuals able

to represent an ethical and cultural point of reference for the young generations. In this chapter, I argue that narrative strategies associated with the concept of play, such as parody of literary genres, the absurd, nonsense and a whimsical and cheerful spirit, were a central expressive means for carrying out these aims.

The features of playful literature do not represent an exhaustive portrayal of Russian children's literature of the 1990s. For example, these years saw the rise of a new interest towards pre-revolutionary children's reading, such as Lidiia Charskaia's touching prose about orphan heroines or 19th century magazines for young readers. Other signs of change in children's literature were the popularity enjoyed by religious material for young audiences, the translation of many Western children's books, and the fact that crime fiction became one of the most beloved genres.¹ However, playfulness became a prominent feature in Russian children's literature and magazines of the period. Already established children's authors such as Grigorii Oster and others who had just started writing for a child audience, such as Andrei Usachev or Tim Sobakin, approached the child of the post-perestroika period through playful narrative strategies, often putting emphasis on the concept of play itself.

After an analysis of the socio-cultural context, which, I argue, had a key role in the choice of narrative strategies for addressing child readers, this chapter will discuss a range of texts which contain the main categories that I associate with this playful wave. Among these categories is the need, on the part of children's authors, to introduce themselves as adult figures that are

¹ See *Russian Children's Literature Before and After Perestroika*, pp. 107–8. *Tramvai*, a children's magazine to which I devote much attention in throughout this chapter, hosted a regular column on religion from 1991 to 1993. For the success and the value of children's crime novels after perestroika, see Larissa Rudova, 'From Character-Building to Criminal Pursuits', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, pp. 19–42. See also 'Vzgliad iz tupika', for an evaluation of crime and fantasy novels in mainstream literature.

outside and inside their time simultaneously. These adults construct their own selves as intellectuals who have not been compromised by the world of lies and violence they have been living in, and, at the same time, who are ready to offer guidance to children. In this sense, they are profoundly present, with all of the richness and complexity of their personalities, *in* their time. This dynamics between non-involvement and commitment, of 'absence' and 'presence' were expressed not only in the texts they wrote for children and in illustrations, but also in a wider paratext, which included columns and letters to child readers which were published in popular magazines of the time.² In particular, I will discuss some of the letters to readers which appeared in *Tramvai*, a popular children's magazine of the time where many playful authors found a platform. These non-literary texts are important for my discussion because they testify to the atmosphere in which the literary sources I deal with were written, an atmosphere which, through the 1990s, became increasingly tense for children and adults, oppressed by the effect of an economic catastrophe. On some occasions these letters intertwine with literary texts in a play of reciprocal references, confirming that the social and cultural context in which these authors wrote cannot be excluded from the discussion of their work. All these components of the playful wave in Russian children's literature of the post-perestroika period undergo a specific reworking in a children's series which has enjoyed an immense success from its first appearance: Grigorii Oster's *Vrednye sovety* (*Bad Advice*), which I discuss in depth in the second part of the chapter.

² In this thesis I use the term paratext to refer to both the peritext (the paratext in the text, the elements that are inside the confines of a bound volume) and the epitext (the paratext outside the text: interviews, letters, declarations and so on). Occasionally, I will use the term peritext for the sake of clarity. See Gérard Genette *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Some scholars have detected an overall bias against comic genres in the West.³ This bias concerns Russia only to some extent. For reasons that will be discussed below, in the 1990s humour and playfulness were part of a high cultural code. However, the respect enjoyed by these playful children's texts in the Russian academic environment and among critics is due not only to their literary quality. It is the context in which they were written that has inspired feelings of deep admiration and solidarity towards these texts and these writers. Scholars and critics of Russian children's literature and culture have seen the use of humorous inversions, often bordering on nonsense and the absurd, as a way of setting children and children's literature free from the imposition of false values and from the dominance of the collective over the individual in Soviet culture.⁴ According to this view, these children's texts fostered a pedagogical practice based on humour and joyfulness in a time of depression and uncertainty. The critic Ol'ga Korf underlines the fact that these children's texts directed their educative function at adults as well. She points out that, in the 1990s, through humour 'children's writers invited parents to go back to their children, helping them to manage the troubles and adversities which were destroying human personalities'.⁵ In this chapter I will discuss the fact that some children's authors addressed their pedagogical effort both at adults and children

³ Jessica Milner Davies, "Down with Skool!": The Perspective of Youth in Contemporary Western Humour' in *The Social Faces of Humour: Practices and Issues*, ed. by George E. C. Paton, Chris Powell and Stephen Wagg (Aldershot: Arena, 1996), pp. 89–103 (p. 101); Julie Cross, *Humour in Contemporary Junior Children's Literature* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 1.

⁴ See Olga Mäeots, 'Topsy-turvy World: New Trends in Modern Russian Children's Literature' in *Reflections of Change: Children's Literature since 1945*, ed. by Sandra L. Beckett (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 171–7; Larissa Rudova, 'Invitation to a Subversion: The Playful Literature of Grigorii Oster', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, 325–41, especially pp. 335–8; Ol'ga Korf, 'Iumor epokhi vseobshchei depressii', *Ostrov sokrovishch*, Vypusk 06, supplement to *Biblioteka v shkole*, 14, 170 (16-31 July 2006) <<http://lib.1september.ru/2006/14/3.htm>> [accessed 9 February 2013], *Detskaia literatura*, pp. 469; 471–3.

⁵ 'Iumor epokhi vseobshchei depressii' <<http://lib.1september.ru/2006/14/3.htm>> [accessed 9 February 2013].

and expressed it through playfulness. At the same time, I will see these authors as adults affected by troubles and adversities like any other Soviet – and then Russian – citizen of the time. In other words, I will address the crisis they too were living through as adults and intellectuals in the social and cultural upheavals that followed perestroika as central aspect of their narratives.

The mocking of Soviet discourse, its categories and mythologies, was an important element of these authors' playfulness. This was a feature typical of Russian Postmodernism, and especially of the Sots-Art movement. The name of Grigorii Oster appears in the list 'Who's Who in Russian Postmodernism' edited by Mikhail Epstein and Alexandr Genis,⁶ among other Russian artists whose work exhibits 'stylistic eclecticism, intertextualism and the citational mode, the interplay of signifiers, irony, parody, pastiche, and (self-) deconstruction of artistic discourse'.⁷ Other scholars and critics have also addressed Oster's work as Postmodernist.⁸ Furthermore, some other authors and illustrators whose work I discuss in this thesis were close to the Sots-Art movement. However, I suggest that these authors and works undertake a dialogue with the cultural tensions expressed by Russian Postmodernism, but they are not, or not entirely, Postmodernist in their own right.

There are different views of Postmodernism, and especially of its playful deconstruction of any monolithic form of discourse, or, in Lyotard's words, of

⁶ Mikhail Epstein and Alexandr Genis, 'Who's Who in Russian Postmodernism', in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, ed. by Mikhail Epstein, Alexandr Genis and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), pp. 469–528.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 469.

⁸ For example, Larissa Rudova, in 'Invitation to a Subversion: The Playful Literature of Grigorii Oster', pp.329–32. and Maria Poriadina, 'Grigorii Oster: Est' o chem razgovarivat', *Kriticheskaia massa*, 2 (2004) <http://artpragmatica.ru/km_content/?auid=285> [accessed 30 May 2013].

any 'Grand Narrative'.⁹ Postmodernism, indeed, contests any system of thought in which there is no space for contradictions and for plurality. Its endless ironical deconstruction of discourse has sometimes been interpreted as a negation of humanism and, ultimately, a nihilistic approach to culture and the very possibility of meaning-making and decision-making.¹⁰ These perceptions of Postmodernism are due to its raising questions about what was taken for natural in the past, including the notions of 'historical fact' and of 'subjectivity' as a coherent whole. Postmodernism exposes the artificial nature of these concepts without offering answers or resolving its ironical contesting of culture and cultural practises into a new complete cultural system.¹¹ For Allen Thiher, who sees analogies between Postmodernist fiction and the work of philosophers such as Derrida, the typical Postmodernist text is a 'schizo-text' in which 'words and things go their separate ways'.¹² According to Thiher, the play metaphor, which he considers central in Postmodernist fiction, resembles Derrida's notion of the infinite play of meanings which occurs in language, 'a process of infinite deferring and differing that refuses any arrest to the play of meaning'.¹³ This complicates a possible interpretation of the forms of playfulness that I examine in some Russian children's texts of the 1990s in terms of Postmodernism. A central part of my argument is that, beyond

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; foreword by Fredric Jameson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ For example, Charles Newman maintains that 'Post-modernism harbors the deep suspicion that we have only unpleasant choices; that we may have seen the best civilization has to offer'. Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Art of Fiction in an Age of Inflation*, with a preface by Gerald Graff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 3.

¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), pp. x–xi.

¹² Allen Thiher, *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 33.

¹³ Ibidem, p.158. Thiher makes reference to Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

exposing an existential and philosophical labyrinth, these children's texts try to offer a solution to it, in the name of the self – of its integrity – and in the name of the other, specifically the child other. They were written in a cultural environment almost obsessed by pedagogical issues and by the possibility itself of pedagogy.

The ever contradictory and problematizing worldview of Postmodernism, however, has been seen as endowed with an ethical standpoint, and therefore compatible with pedagogical practice. According to Linda Hutcheon, Postmodernism does not aim at the implosion of culture and has not replaced humanism, albeit it has challenged it in many ways. Rather, Postmodernism asserts pluralism and difference.¹⁴ Scholars of children's literature have assigned Postmodernist children's books, such as *The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales*,¹⁵ a highly human – and, in this sense, pedagogical – value.¹⁶ The self-conscious play with conventions, including literary conventions, and the intertextual features that we find in this book resembles some of the Russian children's texts I discuss in this chapter, especially Grigorii Oster's. However, in these Russian sources playful features are often associated with a well-defined vision of the world and of the child, a well-defined

¹⁴ *A Poetic of Postmodernism*, pp. 4; 6.

¹⁵ Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992). Deborah Stevenson has defined this book 'the classic postmodern picture book'. Deborah Stevenson, "If You Read This Last Sentence, It Won't Tell You Anything": Postmodernism, Self-Referentiality, and *The Stinky Cheese Man*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 19.1 (Spring 1994), 32–4, p. 32.

¹⁶ See, for example, Jean Webb, 'A Postmodern Reflection of the Genre of Fairy-Tale: *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*', and 'Clockwork: A Fairy-tale for a Postmodern Time' in Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb, *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 157–64; pp. 151–6. Stevenson also discusses Scieszka's and Smith's book in pedagogical terms, when she concludes her article thus: '[...]: it tells you worlds. It tells you meaninglessness happens and is a part of life and books, it tells you that the signs may point the wrong way, but that wrong way or even nowhere may be more interesting than your supposed destination'. "If You Read This Last Sentence, It Won't Tell You Anything", p. 34.

set of values that adults offer, or try to offer, to child readers. This is at odds with Postmodernism.

I do not consider the children's texts which are here under scrutiny as Postmodernist *tout court*, nor a continuation of the trend which emerged in Soviet children's literature in 1970s, and which exposed the disconnection between signified and signifier, and the subsequent impossibility for language to refer to a stable net of meanings. On the contrary, the sources I will discuss in this chapter demonstrate that, in the 1990s, numerous children's writers, illustrators and critics embarked on a mission which can be defined as an attempt to rejoin signifier and signified together. The playful strategies I discuss in this chapter seem to be affirming literature as a means for adhering to life more genuinely and honestly. However, these texts were written in a Postmodern context. These authors' attempts to create a literary language able to provide new generations with valid points of reference met an obstacle in adults' bewilderment at the collapse of the cultural, ideological and political system in which they had come of age. The catastrophic economic crisis which followed made the context even more difficult. The truths these authors tried to re-assert by means of playfulness gave rise to inconsistencies and contradictions. My aim is to highlight the attempt, on the part of Russian playful children's authors in the 1990s, at a reformulation of the relationship between the child and the adult, a reformulation centred on trust in literature as a form of truth-telling. The figures of Soviet literature (especially the OBERIU) who were associated with the concept of non-conformism, together with underground humour and, in some cases, the family setting, constituted a triangle within the boundaries of which Russian playful children's literature of the 1990s developed as a truth-telling practice. I will discuss how contrasting drives, including adults'

sense of being incapable of providing care, and even the perception of being 'vrednye' ('harmful') complicated this process further.

Playfulness in Russian children's literature of the 1990s is characterized by complex narratives in which adults alternatively resist and surrender to discourses on the culture of oppression and violence (sometimes referred to as 'Stalinism') they supposedly bear within themselves. Through playful devices such as the inversion and humorous references to Soviet culture, these authors tried to cope with intense social changes. By engaging with themes associated with the social sphere and, at the same time, by manipulating these themes in a playful mode, their texts allow insights into the way in which adults perceived themselves and constructed their ideal selves in a time of socio-political transition.

3.1. Disfigured Happiness: Debates on Soviet Orphans and Abandoned Children and the Birth of New Magazines for Junior Readers

In chapter 2 I discussed how, in the 1980s the notion of childhood underwent an enormous change in the Soviet Union. Childhood started to be associated with unhappiness and sorrow, and with the failure of society, which was held responsible for producing a generation of cynical young people. In the second half of the 1980s the public debate on the poor condition of children focused especially on children's homes, which were revealed to be in a desperate condition. Media reports and readers' letters to newspapers demonstrate an acute concern for the physical abuse to which children were subject in these institutions.¹⁷ Not only the conditions of orphans raised astonishment, but also

¹⁷ Elizabeth Waters, "Cuckoo-mothers" and "Apparatchiks": Glasnost' and Children's Homes', in *Perestroika and Soviet Women*, ed. by Mary Buckley (Cambridge, New

the fact that the vast majority of the children who were held in these homes had living parents, and had been abandoned.¹⁸ Commentators placed blame on irresponsible adults, and only between 1988 and 1990, with the growing economic crisis, the debate started to address the problems which parents had to face in raising their children.¹⁹ Little difference was now perceived between orphans, abandoned children and those who had parents and lived in families: the failure of the country as a social and political system concerned all the environments, and children were its first victims.²⁰ Adults expressed the perception of being victims themselves and, at the same time, the instruments of a system which was corrupting the whole society, and children in particular. In *Pravda*, a highly respected and influential intellectual of the time, S. Ia. Doletskii, stated that children were victims of abuse because their parents in turn had been raised in an authoritarian system, characterized by propaganda and oppression.²¹

The crisis which concerned adults was debated within the field of children's literature. In 1990, the journal *Detskaia literatura* opened a debate significantly entitled 'Deti: trevogi i nadezhdi' ('Children: Anxieties and Hopes'). Here Andrei Bystritskii, a young scholar who had graduated from the Institute of Pedagogy in Moscow, defines the whole of perestroika a matter of *vospitanie*, of upbringing.²² In his words, 'all the debates, conflicts and discussions around [perestroika's] underlying reasons contain this question'.²³ Bystritskii points out:

York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 123–41 (p. 125).

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 129–30.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 131.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ V. Shcheptkin and S. Ia. Doletskii, 'Po isku detstva', *Pravda*, 1 March 1991, p. 3. Doletskii was a children's surgeon and a writer.

²² A. Bystritskii, 'Zametki o vospitanii v epokhu demokratizatsii i glasnosti', *Detskaia literatura*, 9 (1990), 3–6, p. 3.

²³ Ibidem.

‘the trouble lies [...] in the fact that we have very unclear ideas about who we are and what our lives will be like in the future’.²⁴ This idea is reinforced throughout the whole article, and summarised effectively when Bystritskii says: ‘the crisis of upbringing is the crisis of society, it is the crisis of adults, who have nothing to say to their own children and, ultimately, to their own selves’.²⁵ Although some authors, such as the poets of the OBERIU or Chukovskii, were appreciated for having been disliked by the Soviet authorities, Soviet children’s literature, sometimes including even sacred names such as Marshak and Gaidar, became the object of harsh criticism, because it was accused of having brainwashed children for decades.²⁶ It was hard now, one commentator observed, to find a solution to this state of things and ‘create culture’,²⁷ because adults had to get rid of Stalinism as something they held within themselves.²⁸

These stances of profound mistrust in the pedagogical skills of adults coexisted with opposite attitudes. Significant efforts were being made to improve the condition of children, which bears testimony to the fact that many adults, in spite of everything, considered themselves capable of providing effective care. Among these efforts, the setting up of the *Sovetskii detskii fond imeni V. I. Lenina* (V. I. Lenin Soviet Children’s Fund), in 1987, appears to be intertwined with the development of playful children’s literature in the 1990s. The main task of the Fund was to solicit and administer public donations for the

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 4. It should be noted that Bystritskii was born in 1961, thus he belonged to the same generation of authors who formed the group *Chernaia kuritsa*, which I discuss below.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 5.

²⁶ V. Akimov, ‘Nado nachinat’ s sebia’, *Detskaia literatura*, 2 (1991), 16–19, p. 16. Marshak is here attacked for his *Mister Twister*.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 17.

²⁸ Ibidem, p.16. On the difficult position of adults who perceived themselves as subjects raised in a climate of falsity, and who now wanted to adopt a pedagogical role through children’s literature, see also E. Ravtovich, ‘Vpered, malysh, na karuseli perestroiki!’, *Detskaia literatura*, 9 (1990), 7–11. Upbringing could be considered as a form of violence *per se*. See, for example, Galina Gordeeva, ‘Sliskom sil’nee?...', *Detskaia literatura*, 4 (1990), 8–11, p. 29.

improvement of the condition of orphans and abandoned children.²⁹ Its chairman was children's writer Al'bert Likhanov. He commented on the foundation of the charity by declaring that it was time to come back to childhood as to a 'substantial truth at the heart of human kind' (*'obshchechelovecheskaia pervoistina'*).³⁰ In the same article, Likhanov denounced the hypocrisy of the Soviet ideal of the happy childhood. In his view, decades of propaganda had convinced Soviet people that, thanks to the State, children of the Soviet Union had always received the best possible upbringing and care. Thus, Likhanov maintains, people failed to realize the reality of children's abandonment and mistreatment.³¹ For decades, Likhanov carries on, Soviet adults had been exempted from personal responsibility in raising children, and it was now time to revive the cult of the family, and to revalue categories such as 'teaching feat' (*'uchitel'skoe podvizhnichestvo'*) and 'pedagogical self-immolation' (*'pedagogicheskoe samosozzhenie'*).³² In this way Likhanov linked together the concepts of *podvig* (ethical deed) and pedagogical duty, appealing to adults in all the environments in which a pedagogical role could be exerted, from the family to school.

The Fund was also involved in commercial and editorial ventures, and this seems to have been partly due to the lack of media coverage about its work, and on the need to overcome this problem.³³ The weekly newspaper *Sem'ia* (*The Family*), issued from 1988, was one of the ways through which the

²⁹ See *Smena* Editorial Board, 'Sovetskii detskii fond imeni V. I. Lenina sozdan!', *Smena*, 1453 (December 1987) <<http://smena-online.ru/stories/sovetskii-detskii-fond-imeni-vi-lenina-sozdan/page/2>> [accessed 22 May 2013]; "Cuckoo-mothers" and "Apparatchiks": Glasnost' and Children's homes', pp. 126–7.

³⁰ Al'bert Likhanov, 'Obernut'sia k detstvu: Net zaboty vazhnee', *Pravda* (13 August 1987), 3; 6, p. 3.

³¹ Likhanov was not the only one to raise this point. See *Children's World*, p. 153, and p. 618, n. 106.

³² Ibidem.

³³ "Cuckoo-mothers" and "apparatchiks", pp. 127; 131.

Fund tried to draw the attention of the audience. *Sem'ia* was accompanied by a monthly supplement for children and adolescents: *Tramvai № My* (*Tram Number We*). In 1990 the supplement developed into two separate monthly magazines: *Tramvai*, for children, and *My*, for adolescents.³⁴ Through *My* and *Tramvai*, the pedagogical commitment promoted by the Children's Fund reached literature for young readers. *My*, for example, opened with an introduction by Al'bert Likhanov himself, in which adolescents were invited to develop those virtues which would benefit society, such as honesty, goodness or the capacity to make decisions.³⁵ The first number of *Tramvai* opened with the picture of a little girl with sad eyes and a shaved head, and a text explaining that a little girl named Marina lived in a children's home in difficult conditions, like so many other Soviet children did, and needed help. Readers were invited to give a hand, to participate in what the Fund was doing for these children, first of all by becoming aware of their existence.

The perception of childhood as a condition marked by sorrow and oppression that can be noticed in this opening of *Tramvai* did not exclude another perception, discussed in the previous chapter, in which this time of life was conceived of as happy by virtue of its very nature. Adulthood, on the other hand, was associated with absence of joyfulness, the starting of a troublesome time of life. This can be deduced from a comparison between the way in which *My* and *Tramvai* approached their respective audiences in their first issues. *My* defined itself thus:

« Мы » – для тех, кто, увы, прощается или уже простился с самой лучшей беззаботной порой нашей жизни – детством.³⁶

³⁴ See *Tramvai*, 11 (1993), p. 2. On *My* see the interview with its main editor, Gennadii Budnikov, 'Obresti slovo', *Detskaia literatura*, 11 (1990), 28–30.

³⁵ Al'bert Likhanov, 'Obrashchenie k vam', *My*, 1 (1990), pp. 4–5.

³⁶ 'My is for those who, alas, are leaving, or have already left, the best and most carefree time of our life: childhood'. *My*, 1 (1990), back cover.

In these words adulthood (and adolescence as the state which immediately precedes it) is described by putting emphasis on the end of childhood, rather than on the starting of a different stage of life which implies new possibilities and new pleasures.

Tramvai defined children mostly in terms of their tendency to laugh and play. After the text about Marina, the little orphan, the first issue of the magazine turned away from an atmosphere of sadness, and defined itself as a funny magazine, full of 'joyful stories, verses and tales' as well as 'engaging games'.³⁷ In spite of the variety of its content, this is the way in which *Tramvai* defined itself throughout the years in which it was published: *Tramvai* makes you laugh, *Tramvai* is funny.³⁸ Tim Sobakin, who was the vice-editor of *Tramvai*, declared that the magazine was conceived of as a 'journal-game' (*zhurnal-igra*).³⁹ To explain the meaning of this expression, Sobakin turned to arguments which are typical of developmental theories on children's play. Children, he argues, apprehend better when they play, that is when information is offered in an entertaining way. Furthermore, Sobakin carries on, children's understanding of the links between causes and effects is still limited, and this stimulates their reflection, on the one hand, and their production of absurd explanations for the various phenomena, on the other. Thus *Tramvai* offered readers riddles, jokes, games and funny tales, and was characterized by an overall tone of joyfulness.

³⁷ *Tramvai*, 1 (1990), p. 3.

³⁸ For example, in the issue which celebrated the history of *Tramvai* starting from *Tramvai Ne My*, readers are invited to wonder: 'what did passengers of this glorious Tram (*Tramvai*) read, and what did they laugh about?' (*Tramvai*, 11 (1993), p. 2). Through these words, the amusing, funny nature of *Tramvai* is re-affirmed, as well as the inner nature of its readers as laughing people. Among the several times in which this concept is repeated, see *Tramvai*, 4 (1994), p. 2. The magazine was not published in 1992 and ceased publication in 1996.

³⁹ 'Obresti slovo', p. 30.

The birth of a children's magazine such as *Tramvai* during a debate about children's suffering and the damage they had received from society, suggests that the image of the suffering child went hand in hand with its opposite, that is to say with Tolstoi's ideal of the 'happy, happy childhood'. It was as if children's innate happiness had been only temporarily damaged, but still persisted, and could return. Even in terrible conditions within and outside the family environment, children were still believed to be happy at some level because of their very nature. I will show how, by writing texts centred on the device of the playful reversal of the categories of the common sense, many children's authors appealed to the supposed capacity of their child readers to restore happiness within and around themselves.

3.2. Children's Literature as a Mission: the Case of the Black Hen Group

The initiatives of the Fund are not the only elements testifying that Russian children's literature between the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s had a strong pedagogical underpinning that aimed to open up a new relationship between adults and children and develop a form of social commitment through literature. In 1989, a group of Moscow young writers, illustrators and critics of children's literature, among whom was Tim Sobakin, formed the group *Chernaia kuritsa* (Black Hen). In the same year they took part in the 6th 'All-Union Seminar of Young Writers for Children and Adolescents' which was organized by the magazine *Koster* (*The Bonfire*) in Leningrad. On this occasion, the members of the group read their manifesto, which contained this passage:

Мы с тобой, школьник конца 80х! Для тебя пишут свои книги молодые писатели! Где спасительный глоток чистого воздуха после

сдернутого с головы "бензинового" пакета?! Кто поможет тебе противостоять равнодушию семьи и казарме-школе?!⁴⁰

In 1990 the manifesto was published in an issue of the children's magazine *Pioner* which was almost entirely devoted to the Black Hen group. The above-quoted point was modified as follows:

ПУСТЬ БУДЕШЬ ты, школьник начала 90-х, – ты ведь помнишь строчки Высоцкого про сломанные крылья, – твои крылья только прорезаются, и никуда от этой боли не деться, – так помоги им окрепнуть, иначе полета не получится.⁴¹

The members of the Black Hen group, whose texts for children gave an enormous contribution to the development of the new wave of playfulness in Russian children's literature, wanted to meet children in person, and reached them in the libraries, schools and orphanages of different towns of Russia, such as Saratov, Vladimir or Volgograd.⁴² The tone of the manifesto and their activism may be read as a specific version of that 'extreme missionary vision of culture' that Stephen Lovell defined as typical of the Soviet intelligentsia.⁴³ The authors I deal with in this chapter devoted themselves to children's literature in the same years in which written culture was being delegitimized as a source of moral guidance. When one considers that, although throughout the 1990s the demand for children's books never diminished,⁴⁴ it was hard for a children's

⁴⁰ 'We are with you, school child of the end of the 1980s! Young writers are writing their books for you! Where is the saving breath of fresh air after that pack of "gasoline" which has been pulled off your head? Who will help you to confront the indifference of the family and the barrack-school?'. The manifesto was read by Boris Minaev. See Lola Zvonoreva, 'Slova, uslyshannye u "Kostr": Reportazh s VI vsesoiuznogo seminara molodykh literatorov, pishushchikh dlia detei i podrostkov', *Detskaia literatura*, 3 (1990), 12–14, p. 12.

⁴¹ 'May there be you, school-child of the 1990s. You surely remember Vysotskii's lyrics about broken wings: your wings have just come forth and there is no way to escape this pain, so help them strengthen, or flight will be impossible.' *Pioner*, 4 (1990), p. 5.

⁴² Lola Zvonareva, 'Kak nachinalas' "Chernaia kuritsa"', *Detskaia literatura*, 9, (1990), 60.

⁴³ Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, p. 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 138, and p. 196, note n.196.

writer to make a living,⁴⁵ the strength of commitment on the part of those who wrote for children in that period becomes clear. Some authors who had written for a child audience because of the socio-political circumstances during the Soviet Union were now writing for adults,⁴⁶ but a new generation willingly started to write for children. The sources discussed so far in this chapter demonstrate that, among the reasons underlying this choice, social and pedagogical concerns were central.

When they published their manifesto, the members of Black Hen were all in their early thirties. According to the statistics which had been recently published in *Ogonek*, the average age of the writers who were members of the Union of Soviet Writers was sixty seven years in Moscow and sixty four in Leningrad. The average age of children's writers was even higher.⁴⁷ The members of Black Hen considered the generational gap separating them from many official children's writers of the time as a positive factor, which brought them closer to children.⁴⁸ Although they wanted to distance themselves from an outmoded generation, they still wanted official recognition, and in 1991, before the Soviet Union collapsed in August, ten members of Black Hen entered the Union of Soviet Writers.⁴⁹ This goal was achieved thanks to the support of children's writers of older generations whose authority was undisputed, such as

⁴⁵ Lola Zvonareva explains that editors asked writers to write very short texts so as to enhance the copy run. Thus children's authors earned very little for each book, because they were paid by volume of writing. Besides, Zvonareva adds, each author did not publish more than two or three books a year. Lola Zvonareva, 'Pomoch' uslyshat' drug druga: Reportazh s VI Vsesoiuznogo seminaru molodykh kritikov detskoi i iunosheskoj literatury', *Detskaia literatura*, 9–10 (1991), 16–20, p. 16. A similar point is made by Elaine Bradshaw in her essay 'Glasnost', Perestroika and Children's Books in the USSR', *International Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 4.2 (1989), 65–84, pp.75–6.

⁴⁶ 'Russian Children's Literature before and after Perestroika', p. 106.

⁴⁷ See Lola Zvonareva, 'O "Chernoj kuritse" i ee podzemnykh zhiteliakh', *Muza: Mezhdunarodnyi literaturnyi almanakh*, 18 (2011), 161–8, p. 162.

⁴⁸ Ibidem. Zvonareva underlines that, by reading these statistics, she realized that 'not dads and moms, but grandparents wrote for children'.

⁴⁹ Lola Zvonareva and Vladimir Druk were already members. Ibidem, p. 165.

Valentin Berestov, Roman Sef, Sergei Ivanov, Iakov Akim and Leonid Iakhnin.⁵⁰

This detail is indicative of the fact that the members of Black Hen considered themselves the representatives of a new wave, but at the same time wanted to become part of a Soviet literary and intellectual tradition endowed with prestige and authority. The authority they were looking for also concerned the possibility of carrying out their own editorial projects. From 1991, the official address of the group was at the *Mezhdunarodnyi fond detskogo kino Rolanu Bykovu* ('Rolan Bykov International Fund for Children's Cinema'), thanks to the support of Rolan Bykov himself.⁵¹ These and other initiatives on the part of the members of *Black Hen* should be read not only as attempts to make a living out of children's literature; but also as attempts at having a cultural and social impact, and carrying out a vision of literary culture as a mission.

3.3. The Model of the Avant-garde: The *Chudak* (Weird fellow) as a Form of Commitment

Tim Sobakin and other members of Black Hen, such as Andrei Usachev or Sergei Sedov, wrote funny children's texts which were a mixture of humour, parody, fantasy and absurdist elements. The upsurge of playfulness in children's literature of the post-perestroika period was due not only to the persistent image of the happy child, but also to matters of self-representation on the part of children's writers. Through absurdist prose and poetry, parody, jokes or simply a joyful tone, children's authors approached their child audience as *chudaki*, weird fellows. A *chudak* is an eccentric individual whose weirdness is a

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 166.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

sign of innocence.⁵² In my interpretation of the playful children's texts written during the 1990s, *chudachestvo* is synonymous with non-involvement in the established cultural system, freedom from the taint of compromise associated with the times these authors had been living in, and non-conformism. I would define this aspect of *chudachestvo* a semantic of absence. However, the *chudak* can simultaneously feature a semantic of profound presence. His oddity is also vulnerability, and the capacity to perceive phenomena in their most subtle aspects. *Chudaki*, in other words, can live through their time intensely, albeit in their own way. A bond of solidarity links the adult-*chudaki* to the suffering-joyful children of the late 1980s. The *chudak* is able to talk to these children, and has the right to guide them through the difficulties of growing up, by virtue of his innocence, which is to say moral integrity, and his weirdness, which is sensitivity. The association of weirdness with ethics was not new in the Russo-Soviet intellectual environment. Brodskii, for example, expressed his faith in the capacity of 'extreme individualism' to represent a defence from Evil by listing the typical features of the *chudak*: 'originality of thinking, whimsicality,

⁵² Lesley Milne discusses comic types in Soviet and post-Soviet culture, including that of the innocent. She describes this figure as follows: 'It signifies one who is ingenuous and unsuspecting and thus combines element of the fool (*durak*) and simpleton (*prostak*) with that of the *blazhennyi*, the person blessed with blissful ignorance (*blazhennoe nevedenie*)'. Lesley Milne, 'Jokers, Rogues and Innocents: Types of Comic Hero and Author from Bulgakov to Pelevin', in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. by Lesley Milne (London: Anthem Press, 2004), pp. 85–96 (p. 86). I see her words as an apt definition of the *chudak*, only devoid of the nuance of eccentricity that characterizes this figure. The perception of the *chudak* as innocent is widespread in scholarship of Russian culture. Cynthia Marsh, for example, underlines the childish innocence of Mastakov, one of the main characters of the play *Chudaki* by Maksim Gor'kii, written in 1910 (see Cynthia Marsh, *Maksim Gorky: Russian Dramatist* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 222–3). Discussing Andrei Tarkovskii's film *Katok i skripka* (*The Steam roller and the Violin*, 1960), Josephine Woll highlights that the child and the *chudak* are linked to each other by a bond of innocence (Josephine Wall, *The Cranes are Flying: The Film Companion* (London: Tauris, 2003), p. 95).

even – if you will – eccentricity'.⁵³ In Russian children's literature in the 1990s, *chudachestvo* was therefore a form of commitment.⁵⁴

References to the avant-garde, and especially to the OBERIU, played a significant role in the formulation of this commitment. By introducing themselves to the public through a manifesto, the members of Black Hen were suggesting a parallel between them and the Oberiuty. A passage of the manifesto made this explicit:

ПУСТЬ БУДУТ доноситься из того «живого» уголка, где «Еж» и «Чиж», голоса Даниила Хармса, Александра Введенского, Николая Олейникова, Юрия Владимировича, а вместе с ними игра, парадокс, мрачноватые закоулки непредсказуемой повседневности, приключения души!⁵⁵

Here Kharms and his fellow poets are associated with play as originality and emotional intensity (*'priklucheniia dushi'*) at the same time.⁵⁶ In other sources, this first set of meanings associated with the OBERIU is enriched with references to the tragic destiny of its members, which enhance their ethical profile.⁵⁷ As the heirs of a non-conformist literary and artistic tradition, which

⁵³ Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (London, 1986), p. 385.

⁵⁴ OBERIU had been a point of reference in children's literature for decades. The magazine *Pioner*,⁵⁴ which offered the Black Hen group a showcase in April 1990, was strongly oriented towards the avant-garde. After the Thaw, the magazine started renewing its programme by drawing inspiration from experimental children's magazines of the 1920s and the 1930s, such as *Vorob'ei* (*The Sparrow*, later on to be called *Novyi Robinson*, (*The New Robinson*), 1923-1925), and *Ezh*, by encouraging experimentalism. See L. N. Kolesova, *Detskie zhurnaly Rossii xx vek* (Petrozavodsk: Izdatel'stvo PetrGU, 2009), pp. 195–6; 207 and 301.

⁵⁵ 'May the voices of Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii, Nikolai Oleinikov, Iurii Vladimirov be heard from that 'lively spot' where *Ezh* and *Chizh* are. May play, paradox, gloomy back-streets where the unexpected occurs daily, and adventures of the soul resound!' *Pioner*, 4 (1990), p. 5.

⁵⁶ In a brief introduction to Kharms's poetry in *Tramvai*, the term 'nonsense' is rejected for a correct understanding of his work. Emphasis is put on his work's meaning, the understanding of which requires extreme sensitivity (*'nado prezhde vsego chuvstvovat' dushoiu'*), rather than rationality. 'Daniil Kharms: Kovarnye stikhi', *Tramvai*, 4 (1990), p. 22.

⁵⁷ For example, Zvonareva, after specifying the circumstances in which Kharms and his fellow poets died, wrote:

'Daniil Kharms and his friends, Aleksandr Vvedenskii (1904– 1941), and Nikolai Oleinikov (1898–1942), the talented writers who tried to create a new children's literature full of jokes, play, tall tales and nonsense, were killed while they were very

was associated with the refusal to compromise with Soviet power, the new children's authors and artists felt entitled to usher in a new 'art for the soul' ('*iskusstvo dlia dushi*'), and a 'brotherhood of kindred souls' ('*bratstvo rodstvennykh dush*').⁵⁸ Lola Zvonareva, a literary critic who was one of the leaders of the Black Hen, used these expressions to explain the purposes of the group in *Pioneer* in 1990.

The new 'art of the soul', mediated through the concept of play as a high, avant-garde code, was a creative game which aimed at the reconstruction of culture. Sobakin defined *Tramvai* as 'an avant-garde magazine', with reference to the absurdist features of many of its texts.⁵⁹ Because it offered excerpts from 'high literature', from Anton Chekhov to Marina Tsvetaeva or Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova, or pages devoted to the art of Malevich, Chagall and other artists, *Tramvai* was sometimes understood as a *tolsty zhurnal* ('thick journal') for children.⁶⁰ However, Sobakin explained that, through *Tramvai*, he and the other members of the editorial board intended to reject the typically Soviet model of children's magazine. In their view, these magazines were mostly literature-oriented, and lacked a consistent idea that could link the

young, slandered and unrecognised. And yet the feast of selfless play and witty laughter, the feast that they donated to us fifty years ago, carries on'. L. Zvonareva, 'D. Kharms', in *Ku-ka-re-ku: Skazki i komiksy dlia detei i vzroslykh*, ed. by Lev Iakovlev (Moscow: Slovo, 1990), p. 192. For similar emphasis on the tragic destiny of Kharms in a children's literature context, see Anatolii Aleksin, 'Daniil Kharms: Stikhotvoreniia', *Detskaia literatura*, 4 (1989), p. 71.

⁵⁸ 'Lola Zvonareva, 'Oni podumali i reshili...: Gruppovaia fotografiia na fone gorizonta', *Pioner*, 4 (1990), 16–17, p. 16.

⁵⁹ 'Obresti slovo', p. 30.

⁶⁰ Irina Stepacheva, 'O kuchetvorenii v detskom zhurnale', *Detskaia literatura*, 2 (1997), 30–2, p. 30. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, both *Koster* and *Pioner* increased the number of their pages, so as to almost reach the scale of the *tolstye zhurnaly*. Presumably, these precedents encouraged critics to consider *Tramvai* and, from 1996 on, *Kucha mala* (*The Little Heap*), another children's magazine directed by Tim Sobakin, as another *tolsty zhurnal* for children.

various tales and poems to one another.⁶¹ *Tramvai* wanted to be a means through which children could actively explore every aspect of their lives. The conceptual bond linking together each part of the heterogeneous content of the magazine was intended to lead children to a playful re-discovery of the world, which was one of the hallmarks of the OBERIU. *Tramvai* carried out its programme of rediscovery by devoting entire issues to the most common objects of one's everyday life, such as dust, or single parts of the body, or even letters of the alphabet.⁶² The creative potential of these objects was revealed through the effect of *ostranenie* (defamiliarisation) formulated by Viktor Shlovskii, and which has been acknowledged as one of the main devices of the poetry and the prose of the OBERIU.⁶³ *Tramvai's* issue on teeth, for example, started with a description of how objects and animals, including people, bite, and ended with a page gathering together all the idiomatic expressions which included the word 'teeth', taken from the most disparate contexts and illustrated by Vladimir Burkin, with his typical emphasis on the grotesque, deformed, body.⁶⁴ Thanks to this strategy, objects and words could re-enter the life of the child having acquired new meanings. In other words, a stage of playful deconstruction preceded a phase of construction, and the child was invited to join this creative game.⁶⁵

⁶¹ See the interview with Tim Sobakin, editor of *Tramvai*: 'Obresti slovo', *Detskaia literatura*, 11 (1990), 30–1. One of the main sources of inspiration was the French children's magazine *Gulliver*. Appreciation was shown towards the children's magazines produced by the American publisher Scholastic, especially for its lively and non-traditional approaches to school subjects. See *Tramvai* 3 (1993), pp. 9–11.

⁶² For example, *Tramvai*, 7 (1990) is devoted to the theme of dust. Issue 4 (1990), is devoted to the nose, issue 6 (1990) to the teeth.

⁶³ Pankenier, *In Fant Non Sens*, p. 312.

⁶⁴ *Tramvai*, 6 (1990), pp. 21–5.

⁶⁵ It is significant that the session on dust in the seventh issue of *Tramvai* in 1990 started with a series of humorous short texts which aimed to widen the understanding of dust (for example, one of them concerns the 'cosmic dust'), and ended with a rather serious invitation to children to pay attention to the places in which dust gathered in the place they lived, so as to avoid 'this dirt' ('*griaz'*) (p. 4).

The reconstruction of the world which these authors and illustrators seemed to be committed to was also expressed by the portrayal of people and objects flying around, sometimes in a deformed shape, and disjointed from the laws of gravity, a feature which was typical of many pre-war picture books. Now the distortion, the inversion of what was commonly known and accepted was also expressed through images of flight, of suspension in the air, and sometimes of abrupt fall. These images seem to represent visually the principle expressed in another of the points of the Black Hen Manifesto: 'the capacity to unlearn is no less important than the capacity to learn'.⁶⁶ In the almanac *Ku-ka-re-ku*, a collection of works of the authors of Black Hen, Kharms appears in an illustration in which he flies over a town, as if he were the subject of a picture by Mark Chagall.⁶⁷ Sasha Chernyi, another important point of reference for these playful children's authors, appears as a Don Quixote in his pyjamas, riding a winged horse, and holding a long pen-spear, with several sheets of paper fixed on it.⁶⁸ The dilemma which these images capture concerns the need to be deeply in and yet out of time. Eccentricity and sensitivity, embodied by the *chudak*, present a possibility to solve this contradiction, and both features were found in figures associated with authenticity and a superior ethics.⁶⁹ To be in and out of time allowed subjects to become part of a compact 'brotherhood of

⁶⁶ *Pioner*, 4 (1990), p. 5.

⁶⁷ *Ku-ka-re-ku*, pp. 194–5. The illustration is by A. Kapnicheskii.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 53. The illustration is by I. Vvedesnskaia.

⁶⁹ The text introducing Sasha Chernyi explains that he wrote his collection of poems *Detskii ostrov* when he had already emigrated, and children were for him a familiar island among difficulties in a foreign land. Children, the author carries on, are those for whom one tries to protect his own language. In my view, with these words the author of this introduction associates Sasha Chernyi's poetry with a cultural and ethical function. F. Grimber, 'Sasha Chernyi', *Ku-ka-re-ku*, p. 52.

kindred souls' regardless of the different chronological and spatial location of their members.⁷⁰

3.4. The Celebration of Personality

The spirit of discovery that characterized *Tramvai* was not only directed at the external world, but also at one's self. The idea of a cultural brotherhood turned into a celebration of personality, and especially of the eccentric personality. In *Pioner*, Zvonareva portrays some of the members of Black Hen by attributing to each of them various signs of intellectual *chudachestvo*: one looks like Don Quixote, and holds a copy of Sokolov's *Shkola durakov* (*A School for Fools*) under his arm. Another is halfway between Karlsson and Sancho Panza, a third has chosen a penname, 'as Daniil Kharms did'.⁷¹ The new protagonists of Russian children's literature also emphasised their eccentric personalities in *Tramvai*. At the end of 1990, the editorial staff wished readers happy New Year with two pictures in which all the members wore or held a funny object: a crown, a bright scarf, a toy, or a puppet. Their names were associated with the roles of a tram crew, from the 'driver' and the 'signaller' to the 'gatherer of tram jokes' ('*sobiratel'nitsa tramvainykh anekdotov*').⁷²

Playful children's authors in 1990s were keen not only to highlight their bizarre personalities in magazine columns and other forms of paratexts, they also appeared personally in their work, and tried to leave a clear sign of their own selves. It is significant that the section in *Pioneer* in which the Black Hen

⁷⁰ Addressing child readers, the children's writer and member of Black Hen Svetlana Vinokurova invited them to select their friends among people of previous generations, whose thoughts, deeds and life can be 'salvation and support'. 'There is also a "vertical" bond linking people to each other!', she explains. Svetlana Vinokurova, 'I ia podumala', *Pioner*, 4 (1990), p. 43.

⁷¹ 'Oni podumali i reshili...', p.17.

⁷² *Tramvai*, 12 (1990), p. 31.

introduced itself to the audience opened with the illustration of a big hen composed of hand-written signatures: the names of each member of the group. In a brief note of introduction to his first book, *Zhil-byt Lesha (Once Upon a Time There Was Lesha)*, the protagonists of which transforms into whatever he wishes, Sergei Sedov assured that these short tales were actually about himself and his hand-written signature appeared under this declaration.⁷³ Sometimes the emphasis on individuality contributes to the creation of a very private environment thanks to a play of references to one's circle of fellow poets and writers. For example, the illustrations of Usachev's *Umnaia sobachka Sonia ili Pravila khoroshego tona dlia malen'kikh sobachek (The Smart Doggy Sonia or Rules of Bon Ton for Little Dogs)*, feature 'the poet Tim Sobakin', as one of the dwellers of the building in which Sonia and her master live.⁷⁴ Eventually readers understand that Sonia's master is actually the author of the book.⁷⁵ This intimate circle sometimes included relatives. For example, a tale by Marina Moskvina was published in *Tramvai* with illustrations by Sergei Tishkov, her thirteen-year-old son.⁷⁶

This play with the author's own presence in the text and references to other people belonging to the author's private sphere can be traced back to the OBERIU. Nikolai Oleinikov, for example, had a pen-name, Makar Svirepyi. This was also a character in his texts for children and he was drawn with Oleinikov's facial features. With the pen-name of Makar Svirepyi, Oleinikov wrote many

⁷³ Sergei Sedov, *Zhil-Byt Lesha* (Moscow: Malysh, 1991), p. 2.

⁷⁴ Andrei Usachev, *Umnaia sobachka Sonia ili Pravila khoroshego tona dlia malen'kikh sobachek*, illustrated by V. Medzhibovskii (Moscow: Topikal Tsitatel', 1996), pp. 6; 8. *Umnaia sobachka Sonia* was originally a cartoon. The first series was released in 1991 and the second in 1993. Both were directed by V. Medzhibovskii and written by Andrei Usachev.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, pp.82–5.

⁷⁶ Marina Moskvina, 'Eti neulovimye zvery', *Tramvai*, 6 (1993), pp. 15–18. A final note underlines that Sergei Tishkov is Moskvina's and Leonid Tishkov's son. The young boy had published a short autobiographical profile, a tale and some poems with his own illustrations in *Tramvai*, 4 (1990), pp. 30–31, when he was only ten years old.

fables or poems for private occasions, in which he referred to his circle of friends. According to Svetlana Boym these ‘madrigals’ had a subversive value, because they referred to the Soviet everyday, where the private dimension had no significance, and was even considered to be socially dangerous. In Boym’s words, ‘it is as if Oleinikov, through those humorous poems, sought to create a society of playful friends to defy the official collectivity’.⁷⁷ There was no longer a need for political subversion at the time when Tim Sobakin and his fellow writers and illustrators played with their own personalities and private lives. This feature rather had a cultural and ethical significance, since it was another way of underlining a specific cultural belonging.

The authors of the new playful wave emphasised their presence in their time, a presence which can be understood as indicating the acceptance of responsibility, a refusal to hide from the tasks that adults were confronted with. In other words, the emphasis on personality and the references to the author’s self are elements which participate in the cultural reconstruction that playful children’s literature was committed to in the early 1990s. The adults’ presence, though, must not convey the sense of an authoritarian form of control of the child’s perceptions. Thus, it could be expressed through play in a sort of a ‘hide-and-see’ mode. Tim Sobakin hid the letters of his name in a text on Sherlock Holmes.⁷⁸ In *Tramvai*, authors could introduce themselves as children. Sobakin, for example, whose actual name is Andrei Ivanov, signed the humorous tale ‘Moi tovarish vnuk’ (‘My Grandson Comrade’), centred on the figure of the

⁷⁷ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.198–9.

⁷⁸ *Tramvai*, 2 (1990), p. 10.

grandmother, as 'Andriusha Ivanov, granny Lena's grandson, and also granny Klava's'.⁷⁹

If we think back about the image of the black hen made up of handwritten signatures, the presence of the author's personality in the above-discussed texts appears to bear the message 'I am here', rather than 'I do not know who I am'. The context in which these authors wrote for children suggests we should not ascribe their playful self-referentiality to Postmodernism and its typical dislocation of the subject straightforwardly. Arguably, the new Russian children's authors acknowledged the feeling of uncertainty concerning identity which is typical of Postmodernism, and undertook a dialogue with it. However, they appear to strive for a solution to this feeling. In the session devoted to Black Hen in *Pioneer*, Vladimir Druk, a Postmodernist poet and a member of Black Hen, published his poem 'Vechernaia poverka' ('Evening Roll'). It is a poem imitating a dull taking of the register that turns into an interrogation of the identity of the poetic 'I'. A note below the title makes clear that these verses are for adults:

Иванов – Я
Петров –Я
Сидоров – Я
Так точно – тоже Я

К сожалению – Я
Видимо – Я
Видимо –невидимо – Я
Патефонов – Я
Мегафонов – Я
Магнитофонов – Я
Стереомагнитофонов – Я
Цветотелевизор – Я

В лучшем случае – я
в противном случае – тоже я
В очень противном случае –опять я

Здесь –я, тут –я
к вашим услугам –я.

⁷⁹ *Tramvai*, 6 (1990), pp. 10–13.

[...] ⁸⁰

Vitaly Chernetsky observes that this poem by Druk includes the pronoun I and surnames within a fluid representation in which signifiers are endlessly combined and recombined together.⁸¹ A short story written by another member of Black Hen, Iurii Nechiporenko, seems to suggest that the new wave of Russian children's authors was engaging with the confusion of identity expressed by Druk's poem. Nonetheless, it is significant that, in his short story, the narrative 'I' is in search of a solution to this identity crisis. Nechiporenko's story, 'Moi otets – nachal'nik sviazi' ('My Dad is the Head of Communications'), does not number among the playful texts that are the object of this thesis, which are characterized by playful inversions of expectations and common sense. However, the story is relevant to this discussion because it explicitly states what the playful texts reveal through their narrative strategies: the adults' need to believe in the possibility of saying 'I am here' and creating links bonding individuals to one another, when one's own relation to the self is nebulous.

In Nechiporenko's text, the adult narrative voice describes himself as a *chudak* ('Nu, i chudak!', 'What a weird fellow you are!' he says to himself).⁸² He recalls his own childhood, which took place during de-Stalinization,⁸³ and the

⁸⁰ 'Ivanov –me/ Petrov –me/ Sidorov –me/ Precisely –it's me as well./ Unfortunately–me/ Evidently–me/ Uncountably –me/MacPatephone –me/ MacMegaphone–me/ MacMagnetophone –me/ MacStereomagnetophone – me/ Colour Television – me/ At best–me/ At worst – me/ At the very worst – it's me again/ Here is me, this is me/At your service – me.' Vladimir Druk, 'Vechernaia proverka', *Pioner*, 4 (1990), 16–17.

⁸¹ Vitaly Chernetsky, 'Iosif Vissarionovich Pushkin, or Sots-Art and the New Russian Poetry', *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, ed. by Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgenii Dobrenko (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp.146–64 (p. 155).

⁸² Iurii Nechiporenko, 'Moi otets – nachal'nik sviazi', *Pioner*, 4 (1990), 18–25, p. 24.

⁸³ This is suggested by a passage with a hint at the removal of Stalin's body from the Mausoleum, which took place in 1961. The children are told about it by their father, as they have no memory of it themselves. Another important passage is about the fall of a statue of Kliment Voroshilov. The latter was a military commander close to Stalin, and in the tale the statue is secretly destroyed and buried because it is thought to resemble Stalin's features. 'Moi otets – nachal'nik sviazi', pp. 23–4.

figure of his father, who was head of the 'bond' (*sviaz'*), that is of a local telephone exchange. In one passage, the narrative voice declares he feels he is many people at the same time: an old man, a child, a weird fellow (*'chudak'*), and his father.⁸⁴ He states that these are simply the most stable forms of the 'I' living within himself, but other people come out sometimes, in a nebulous inner environment. One can almost hear a continuation of Druk's evening roll call: A child– me/ An old wise man –me/ A weird fellow – me /My father –it's me again.

The memory becomes more and more fragmented, but the closing paragraph, entitled 'Nachalo' ('Beginning') is an invitation, rich in emotional intensity, to have children, and create a living 'bond' (*sviaz'*):

[...] и детей делайте – это связь живая, она нужна – под напряжением только чтобы было, под напряжением – хотя, конечно, опасно, но только так можно.⁸⁵

The dangerous potentiality of bonds seems here to be associated with the individual responsibility that these entail,⁸⁶ and yet the creation of 'living bonds' is seen as necessary. The child is imagined as asking for a form of commitment on the part of adults, and the narrative voice's *chudachestvo*, his eccentricity and extreme sensitivity, makes a response to this call possible. Both in Nechiporenko's text and in the paratextual materials I discussed above, the figure of the *chudak* guarantees an emotionally intense form of commitment. By making reference to non-conformist art, to the personalities of the OBERIU poets, as well as to other members of what was perceived of as 'a brotherhood

⁸⁴ Ibidem, p. 24.

⁸⁵ '[...] and have children – this is a living link, a necessary one – as long as there is some electricity, some electricity; of course, it's a dangerous thing too, but that's our only way.'

Ibidem, p. 25.

⁸⁶ In the same paragraph, the narrative voice says that he is the 'head of the bond' ('nachal'nik sviazi') for his own son: 'и передается в него все – слово, и жест, и поступок – усиливается под напряжением – и дальше пошло.'

'And everything, my words, gestures and actions, passed to him, were strengthened by electricity, and then further grew.' (ibidem).

of kindred souls', the new wave of children's authors tried to articulate a coherent response to a question concerning their own identity in terms of pedagogical skills and ethical depth.

3.5. The Suffering Child and the Child-Lifeboat

The playful children's authors of the 1990s tried to conduct a personal dialogue with child readers, to create a 'living bond' with them. When the members of the group Black Hen introduced themselves to the vast readership of *Pioner* in 1990, they addressed child readers by means of special columns called 'I ia podumal/a' ('And I Thought'). Here various members of the group shared with children a personal thought: on life and the need to make decisions, on personal feelings and memories, on the concept of the absurd, on friendship, on the value of human beings in a society which is revealed to be full of violence, and on one's relationship to literature.⁸⁷

In *Tramvai*, the direct dialogue with the child reader became a regular feature from 1993, when the magazine started to be published again, after a year's pause.⁸⁸ Each issue opened with a letter to readers by a member of the editorial board, and other articles and columns turned to child readers and addressed their everyday lives. What is striking is that, on the one hand, these texts demonstrate a deep awareness of the difficult material and emotional conditions that children were going through. On the other hand, child readers are encouraged to help adults by virtue of their innate happiness. Only adults seem to be affected by the tragic conditions in which the country finds itself:

⁸⁷ The texts can be found in *Pioner*, 4 (1990) on the following pages: Tim Sobakin '...I togda ia podumal', pp. 26–7; Boris Minaev, 'I ia podumal...za chto ia liubliu "Laskovyi mai"', pp. 36–7; Svetlana Vinokurova, '...I ia podumala', p.43; Lev Iakovlev, '...I ia podumal', p. 46; Iurii Nechiporenko, '...I ia podumal', p. 47.

⁸⁸ From this time on, it was no longer published with the support of the Children's Fund.

Скажи, часто ли улыбается твой папа? А мама? [...] Понаблюдай за взрослыми и посчитай: на скольких, повстречавшихся тебе, приходится один улыбающийся. Если каждый десятый — тебе крупно повезло, ведь сегодня не так часто встретишь улыбающегося человека.⁸⁹

The text carries on by inviting children to wear a sticker with a smile and cheer up their parents. In the next issue, a member of the editorial board, 'Vzroslyi diadka Oleg' ('Adult uncle Oleg'), includes himself among the adults who are in need of help:

Здравствуй, брат мой!

Вчера целый день у меня случились неприятности, каких, впрочем, бывает полным-полно у всех взрослых, и У ТВОИХ ПАПЫ С МАМОЙ – тоже. Я промаялся весь день, а ночью долго не мог заснуть. А когда наконец заснул, мне приснилось, что где-то у меня есть младший брат — ТЫ. И я понял: без твоей помощи, без твоего тепла мне будет очень трудно.

[...]

Я увидел тебя во сне, но я точно знаю, что ты существуешь наяву, на самом деле. ТЕБЯ НЕ МОЖЕТ НЕ БЫТЬ, БРАТ МОЙ!

Взрослые всегда оберегают детей, помогают им, защищают их. Но ты не можешь себе представить, как иногда бывают БЕЗАЩИТНЫ сами взрослые! [...]

Посмотри вокруг. Может быть, твои близкие взрослые, ТВОИ ПАПА И МАМА так же НУЖДАЮТСЯ В ТВОЕЙ ПОМОЩИ, как и я? [...] ПРОТЯНИ ИМ РУКУ, брат мой!⁹⁰

Once again, it is acknowledged that child readers live surrounded by desperation, but it is as if they have preserved an inner invulnerability which prevented the circumstances from affecting their natural happiness. The text is accompanied by a picture of the author as a child, wearing a sailor hat, and

⁸⁹ Tell me, does your dad often smile? And your mom? [...] Observe adults and count: out of how many of those you have met is smiling? If one out of ten, you are definitely lucky – it's not so easy today to meet a smiling person. 'Podari ulybku!' *Tramvai*, 1 (1993), p. 19. The letter to readers which opens this issue addresses the entertainments of the past and of the present (*Ibidem*, p. 2).

⁹⁰ 'Hello, my brother! Yesterday I went through troubles all day long, the same identical troubles which all adults, including YOUR DAD AND MOM, are going through. I languished all day, and could not fall asleep for a long time at night. And when I finally fell asleep, I dreamt that somewhere I had a younger brother: YOU. And I realized that without your help, without your warmth, it would be very hard for me to carry on. [...] I saw you in a dream, but I am certain that you do exist. YOU CANNOT BUT EXIST, MY BROTHER! Adults always defend, help and protect children. But you can't imagine how DEFENSELESS even adults can be sometimes! [...] Have a look around. Maybe adults who are near to you, YOUR DAD AND MOM, also NEED YOU HELP, as much as I do. [...] EXTEND YOUR HELPING HAND TOWARDS THEM, my brother!', 'Zdravstvui, brat moi!', *Tramvai*, 2 (1993), p. 2.

indeed other passages of the letter make reference to the adult as an old ship in the middle of a tempest, and to the child as a lifeboat. The author of the letter is probably Oleg Kurguzov, who wrote many absurdist tales about parents and children, since the features of the child in the black and white picture unmistakably belong to him.

Remarkably, straight after this letter a very funny poem by Mikhail Iasnov about a child who has just lost his first milk tooth celebrates the passage from childhood to adulthood. The poem is entitled 'Ia vzrosleiu' ('I Grow Up'):

Ура! Он выпал наконец!
Теперь я больше не юнец.
Я рашпрощалша ш прошлым —
И штал ужашно вжрошлым!⁹¹

The illustration to this poem portrays the same child in the photograph, Oleg, wearing an identical sailor hat.⁹² The content of the letter and the relationship between this text and the poem exemplify the delicate equilibrium that many authors of the early 1990s tried to maintain between the wish to open a genuine dialogue with child readers, which implied a confession of their severe difficulties, and their credibility as adults. The ideal of the child as 'a new beginning', a 'holy Yea' who inhabits play as his natural dimension, allows adults to state their doubts about their actual capacity to provide care, without ultimately jeopardising their status as adults. When a game finishes, a new game can start. After the terrible confession of being weak and defenceless, the child 'I' of Oleg is still smiling in the poem, enthusiastic at the idea of having said farewell to the past, and having entered adulthood. The play-dimension offers the possibility of a continuous re-starting, which here turns into the possibility of a re-birth. Thus, the relationship between Iasnov's poem and the letter by 'Adult

⁹¹ 'Hurray! It's finally dropped/ I'm no longer a child/ I say farewell to the past —/ I am an adult, how terrific!', Mikhail Iasnov, 'Ia vzrosleiu', *ibidem*, p. 3.

⁹² The illustration is by O. Orekhova.

uncle Oleg' features the death and the rebirth of the adult 'I'.⁹³ However, this rebirth excludes the child from the realm of experience. By venting his own desperation to the child reader and by turning his plea for help into a collective issue, 'Adult uncle Oleg' has erased from his adult consciousness the idea that children also experience the conditions he is describing. This is especially significant if we remember that the playful wave within Russian children's literature of the post-perestroika period had started in the name of children's suffering and the wish to make society aware of their conditions. In just a few years, it turned into a discourse on adulthood in which the child, with his jolly spirit, and above all his invulnerability, was a lifeboat.

During the same year, 1993, another collaborator of the magazine, 'Gosha', devoted the initial letter to readers to the theme of love. Here children's difficulties are acknowledged, but the author explains that the resources for overcoming difficulties are within the child's self: 'hard though life may be for you, always remember that you are happy'.⁹⁴ Undoubtedly these words have the merit of encouraging resistance and hope in a time of dire straits, however, they also confirm the persistency of the idea of children's innate happiness, and – at least potential – invulnerability. The passage into adulthood, as the group Black Hen declared in his manifesto, is necessarily painful, but before becoming suffering grown-ups, children can endure a lot.

3.6. Not Only Harmful: Adults in Playful Children's Texts of the Early

1990s

⁹³ The fact that this rebirth is expressed through a series of actors (Kurguzov, Iasnov and the illustrator, Orekhova) strengthens the impression that this is a collective rebirth.

⁹⁴ *Tramvai*, 6 (1993), 'Bumazhnyi golub', p. 2.

As we have seen, many members of the group *Black Hen*, including Tim Sobakin, found a platform for publishing their works in *Tramvai*. The concept of playfulness was central in their literary manifesto, and intertwined with a model of adulthood:

ПУСТЬ БУДЕТ вопящий от счастья, восторженный, обоженный несправедливостью, презирающий тупое самодовольство взрослых дядь и тетя – да! здравствует! такой! человек! который даст двести очков форы манекенным персонажам, еще время от времени встречающимся в литературе.

[...]

ПУСТЬ БУДЕТ и шальная, легкомысленная, со свистом в ушах проза, вольная, немудреная, полоумная — так, побасенки да приколы — проза неги и наслаждения; гуляешь иногда зевакою по улицам и видишь — батюшки-святы, — какого только народу земля не носит — и длинноволосых, и пучеглазых, и ушеострых, и хорькозубых мордovorотов!⁹⁵

Such criticism of ‘adults’ dull self-satisfaction’ is variously expressed through adult characters who are not authoritarian. The stories are often set in a usual everyday home environment, in moments of calm which are made joyful by an unexpected or absurd happening. At the end of these stories, the relationship between adult members of the family and children usually appears strengthened by a bond of complicity. Typical examples are Oleg Kurguzov’s short tales, which often have a child narrator. In ‘Solntse na potolke’ (‘The Sun on the Ceiling’), for instance, a child enjoys the warmth of the sun rays which are falling on the wall of a room at home. When the rays reach the ceiling, the child’s mum forbids him to climb on it with his new shirt, because it may get dirty. Obediently, the child changes into an old shirt, and carries on his pursuit

⁹⁵ May there be a person who is able to cry out loud for happiness, is enthusiastic, set on fire before injustice, contemptuous of adults’ dull self-satisfaction. Long! Live! Such! A person! Who is one hundred times better than those puppet-like characters that one still meets in our literature now and then.

[...]

‘May there be crazy, light-hearted, loony prose; an overwhelming, non-enigmatic, half rattle-brained prose – such as *pobasenki* and *prikoly*–, one expressing joyfulness and fun. Sometimes you may go around like a slacker and meet –good heavens! what people don’t live on earth – long-nosed, or pop-eyed, pointed-eared or ferret-like toothy freaks!’ *Pioner*, 4 (1990), p. 5.

of the sun on the ceiling.⁹⁶ In another story, the dad wants a colony of bugs that have invaded his house to go away, and orders them to leave the house with a very harsh tone. The youngest of the bugs, however, catches a badly-hidden smile on his face, and understands that this man is actually good. Eventually, the dad turns to his son with a sentence that appears as mocking the typical scene of Socialist Realist fiction in which the elder teaches the younger a moral lesson:

С детства, сынок, надо силу воли тренировать. Чтоб не улыбаться, когда не надо. Понял?
 - Понял, - говорю я. А сам на папу смотрю и улыбаюсь. Он смешной такой, весь клопами истоптанный.⁹⁷

The absurdist prose of Marina Moskvina, on the other hand, exposes adults' inadequateness and egoism, and her child narrator is their victim. Andriukha Antonov, the child narrator of the stories gathered in *Moia sobaka liubit dzhaz* (*My Dog Loves Jazz*)⁹⁸ never passes a personal judgment on the adult figures that surround him, from his parents to his teachers at school, but there is no way he can hide his longing for affection and authentic human relationships. Thus the reader cannot but realize his miserable conditions of abandonment: 'Even a fly's buzz has the power to brighten up my loneliness',⁹⁹ Andriukha says. Almost all of the 'adventures' of this child concern his family environment. In one tale, his dad falls in love with another woman, but goes back home when he hears that his favourite plant, Ivan, is losing his leaves

⁹⁶ Oleg Kurguzov, 'Solntse na potolke', *Tramvai*, 1 (1990), p. 22.

⁹⁷ 'From childhood, son, you need to train your willpower. This way you will manage not to laugh when you should not. Understood?'

'Understood.' I say, and I look at dad and smile. He is funny, all covered with bugs.

Oleg Kurguzov, 'Kak papa klopoiv gonial', *Tramvai*, 9 (1990), p. 15.

⁹⁸ These stories appeared in children's and adolescents' magazines between 1990 and 1992, but the book was published in 1992. Other editions, in which new chapters were added, appeared in 1997 and in 2001.

⁹⁹ 'Marina Moskvina, 'Moia sobaka liubit dzhaz'

<<http://tramvaj.narod.ru/Moskvina/jazz.htm>> [accessed 25 May 2013].

because it misses him.¹⁰⁰ In another, he experiences terrible anxiety because his father, whom he considers ‘totally defenceless’, has not got home yet.¹⁰¹ In many cases, this child is only a witness, and reports what he has heard (the narrative is always in the past tense) from adults, especially from his parents.¹⁰² This child narrator seems to embody infinite enduring, and he is able to experience a variety of emotions, including excitement or sorrow. Through the child narrator’s perceptions of events, the short stories of *My Dog Loves Jazz* becomes an example of ‘subjective realism’, allowing the reader to see reality through the subject’s mind (the narrator, in this case).¹⁰³ The child does not seem to be aware of being oppressed, this is something that readers are left to deduce. The suffering child reader of late perestroika is here the observer of a family environment which is indifferent towards children’s needs, and he is asked to understand and overcome the possible effects of this context by virtue of his capacity to endure suffering through laughter.

My Dog Loves Jazz is an extremely funny narrative. However, it is not the narrator Andriukha who jokes and laughs, but the authorial voice. The book draws on a rich repertoire of Soviet underground humour which tended to subvert any form of sacredness and gravity, from the Soviet discourse to the category of the ‘Russian soul’. For example:

Друзья! – сказал папа. – Не будем тратить драгоценное время общения на ссоры. Потому что жизнь есть радости.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ ‘Nash mokrii Ivan’, *ibidem* [accessed 25 May 2013].

¹⁰¹ ‘Seichas on pridet i budet veselo’, *ibidem*, [accessed 25 May 2013].

¹⁰² ‘Shvabra, Shvabra, gde moia liubov’, *ibidem*, [accessed 25 May 2013].

¹⁰³ Maria Nikolajeva, ‘Exit children’s literature?’, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 22, 2 (1998), 221– 36

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v022/22.2nikolajeva.html>

[accessed 30 May 2013].

¹⁰⁴ ‘Friends!’ dad said, ‘We will not waste the precious occasion of an encounter by arguing. Because life is joy.’ ‘Hobbi’, *Moia sobaka liubit dzhaz* <<http://tramvaj.narod.ru/Moskvina/jazz.htm>> [25 May 2013].

Exploiting underground humour, the narrative turns to an implied reader who is able to understand subtle forms of irony and parody that point to on adults' shortcomings. In *My Dog Loves Jazz*, the bond of complicity, which in Kurguzov's texts is established between parents and child character, shifts to the relationship between the implied author and the implied reader. Together, they explore the adult world by laughing at it.¹⁰⁵

3.7. Between Chaos and New Order: Underground Soviet Humour Enters Russian Children's Literature

In the context of 1990s Russia, laughing at the adult world implied first of all laughing at Soviet discourse. Russian underground culture had a long and rich tradition of doing so, and after perestroika Russian children's authors drew on this tradition to affirm their pedagogical and intellectual reliability. By referring to this form of underground humour and replicating its capacity to turn Soviet discourse upside-down and expose its absurdity, Russian children's authors of the post-perestroika period introduced themselves as the representatives of a group of intellectuals who had been able to state the truth in a time of oppression and censorship. This tradition can be separated into two parts. One was a non-conformist artistic expression which originated in the 1970s, the so-called Sots-Art, and which mocked Soviet ideological cliché. The other can be defined as a large ironic aesthetics which belonged to the everyday dimension, to the circles of friends and the coffee breaks at work, and was called, among its many denominations, *steb* or *prikol*.

¹⁰⁵ The edition of 1997 of this book opens with a letter supposedly handwritten by Marina Moskvina, in which she states that she has written the book to make her child reader even happier than he or she already is. Marina Moskvina, *Moia sobaka liubit dzhaz: Rasskazy*, illustrated by Vladimir Burkin (Moscow: Olimpionnik, 1997), pp. 1–2.

The discussion of Sots-Art as a form of Russian Postmodernism is useful for my analysis of playful children's texts of the post-perestroika in that it clarifies the differences between the value of Postmodernist play and the kind of playfulness featured in these children's texts in the 1990s. The fact that some Sots-Art poets, such as Vladimir Druk or Igor Irten'ev, joined the Black Hen group or published their work with them points to a dialogue between the features of the Sots-Art movement and the new playful wave in Russian children's literature. This dialogue called into question the motifs underlying Russian Postmodernism, especially its reworking of the categories of norm, chaos, freedom and the possibility of enjoying freedom individually. Sots-Art was particularly concerned with the Soviet concept of heroism and with the Soviet 'grand style', or the tendency toward monumentalism, epic narratives and other aspects of Socialist Realism. For example, it could juxtapose an image of Lenin with a Coca-Cola logo.¹⁰⁶ Sots-Art originated in painting and in poetry,¹⁰⁷ merged textual and visual aspects together, and its features were those typical of Postmodernism, such as language games, or the deconstruction of the concepts of author, viewer and reader. The specificity of Sots-Art rested in its play with Socialist Realism, its myths and structures, and the way in which Soviet ideology dominated every-day reality. As Lipovetsky and Dobrenko underline, Sots-Art artists belonged to the post-Thaw generation, and emerged in an atmosphere in which the Socialist Realist discourse was

¹⁰⁶ Nancy Condee, 'Sots-Art, Conceptualism and Russian Postmodernism', in *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, ed. by Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgenii Dobrenko, pp. vii–xii (p. vii).

¹⁰⁷ Mark Lipovetsky, 'Vladimir Sorokin's "Theatre of Cruelty"', in *ibidem*, pp. 167–92 (p. 167).

already delegitimized. Therefore, they addressed Socialist Realism both as the code of power and as a delegitimized, already deconstructed, discourse.¹⁰⁸

For Lipovetsky, Sots-Art mostly consists of a dialogue with the world of absurd, with chaos.¹⁰⁹ He draws attention to the significance of Foucault's notion of any discourse as totalitarian for Sorokin, whom Lipovetsky considers a typical representative of Sots-Art literature. The presence of Socialist Realist discourse in Sorokin's prose, Lipovetsky maintains, was informed by the 'extreme complexity of the task of disengagement from the power of discourse'.¹¹⁰ For Sorokin and, Lipovetsky implies, Sots-Art artists in general, Socialist Realism symbolized any form of discourse as totalitarian power. Through their works they represented chaos, in which the categories of order and violation of order, harmony and absurdity merged together and became indistinguishable.¹¹¹

In my view, after perestroika many children's authors turned to playfulness, which included playing with Soviet discourse, as a way of recreating a coherent discourse able to guide the child in the difficult time of transition, and assign adults a defined role of moral leaders. Among Lipovetsky's observations on Sorokin as a typical Sots-Art writer, one is particularly relevant for separating the children's texts I discuss in this chapter from the features of Russian Postmodernism, and, at the same time for demonstrating the existence of a dialogue between these children's texts and Postmodernist features. According to Lipovetsky, Sorokin, and Russian Postmodernists with him, constructed a 'mythology of chaos' in which 'any

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem, pp. 169–70; Evgenii Dobrenko, 'Preodoleniie ideologii,' *Volga*, 11 (1990), 164–84, quoted ibidem, p. 170.

¹⁰⁹ 'Vladimir Sorokin's "Theatre of Cruelty"', pp. 169–70.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 171.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, p. 176.

hierarchy of meaning, any system of values are only an external cover for the total chaos of ontological absurdity'.¹¹² According to this view, Sots-Art was the exposition of an ontological dead-end, in which freedom, as the main inspiration of the culture of the time, could be achieved only through the decentralization of the subject, and thus the playful assembling of different discourses, the absence of responsibility for the word. It is a freedom that belongs to no-one and which had little to do with humanism.¹¹³

The never-ending deconstruction of any discourse as power risked leading Sots-Art artists towards the destruction of existential values and of the self. Dmitrii Prigov, one of the main figures of the Sots-Art movement, revealed he was aware of this possible dead-end, when he declared that he feared freedom and felt threatened by it.¹¹⁴ Discussing Prigov's work, Marina Balina maintains that the Sots-Art movement included the seeds of a creative, constructive, approach, in which the deconstruction of the power discourse served as a 'regeneration and rebirth from the chaos of defunct linguistic ideologemes and Socialist-realist mythology'.¹¹⁵ I maintain that playful children's literature of the 1990s became a fertile ground for these seeds. The element of creative re-birth able to save the self from the threat of absolute freedom and of chaos of empty signifiers is central in the playful texts which I discuss in this chapter. Here the mocking of Soviet discourse, often a reworking of Sots-Art's themes and images, appears to aid the reconstruction of the self, especially in terms of intellectual identity. The reconstruction of the adult self was

¹¹² Ibidem.

¹¹³ Ibidem, 189–90.

¹¹⁴ Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, *Napisannoe s 1975 po 1989* (Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1997), p. 119, quoted in Marina Balina, 'Playing Absolute Time: Chronotypes of Sots-Art', in *EndQuote: Sots-Art literature and Soviet Grand Style*, pp.58–74 (p. 65).

¹¹⁵ 'Playing Absolute Time', p. 66.

inseparable from the reconstruction of culture which playful children's authors engaged with in the 1990s. The figure of the child stimulated and encouraged adults' 'regeneration and rebirth', since the child was seen as suffering, and therefore as being able to empathise with adults. At the same time, he was seen as a source of a positive and creative energy, the main expressions of which were play and laughter.

As Dobrenko points out, by 1993 Sots-Art was no longer a form of artistic experimentation, because its representatives had become major figures in the national and international literary scene, and their works had reached the status of 'classic literature'.¹¹⁶ Thus, when Russian children's literature throughout the 1990s and beyond mocked Soviet culture, it was partly associating itself with an established literary tradition, characterized by non-conformism and rebellion. However, these children's texts were also making reference to forms of underground folk culture which, in the early 1990s, were abandoning the reference to Soviet discourse as its main object of humour.¹¹⁷

Throughout the Soviet period, but especially from the 1970s on, a vast humorous underground repertoire had addressed Soviet discourse and its mythologies through a variety of forms. These forms have been gathered together under different denominations, the most common of which are *steb* and *prikol*. *Sadistskie stishki* (sadistic verses), short texts by the Mit'ki, or the absurd deeds of the so called Necrorealists are typical examples of late Socialist *steb*, and *anekdoty* (Soviet jokes) an oral humorous genre similar to

¹¹⁶ Evgeny Dobrenko, 'Socialist Realism, a Postscriptum: Dmitrii Prigov and the Aesthetic Limits of Sots-Art', in *EndQuote: Sots-Art literature and Soviet Grand Style*, pp. 77–8.

¹¹⁷ Yurchak points out that, in the late 1980s, the habit itself of telling *anekdoty* (Soviet jokes), which was a central aspect of *steb* culture, almost disappeared from daily life. At the beginning of perestroika there still were *anekdoty* on Gorbachev, but from the 1990s 'it seemed no longer relevant to tell *anekdoty* about the recent Soviet past.' *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 275–6.

it.¹¹⁸ According to Sergei Yurchak, *steb* was not focused on ‘meaning’, or ‘a truth to understand’, but rather on an ambiguous semantic level enabling the speaker and the listener to find an escape from dichotomies between seriousness and laughter, truth and falseness, or support and dissention towards official discourse. Yurchak argues that, in its various forms, *steb* was provocative, but its prominent features were ‘the openendedness and indeterminacy of meaning’.¹¹⁹ A key element which underlined the production of *steb* forms of irony was, in Yurchak’s view, ‘the hegemony of form’: the detachment of the ever-present ideological discursive forms from their original meanings that gradually occurred in the last thirty years of Soviet power.

However, with perestroika *steb* culture and *anekdoty* had a specific meaning in people’s perception, and this was especially associated with a provocative stance directed at Soviet discourse and which was endowed with an ethical value.¹²⁰ Late Socialist underground humour, in other words, started to be seen as a form of truth-telling and political resistance. Collections of *anekdoty*, which had always been an oral and unofficial genre, started to be published. As Seth Graham points out, the publication of *anekdoty* participated in the project of perestroika, as a ‘literary counterpart to the many posthumous political rehabilitations of the Gorbachev years’.¹²¹ The group Black Hen was

¹¹⁸ About all these forms of late Socialist irony see *ibidem* pp. 238–81.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 258.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 4–8. According to Yurchak, these associations stem from retrospective approaches to Soviet culture and Soviet reality. These retrospective approaches, he maintains, rely on binary categories, such as oppression and resistance, falsity and truth, which do not do justice to the complexity of life in the Soviet Union. *Anekdoty*, in particular, have often been associated with a ‘clandestine statement of “truth”, of what one “really thinks” (*ibidem*, p. 277). In *Ku-ka-re-ku*, the editor of *Ogonek*, Vitalii Korotich, mentions *anekdoty* as Soviet people’s means for expressing criticism towards the State and stating the truth about the actual conditions of the country. ‘Byt’ realistom’, *Ku-ka-re-ku*, p. 22.

¹²¹ Graham, *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 206. See also A. V. Voznesenkii, ‘O sovremennom anekdotopechatanii’, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 22 (1996), 393–9. The first collection of *anekdoty* was ed. by A. F. Belousov and published

actively involved in the gathering and the publication of children's *anekdoty*.¹²²

Overall, Soviet underground humour entered children's literature.

The playful nature of the children's texts which mocked Soviet discourse by reproducing forms of underground humour is first and foremost characterized by the inversion of commonly accepted values and official discourses. Children's texts could make fun of official newspapers, and everything which belonged to the sphere of the official, of gravity and lack of spontaneity, in other words, to the Soviet Grand style. Children's texts such as 'Uchebnik dlia dvoechnikov' ('Textbook for Dunces'), 'Fingal: Vedomosti nevedomykh iavlenii' (Shiner: Gazette of Unknown Facts), 'Kratkaia istoriia khuliganstva' ('Brief History of Rascals'), 'Chistaia pravda' ('The Pure Truth'), or Grigorii Oster's *Bad Advice* are representative of a way of addressing the child reader by turning commonly accepted rules of behaviour upside-down.¹²³

Among the children's texts which mocked Soviet discourse in the 1990s, were those which directed their humour at the typically Soviet books on good manners. These children's texts ridiculed this genre for its rigid understanding of education and upbringing. Overall, mocking advice literature participated in the parody of Soviet cultural cliché.¹²⁴ As Kelly points out, advice literature, such as manuals on etiquette or housekeeping, was very popular in late imperial Russia, and in the post-Revolutionary period it became an important aspect of

in Tallin in 1989. Voznesenskii underlines that already in 1992, the anthologies of *anekdoty* were no longer endowed with a political meaning, but were rather seen as amusing reading (ibidem, p. 394).

¹²² In 1995, the Black Hen group and the publisher Glossa started publishing a children's magazine called *Detskie anekdoty: Zhurnal veselykh shtuk*. In the first issue, readers were reminded that Black Hen had published collections of *detskie anekdoty* for two years.

¹²³ O. and K. Solov'ev, 'Uchebnik dlia dvoechnikov', *Tramvai*, 9 (1990), pp. 5–6; M. Kuzkina (ed.), 'Fingal: Vedomosti nevedomykh iavlenii; Kratkaia istoriia khuliganstva', *Tramvai*, 12 (1990), p. 19, *Chistaia pravda*, ibidem, pp. 22–3. For the analysis of *Vrednye sovety*, see the second part of this chapter.

¹²⁴ *Detskaia literatura*, p. 471.

propaganda. It mostly consisted of behavioural and household manuals, and both the types conveyed a wide sense of *kul'turnost'*, an ethos that implied respect for hygienic norms, physical fitness, ideals of intellectual self-betterment and respect for high culture.¹²⁵ Titles varied from *Kak chitat' knigu* (*How to Read a Book*, 1924) or *Remont i zakalivanie organizma* (*The Repair and Tempering of the Human Organism*, 1925) to *Za obshchim stolom* (*At the Common Table*, 1933) or *Kak i o chem pisat' v gazetnu* (*How to Write for the Newspaper and What to Write About*, 1928).¹²⁶ In the 1930s and in the 1940s advice literature was particularly concerned with order and discipline, and many advice books for parents represented children as 'respectable conformist[s]':¹²⁷ tidy, clean and totally obedient. From the second half of the 1930s, these books strengthened the representation of the Soviet masses as a unified whole whose happiness was guaranteed in all aspects of everyday life: from the richness and variety of food to the beauty of the home environment.¹²⁸ In other words, these books contributed to the creation of the myth of collective happiness and social unity. Both behavioural and household manuals were printed in very high print-runs from the late 1950s.¹²⁹ However, from the Thaw advice literature started to express tensions and contradictions between collective values and personal dignity, and ambiguity of behavioural rules.¹³⁰

Advice literature was the object of unofficial mockery among young people and the creative intelligentsia until the early 1990s, as expressed, for

¹²⁵ Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), see especially the chapters 'Advice Literature in Late Imperial Russia', pp. 156–229; 'The Personal Does Not Exist': Advising the Soviet Mass Reader', 1917–1953', pp. 230–311; and 'Negotiating Consumerism: The Dilemmas of Behaviour Literature', 1953–2000', pp. 312–93.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 271; 268; 275.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 280.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 287.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 319.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 330–1.

example, by *anekdoty*.¹³¹ Furthermore, unofficial Soviet literature often made reference to it in a parodical fashion in the 1960s and the 1970s.¹³² We can find an early example of this specific form of humour within Soviet children's literature in Samuil Marshak's *Kak sebia vesti* (*How to Behave*). The title itself appears to quote a famous behavioural advice book which had been published a few years before, Iina Aasamaa's *Kak sebia vesti* (*How to Behave*, 1974).¹³³ In Marshak's book a bear-cub is the addressee of a series of instructions under the headings 'nel'zia' ('You must not') and 'nado' ('you ought'): greet unknown people who pass by, be obedient, respect elderly people, don't slurp, don't yawn and so on. However, after this long series of pieces of 'advice', the bear-cub does exactly the opposite, and seems to find it funny. There is no trace of condemnation in the narrative voice, and the last illustration portrays the bear-cub triumphantly swinging on a chandelier as if it were a creeper.¹³⁴

Forms of mocking of advice literature can also be found in Moskvina's *My Dog Loves Jazz*. The edition which was published in 1997 concludes with an illustration by Burkin in which Andrei and his father sit together and read *Kniga o vkusnoi i zdorovoi pishche* (*The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*) together, with a large smile on their face.¹³⁵ *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* was first published in 1939, saw several reprints, especially from the 1950s, and promoted the most common recipes and food habits of the Soviet people.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Ibidem, pp. 360–1.

¹³² Ibidem, pp. 362–64. Kelly refers to Erofeev's *Moskva-Petushki* and Dovlatov's prose.

¹³³ This book is mentioned by one of Kelly's informants while describing how she and her circle of school-friends found Soviet advice literature 'hysterically funny'. The informant was born in the late 1950s. *Refining Russia*, p. 361.

¹³⁴ Samuil Marshak, *Kak sebia vesti* (Kiev: Veselka, 1978).

¹³⁵ Marina Moskvina, *Moia sobaka liubit dzhaz* (Moscow: Olimpionik, 1997), p. 55.

¹³⁶ In 1946 and in 1948 the book was reprinted in a reduced edition. In 1952 the original edition was published again, and, from that year on, was reprinted almost annually in hundreds of thousands of copies. The first 1939 edition had an introduction written by

Most importantly, each edition linked the theme of food to the one of Soviet happiness.¹³⁷ As a matter of fact, it featured ingredients that were impossible to find in the Soviet Union's far from well-stocked shops, and the book became the object of unofficial hilarity. In this illustration from *My Dog Loves Jazz* the reader is left uncertain as to whether father and son are laughing at the book, or whether they are victims of the dull hypocrisy it represents.

Sergei Sedov's *Skazki pro zmeia Gorynycha (Fairy Tales About Snake Gorynych)*, with illustrations by Andrei Bondarenko, is an interesting example of the representation of upside-down behaviour as a mocking of the Soviet discourse, and in particular of good manners. At the same time, this book constitutes an interesting reworking of the Sots-Art play with Soviet discourse.¹³⁸ It is a collection of short texts, in which each child protagonist embodies a typical pre-requisite of the Soviet child, only turned upside-down. Sashka is 'terribly lazy', Genka is stingy, Sen'ka is 'very faint-hearted', Mit'ka is 'such a whiny boy', and so on.¹³⁹ The illustrations portray all these children as pioneers, with the typical red handkerchief at their neck and the blue short trousers. The snake Gorynych, a character of Russian fairy tales, interacts with these reversed pioneers. He would like to eat at least one of them, but he never succeeds in his plan. Rather, he ends up doing homework in Sasha's place, or lets Mit'ka have a ride on his back as long as he stops crying. The mocking of

Anastas Mikoian, USSR People's Commissar of Food Industries. See *Refining Russia*, pp. 284; 317.

¹³⁷ See Gian Piero Piretto, 'Tasty and Healthy: Soviet Happiness in One Book', in *Petrified Utopia*, ed. by Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko, pp. 79–96.

¹³⁸ Andrei Bondarenko was formed in the cultural environment of Sots-Art. See the radio interview Viktor Shenderovich, 'Knizhka— dlia dushi ili dlia inter'era: Viktor Shenderovich besuedet s knizhnym dizainerom Andreem Bondarenko'

<<http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/1839614.html>>

[accessed 5 June 2013].

¹³⁹ Sergei Sedov, *Skazki pro zmeia Gorynycha* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1993), pp. 5; 7; 9; 11.

Soviet discourse is not limited to the illustrations of pioneers. The book, indeed, seems to play with the Soviet motto 'we are born to make fairy tales into life'.

The Soviet motto about fairy tales which turn into life was the object of mockery in Sots-Art.¹⁴⁰ As Balina explains, Sots-Art artists transformed this motto into a paradox, by turning life into a fairy tale, or, rather, a myth.¹⁴¹ The dialogue between *Fairy Tales about Snake Gorynych* and Sots-Art is particularly evident in the illustrations, in which the Kremlin and the chimes of the Spasskaia clock tower appear very often in the background. Balina points out that the tower was part of the Soviet mythology, as much as the red flag, and embodied the 'absolute time', which is 'the time of absolute truth', 'the absolute time of power'.¹⁴² Sots-Art artists and writers deconstructed the intrusive and oppressive character of absolute time in various ways, including through fairy tale discourse.¹⁴³ One of the illustrations of *Fairy Tales About Snake Gorynych* performs the same form of deconstruction. Here children are gathered in a fenced yard, and look, for once, to be engaged in a real pioneer-like activity: they are building something, holding saws and hammers. But it is only another joke Soviet discourse: the children are not building something useful for the community, but a mini Red Square. This is as illusory as the gigantic Red Square which is painted on panels at their backs, with the Spasskaia clock tower, symbol of the 'absolute time of power', clearly visible.

¹⁴⁰ See Balina 'Playing Absolute', p. 62.

¹⁴¹ Ibidem.

¹⁴² Ibidem, p. 58–9. Balina draws on the three chrono-types that Donald J. Wilcox has detected in narrative structures: 'absolute time, objective time and narrative subjective time'. She summarises the definition of these three categories as follows: '*Absolute time* is the "given" time, [...]. In a fictional text, it can be expressed as God's plan, fate, existence, or humanity. Absolute time is eternal, the highest time of the temporal axis. [...] *Objective time* is the time of the world around us, which includes concrete events and circumstances that affect the narration. [...] *Subjective time* corresponds to the life of the hero or heroes; it is the time that unfolds immediately in the process of narration' (ibidem, p. 58).

¹⁴³ See, for example, Balina's discussion of the fairy-tale ending of Prigov's 'The Delegate from Vasil'evskii Island'. Ibidem, p. 65.

They look perfectly aware of the fake nature of this landscape: behind the panels the actual Moscow, made of common little streets deprived of grandiosity is well visible for all of them. These children have been made aware of the illusory nature of grandiosity and rhetoric. The deconstruction of Soviet discourse that we can observe in this book does not end in chaos, but in the affirmation of a truth beyond chaos.

Fairy Tales about Snake Gorynych, much as Burkin's illustration of *My Dog Loves Jazz* in 1997, mocks the Soviet discourse at a time when the Pioneers did not exist any longer, and Soviet slogans had stopped being the object of oral humour. In post-Soviet children's literature, the mocking of Soviet discourse persisted for a long time. This can partly be seen as an attempt on the part of children's authors to represent themselves as the heirs of a specific class of intellectuals, which had defended non-conformism and individual thinking throughout the Soviet time. The significance of Soviet underground humour is enhanced by the fact that, from 1990, literature underwent a profound crisis in Russia, and stopped representing a source of moral guidance. Although *Tramvai*, and later the magazine *Kucha mala (Little Heap)* in 1996, continued to offer their child readers the poetry which had been significant for the generation of the Thaw, for example Anna Akhmatova or Marina Tsvetaeva, Soviet humour remained an indispensable source to draw on for many children's writers and illustrators. These playful texts for a young audience should be discussed not only as a way of getting rid of Soviet didacticism, but also as another way of defining adults' identity.

3.8. The Staging of Playful Rebellion and Punishment

The figure of the *chudak* and the presence of Soviet underground humour in post-Soviet children's literature advocated non-conformism and rebellion. However, there are children's texts which fall into the category of playfulness in which acts of rebellion are followed by severe psychological and physical punishments. In *Ku-ka-re-ku*, the almanac of 1990 with texts written by the members of the Black Hen, we find a tale by Vera Ivanova, 'Trudnyi sluchai ('A Difficult Case'). Here a young boy, Petka, wants to realize his dream of taking a ride in an ambulance, with sirens wailing and people making way at the thought that a seriously ill person is being transported. He pretends to have swallowed a whole pack of pills, and he finds himself in an ambulance, which his grandmother has called. After the first moment of excitement, he is subject to physical and psychological torture by the doctors, while his grandmother looks on with indifferent eyes. Eventually, the narrative voice turns to readers, letting them understand that the doctors and the old lady knew about the child's lie since the beginning, and wanted to teach him a lesson. The child reader is made accomplice of their plot.¹⁴⁴

'A Difficult Case' is very similar to one of the stories of *Skazka s podrobnostiami (A Tale with Details)*, written by Grigorii Oster in 1989. Here a goat loves scaring airplanes which are landing by running along the runway. On day, the goat is given the opportunity to take a ride on the airplane. Excitement turns into terror when the landing is disturbed by a motorbike. The pilot asks the goat to choose between killing the people on the motorbike or dying in an accident. At the end of the episode, it is made clear that both the pilot and the two characters on the motorbike wanted the goat to learn this lesson, and once

¹⁴⁴ Vera Ivanova, 'Trudnyi sluchai', *Ku-ka-re-ku*, ed. by Lev Iakovlev, pp. 98–9.

again the implied child reader is asked to approve this harsh punishment.¹⁴⁵ Through physical and psychological violence, these texts define a power relationship between the adult narrative voice and the rebel character, and the implied reader is asked to approve this relationship.

A Tale with Details is particularly meaningful for the history of post-perestroika playful children's literature. It has been associated with the notion of hypertext.¹⁴⁶ The term was coined by Theodor H. Nelson in 1963. He described it as a non-linear, heterogeneous text allowing choices to the reader, who can choose among different pathways.¹⁴⁷ George P. Landow links together the notion of hypertext, post-structuralist theory and Postmodernism: they all question the idea of the linear transmission of a message (which is 'created', conveyed and eventually consumed), and the boundaries between author and reader. In his view, Derrida's understanding of the literary text as openness, something which never rests in a definitive meaning, anticipates the notion of hypertext as pure deconstruction, lacking a definitive version.¹⁴⁸

In *A Tale with Details* there is no narrative linearity, but rather a series of narrative 'chunks' which develop from one another, and form a group of 'details'

¹⁴⁵ The episode is entitled 'Pervye podrobnosti pro militsionera, babushku, pamiatnik, kozla, samolety i koe-cto drugoe', Grigorii Oster, *Skazka s podrobnostiami* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1989) <http://books.rusf.ru/unzip/add-on/xussr_mr/osterg11.htm?1/16> [accessed 20 May 2013].

¹⁴⁶ See Maria Poriadina, 'Grigorii Oster: Est' o chem razgovarivat', *Kriticheskaia massa*, 2 (2004) <http://artpragmatica.ru/km_content/?auid=285> [accessed 30 May 2013]; O. E. Kuvadlina, 'Gipertekst kak kommunikatsionnaia model' v "Skazke s podrobnostiami" G. Oстера', *Iaroslavskii pedagogicheskii vestnik*, 2 (2006) <http://vestnik.yspu.org/releases/novye_issledovaniy/31_5/> [accessed 3 June 2013]; Rudova, 'Invitation to a Subversion: The Playful Literature of Grigorii Oster', pp. 331–2.

¹⁴⁷ The complete title was *Literary Machines: The Report on, and of, Project Xanadu Concerning Word Processing, Electronic Publishing, Hypertext, Thinkertoys, Tomorrow's Intellectual Revolution, and Certain Other Topics Including Knowledge, Education and Freedom*, and it was published in 1981. Nelson's project, however, started in 1963. For a brief history of the notion of hypertext, see George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 2–6.

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem, pp. 1–2.

linked to each other so that the novel has no actual starting point, no centre and no ending. This kind of nonlinear structure resembles an interactive computerized text, and according to Larissa Rudova the hypertextual nature of *A Tale with Details* 'allows its reader to navigate freely from one segment of the text to the other'.¹⁴⁹ Nonetheless, in the intricate net of details that we find in Oster's book there is at least one stable feature which contrasts the idea of infinite openness, and this is the fact that for each infringement of a set of moral rules performed by one of the characters there is a form of resolution, be it punishment, repentance, or strict condemnation. In *A Tale with Details*, characters who lie eventually confess, and after days of inner torment; rebellious children realize their mistakes and receive their parents' forgiveness; rascals are eventually arrested, and 'they will answer for everything they have done from the very beginning of their criminal lives'.¹⁵⁰

The dialogue which takes place between the narrator and his narratees confirms that *A Tale with Details* has a well-defined moral orientation. The book has a first, anonymous, extra-diegetic narrator and a second extra-diegetic narrator who tells the individual stories ('the details') to his narratees, on the model of *One Thousand and One Nights*.¹⁵¹ This second narrator is the manager of a carousel, and he recounts stories to its little horses before they go

¹⁴⁹ 'Invitation to a Subversion', p. 332.

¹⁵⁰ *Skazka s podrobnostiami*, chapter 'Sorok pervye posdrobnosti pro grubuiu oshibku, fantiki i zapasnye shtany' <http://books.rus.ru/unzip/add-on/xussr_mr/osterg11.htm?1/16> [accessed 20 May 2013].

¹⁵¹ The second narrator is ultimately both intra- and extra-diegetic, because he is the focus of the first narrator but does not play any role in the stories that he recounts. The same can be said about his narratees, who do not appear in the stories they listen to, but are characters of the general narrative. For a discussion of the narrative levels of *One Thousand and One Nights*, which can be considered the model of *Skazka s podrobnostiami*, see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: 2009 [Third Edition]), pp 61–2. William Nelles considers Sherazad's stories as 'intradiegetic narratives in the general narrator's extradiegetic narrative' see William Nelles, 'Stories within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narratives', in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2002), pp. 339–53 (p. 343).

to sleep. The horses have the freedom to skip details which they do not like, and to ask the manager to focus the narrative on what attracts their curiosity and imagination. Whenever one of the characters of the stories infringes a rule which has a moral value, the dialogue between the manager and the little horses offers a specific subject position to child readers. For example, when, out of cowardice, a little mouse named Mushka unjustly accuses another character, the horses scream they feel ashamed for her, and the manager ensures that the mouse felt ashamed too for her behaviour.¹⁵² *A Tale with Details* exemplifies that in Russian children's literature of the post-perestroika period playfulness did not ultimately question the possibility of literature to represent reality and a set of stable values, but rather helped authors to find new ways of representing it. 'Reality' should be understood as the truth beyond hypocrisy. The narrative voice of *A Tale with Details* merges high and low culture – a typical feature of Postmodernism – and offers the reader the possibility to skip from one story to another, but never loses from sight the need to secure the narrative to a stable set of values. The series of details which child readers can select as one would 'surf' the internet today amounts to a *web* of which the subject can explore 'details' without ever crossing the boundaries of an adult worldview, adult values. *A Tale with Details* is the expression of the wish to establish points of reference, reset the chain of meanings which previous Soviet children's songs and texts had exposed as disrupted, and, ultimately 'to create culture'. Playfulness, in this case, amounts to a negotiation of freedom and authority between adults and children.

¹⁵² *Skazka s podrobnostiami*, chapter 'Dvadtsat' sed'mye podrobnosti pro kartinu khudozhnika Kuindzhi "Myshka Mushka" <http://books.rusf.ru/unzip/add-on/xussr_mr/osterg11.htm?1/16> [accessed 20 May 2013].

Children's authors' attempt to re-establish a set of meanings and their own pedagogical agency through playfulness after perestroika could not but present obstacles, considered the difficulties that they were facing, including those concerning their identity as adults and intellectuals. A playful text articulates these obstacles by staging dynamics of error and punishment, wrong actions and their consequences. This is the tale 'Kak Sonia nauchilas' razgovarivat' ('How Sonia Learned to Talk'), which is part of *The Smart Doggy Sonia or Rules of Bon Ton for Small Dogs* by Andrei Usachev. The title of the book implied the mocking of advice literature which was so common in children's literature of the time. The book, however, is not only a parody of this literary genre, since it has an educative character in its own right. Moving away from dull didacticism, it addresses the themes of growing up and learning from others and from experience. In this tale, the little dog observes a TV set, and becomes convinced that the TV talks by virtue of the electric socket to which it is attached. Because she wants to talk too, she inserts her tail into the electric socket. As a result, Sonia's first word is a scream of pain.¹⁵³ This brings us beyond the context of cautionary children's literature, in which the character is punished after infringing rules. Usachev's text associates the reconfiguration of the relationship between a signifier and a signified, and, by extension, the reconstruction of culture, with a painful process. Sonia screams out of pain after experiencing in first person what she thought to be the correct relation between an object and its meaning. Her exploration of life and her search for new experiences – precisely what playful children's literature encouraged children to do in the post-perestroika period – result in a trauma. If Postmodernist poets exposed the arbitrary nature of the combination of a set of signifiers, in this

¹⁵³ 'Kak Sonia nauchilas' razgovarivat', in *Umnaia sobachka Sonia*, pp. 16–18.

children's text to link signifier and signified together is featured as an act steeped with violence and pain.

The book does not support violence and authority as a pedagogical method, because in other episodes Sonia learns through positive examples.¹⁵⁴ It is notable, however, that when the little dog learns through unpleasant experiences, these sometimes instil in her empathy towards adults who live a difficult life, rather than an uncritical respect towards adults' rules.¹⁵⁵ This suggests that in 'How Sonia Learned to Talk' the narrative voice shares with the dog/child a reality of pain which also involves adults. This painful condition is linked to the task of 'recreating culture', the task of moving away from 'defunct ideologemes', or from the 'hegemony of the form' – the creative employment of those defunct ideologemes – and give birth to a new set of values, a new chain of meanings. Little Sonia's body in pain appears as the tangible result of recreating culture, the ultimate truth at the heart of the new, playful truth-telling. And yet, through her pain, Sonia learns: the electric socket is a conductor of electricity, and one should not touch it. While *Chernukha* ultimately featured violence as the sign of a pedagogical blind alley, in Usachev's text the staging of violence becomes part of a pedagogical discourse which is not only directed at the child, as in cautionary literature, but at whoever is engaged with the production of meaning, including the children's author. We can teach and learn from one another, the text appear to be saying, we can recreate culture, but at

¹⁵⁴ In 'Kto sdelał luzhu?' Sonia urinates on the floor, and when her master, out of anger, violently pushes her head into the puddle she has made, she does not learn any lesson. She learns only through the example of an imaginary elephant that has made an enormous puddle on the street. 'Kto sdelał luzhu?', in *Umnaia sobachka Sonia*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁵ In 'Gorchitsa', for example, the dog realizes that one never eats good food in big portions, and thinks that mustard must be delicious, because her master only has a tiny bit of it during meals. When she tastes it, she gets a shock, and realizes that her master has a portion of this distasteful substance every day in order to make his low quality food taste better. 'Gorchitsa', pp. 48–50.

the price of violence and pain. This discourse can find space in a playful context, in which the truth of the pain underlying any cultural enterprise is forgotten with the starting of a new joyful episode in the lives of Sonia and her master, a new exploration, a new game.

3.9. G. Oster's *Bad Advice*: Children's Literature as Adults' Carnival

We have seen how the playful children's literature which emerged in Russia in 1990 was characterized by a strong pedagogical vocation and the wish to embark on the reconstruction of culture, creating a new network of meanings and overcoming the cultural void experienced after the Thaw period. The reference to the avant-garde, the shaping of a voice and a personality characterised by the typical features of *chudachestvo*, and the mocking of Soviet discourse responded to these needs. This cultural and pedagogical enterprise revealed itself to be extremely difficult, and the dire conditions experienced by the Russian population after the collapse of the Soviet Union strongly frustrated adults' wishes to take care of younger generations and offer them guidance. The child became a lifeline, rather than the one to be saved. The children's book that more than any other exhibits these traits, and reworks them in its own way, is *Bad Advice*, by Grigorii Oster. It actually consists of a series of books, which are still being published in ever new variants, such as *Vrednye sovety neposlushnym biznesmenam (Bad Advice for Disobedient Businessmen)*,¹⁵⁶ or *Ne vrednye sovety: Posle svadby uzhe ne zazhivet (Not Too Bad Advice: Marriage is an Open Wound)*.¹⁵⁷ Maria Poriadina has declared

¹⁵⁶ Grigorii Oster, *Vrednye sovety neposlushnym biznesmenam* (Moscow: AST, Astrel' 2009).

¹⁵⁷ Grigorii Oster, *Ne vrednye sovety: Posle svad'by uzhe ne zazhivet* (Moscow: AST, Astrel' , 2009). The title is a humorous reworking of the proverb 'do svad'by zazhivet', 'it will heal before marriage'.

that Grigorii Oster occupies one third of the Russian 'children's literature-oriented reading consciousness', and that this is especially due to *Bad Advice*.¹⁵⁸ This further justifies the choice of *Bad Advice* as a case study here.

The editorial history of this popular series started in 1983, with the publication of the poem 'Khrabryi povar' ('The Brave Cook') in the journal *Kolobok*.¹⁵⁹ Later, without a specific title, the poem became part of some collections of *Bad Advice*. It is worth quoting in full, because it represents a typical piece of 'bad advice':

Если ты остался дома
 Без родителей один,
 Предложить тебе могу я
 Интересную игру
 Под названием «Смелый повар»
 Или «Храбрый кулинар».
 Суть игры в приготовленьи
 Всевозможных вкусных блюд.
 Предлагаю для начала
 Вот такой простой рецепт:
 Нужно в папины ботинки
 Вылить мамины духи,
 А потом ботинки эти
 Смазать кремом для бритья,
 И полив их рыбьим жиром
 С черной тушью пополам,
 Бросить в суп, который мама
 Приготовила с утра.
 А варить с закрытой крышкой
 Ровно семьдесят минут.
 Что получится, узнаешь,
 Когда взрослые придут.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ 'Grigorii Oster: Est' o chem razgovarivat'
 <http://artpragmatica.ru/km_content/?auid=285> [accessed 19 June 2013].

¹⁵⁹ 'Ia predatel' v stane vzroslykh',
 <<http://viknaodessa.od.ua/newspaper/news/?8200>> [accessed on 3 June 2013].

'Kolobok' is a folk-tale character, a little round loaf, a sort of gingerbread man.

¹⁶⁰ 'If you are staying at home / alone with no parents/ I can suggest/ An interesting game/ Called 'The brave cook'/ Or 'The courageous chef'./ It is about cooking/ all possible tasty food./ To start with, I suggest a very simple recipe:/You should pour in dad's boots/ your mom's perfume/ And then spread on these boots/some shaving cream/ And, after watering them with fish oil/ mixed with black ink/ Throw them into the soup that mom prepared in the morning./Cover with a lid/and cook for exactly seventy minutes./ You will know the result when adults come back.' Grigorii Oster, *Vrednye sovety: Kniga dlia neposlushnykh detei i ikh roditelei* (Moscow: Moskovskii knizhnyi dvor, 1990), pages are not numbered.

Many other pieces of ‘bad advice’ start with ‘Esli ty...’ ‘If you...’; indeed this series privileges a ‘you and I’ approach to the child reader. The final element of a punishment that the child risks for his deeds is also typical of *Bad Advice*.

The first issue of *Tramvai*, in 1990, published some poems by Grigorii Oster called ‘Vrednye sovety’ (‘Bad Advice’). At that time, Oster was already a children’s author associated with many beloved cartoon scripts, such as *38 popugaev* (*38 Parrots*) or *Kotenek po imeni Gav* (*A Kitten Named Woof*),¹⁶¹ and books such as *Petka mikrob* (*The Microbe Petka*),¹⁶² or *A Tale with Details*, discussed above. The poems which were published under the title ‘Bad Advice’ were accompanied by a short introductory text:¹⁶³

Недавно Ученые с удивлением обнаружили, что на свете бывают непослушные дети, которые все делают наоборот. Им дают полезный совет: «Умывайтесь по утрам»—они берут и не умываются. Им говорят «здороваетесь друг с другом»— они тут же начинают не здороваться.

Ученые придумали, что таким детям нужно давать не полезные, а

Вредные советы

Они все сделают наоборот— и получится как раз правильно! Вот несколько советов для непослушных детей. Послушным детям читать их запрещается.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ *38 popugaev* appeared in 1976, while the TV series on the kitten Woof was produced from 1977 to 1982.

¹⁶² Grigorii Oster, *Petka mikrob* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura 1979).

¹⁶³ I share Mike Cadden’s view that children’s books sometimes blur the lines between text and peritext (that is to say, all kinds of paratext within the book). See ‘Introduction’, in *Telling Children’s Stories*, p. xi. On the relationship between the peritext and the interpretation of a book, see Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, *How Picturebooks Work* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2001), pp. 241–62.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Scholars have recently discovered, with some surprise, that there exist disobedient children who do everything upside-down. They are given useful advice, such as ‘Wash yourselves in the mornings’, and they stop washing themselves. They are told: “Greet one another”, and they start not to greet anyone. Scholars established that these children should not be given useful advice, but, rather, bad advice. They will do the opposite of what they are told, which will turn up to be the right thing! Here are some pieces of advice for disobedient children. Obedient children must not read them.’ Grigorii Oster, ‘Vrednye sovety’, *Tramvai*, 1 (1990), 10–11, p. 10.

This was the epitome of the topsy-turvy children's literature of the post-perestroika, which was informed by a strong pedagogical, although non-authoritarian, approach, and which mocked Soviet discourse. The reference to Soviet culture was evident already in the title, because *Kniga poleznykh sovetov* (*The Book of Useful Advice*) was a very popular household manual, first published in 1958, in which many advice books about the most disparate fields of everyday life, from the care of an orchard to the application of a proper make-up, were brought together, including *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*.¹⁶⁵ These intertextual aspects were stressed in the subsequent development of the series, and became one of its hallmarks. Oster's 'bad advice' mocked Soviet discourse and suggested an association with Soviet underground literature, which made extensive reference to advice books in a playful mode. However, while turning Soviet discourse upside-down, Oster never loses sight of his pedagogical intention.

The pedagogical intention that underlined 'Bad Advice' since their appearance in *Tramvai* created a cheerful atmosphere:

Когда состаришься, ходи
по улице пешком.
Не лезь в трамвай—все равно
Стоять придется там.
И нынче мало дураков,
Чтоб место уступить,
А к тем далеким временам
Не станет их совсем.¹⁶⁶

Although moving away from didactic tones, this poem invites the child to understand the importance of giving up one's seat. In that year, 'Bad Advice' became a book: *Vrednye sovety: Kniga dlia neposlushnykh detei i ikh roditelei*

¹⁶⁵ *Kniga poleznykh sovetov*, ed. by Aleksandra Pavlovka Us (Minsk: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo BSSR, 1960 [1958], third edition).

¹⁶⁶ When you become an elderly person,/ You'd better walk./Don't take the tram— all the same/You will have to stand there./Today there are still a couple of idiots /who will give you their seats,/ but in those distant times /there will be no one like that left. Grigorii Oster, 'Vrednye sovety', *Tramvai*, 1 (1990), p. 10.

(*Bad Advice: A Book for Disobedient Children and for their Parents*), with illustrations by Aleksandr Martynov, Vladimir Burkin and V. Dun'ko.¹⁶⁷ It opened with the same introductory note which appeared in *Tramvai*, but the subtitle underlined that the book addressed parents as well. The references to underground culture made the book enjoyable for adults, but the book also offered them guidance as to how to approach their children. In other words, the pedagogical aim of the book was directed both at children and parents. *Bad Advice* got rid of an old and unfruitful understanding of the educative process and introduced itself as a new pedagogical model in a time of reforms which were giving adults new responsibilities in raising children.¹⁶⁸ The latter, in turn, were invited to develop independence of thought. A similar spirit underlies other famous works written by Oster, such as *Protivnye zadachi* (*Nasty Problems*, 1992), *Konfetoedenie: Nauka na vsiu zhizn'* (*Candy Eating: Science for Life*, 1996), or *Vospitanie vzroslykh* (*How to Raise Adults*, 1999).

In 1991 a new edition of *Bad Advice* was published with illustrations by A. Semenev.¹⁶⁹ However, *Bad Advice* is especially associated with the name of Andrei Martynov. He is particularly known for the illustrations of *Bad Advice*,

¹⁶⁷ Grigorii Oster, *Vrednye sovety: Kniga dlia neposlushnykh detei i ikh roditelei* (Moscow: Moskovskii knizhnyi dvor, 1990). As we learn from the back cover, the edition was financially supported by Grigorii Oster, and part of the income was devolved to the V. I. Children's Fund.

No detail is provided as to the date on which the book was printed. The first number of *Tramvai*, however, was sent to press on 21 November 1989 (as stated in the back cover of the first issue). For this reason, I assume that the first 'Vrednye sovety' were published in *Tramvai* before becoming a book.

¹⁶⁸ In *Legendy i mify Lavrovogo pereulka* we can find instances of a similar attitude. For example, in one of its stories, 'Glubokoe uvazhenie', the main protagonists are a mum and a dad who, after a series of humorous misunderstandings, start treating their child with respect and stop shouting at him. Their son, Kolia, a 'khuligan' (rascal), corrects himself because of this new form of upbringing, and eventually reaches maturity ('i postepenno sovsem ispravilsia'). Grigorii Oster, *Legendy i mify Lavrovogo pereulka*, illustrations by Georgii Ludin (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1980), 22–3, p. 23. Oster often remarks on the fact that, in writing *Bad Advice*, his pedagogy was directed at adults as well. See, for example, the interview 'Ia predatel' v stane vzroslykh' <<http://viknaodessa.od.ua/newspaper/news/?8200>> [accessed 3 June 2013].

¹⁶⁹ Grigorii Oster, *Vrednye sovety* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1991).

Bad Advice 2 and *3*, which were published between 1994 and 2001 and were gathered in *Vse vrednye sovety (All Bad Advice)* in 2004.¹⁷⁰ My analysis of *Bad Advice* will especially focus on these four books, because, as I will try to demonstrate, they form a coherent whole, and give us the possibility of discussing *Bad Advice* as a work with its own internal structure in which a specific discourse on adults can be detected.

Bad Advice (which from now on I will refer to as *Bad Advice 1*, so as to make clear that I refer to the edition illustrated by Martynov in 1994), opened with an introductory note which was almost identical to the one that appeared in previous versions. The key to understanding the short verses gathered in it was clear: they worked as “upside down suggestions”, in which the sense is supposed to be the opposite of what is stated. For example:

Никогда не мойте руки,
 Шею, уши и лицо.
 Это глупое занятие
 Не приводит ни к чему.
 Вновь испачкаются руки,
 Шея, уши и лицо,
 Так зачем же тратить силы,
 Время попусту терять.
 Стричься тоже бесполезно, никакого смысла нет.
 К старости сама собою
 Облысеет голова.¹⁷¹

However, *Bad Advice 1* presented a novelty compared to other versions of the book, and this was a final section entitled *Kniga o vkusnoi i zdorovoi pishche liudoeda (The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food of the Ogre)*. It was a

¹⁷⁰ Grigorii Oster, *Vrednye sovety: Kniga dlia neposlushnykh detei i ikh roditelei* (Moscow: Rosmen, 1994); *Vrednye sovety– 2: Kniga dlia neposlushnykh detei i ikh roditelei* (Moscow: Rosmen, 1997), *Vrednye sovety– 3: Kniga dlia neposlushnykh detei i ikh roditelei* (Moscow: Astrel', 2001); *Vse vrednye sovety* (Moscow: Planeta detstva, 2004).

¹⁷¹ Don't ever wash your hands,/ Neck, ears and face./ It's a silly task,/ There's no point in it./ Faces, necks and hands/ Will get dirty again./ So why waste one's strength,/ Why lose time./ Haircuts are equally useless,/ They make no sense at all,/ For as old age approaches/ Your head itself will go bald. *Vrednye sovety 1*.

collection of recipes for ogres, who, as is well known, eat children.¹⁷² The recipes varied from ‘Glupyi mal’chik s pel’meniami’ (‘Stupid Child with *Pel’meny*’); ‘Shchi iz kislykh detei’ (‘Sour Children Soup’), or ‘Liubopytnye devochki s miagkimi bulochkami’ (‘Curious Little Girls with Soft Rolls’).¹⁷³ With the insertion of this section, the book further underlined its parody of Soviet advice literature, and with it Soviet culture altogether – its myths, slogans, and values. *Bad Advice*, indeed, does not relate only to aspects of children’s everyday life, such as obeying parents, respecting the common norms of upbringing, interacting with friends and so on. The values which are turned upside down, in one piece of advice after another, include showing enthusiasm for the motherland by taking part in a parade, fighting for a common cause, helping each other, feeling part of a community, showing reverence towards culture, or reporting to the authorities whenever we become suspicious of other citizens’ actions. Martynov’s illustrations make the reference to Soviet culture even more explicitly. The following example is particularly interesting for the mocking of the Soviet anthem it displays:

Если вас навек сплотили
 Озарили и ведут,
 Не пытаетесь уклониться
 От движенья к торжеству.
 Всё равно на труд поднимёт
 И на подвиг вдохновит
 Вас великий и могучий,
 И надёжный наш оплот.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² The section had two brief introductions: one for children and one for parents. To the latter, the book was defined as ‘kulinarnaia kniga domashnego vospitatelia’, ‘a culinary book for home-based educators’. Children, instead, were asked to react promptly to any possible aggression on the part of an ogre. It is sufficient, the introduction said, to turn to him questions such as: ‘Have you washed your hands?’. The ogre will run away out of humiliation. *Vrednye sovety 1*.

¹⁷³ *Vrednye sovety 1*, pages are not numbered.

¹⁷⁴ ‘If they have united you forever/And illuminated, and they are leading you, don’t try to escape /The move towards triumph./ Our great, mighty, trustworthy stronghold /will induce you to hard work/And will inspire in you great feats anyway’. *Vrednye sovety 1*.

Russians would immediately recognise the lyrics of the Soviet National anthem.¹⁷⁵ The illustration features a wolf wearing a military hat and a collar with several medals attached on it, in the act of leading a group of children – whose faces wear a bewildered expression – towards the desert, rather than a bright future. The verses that appear in the next page further attack the category of enthusiasm and commitment to the collective cause:

Главным делом в жизни вашей
 Может стать любой пустяк
 Надо только твердо верить,
 Что важнее дела нет.
 И тогда не помешает
 Вам ни холод ни жара,
 Задыхаясь от восторга,
 Заниматься чепухой.¹⁷⁶

In the illustration, a grown-up pioneer, easily recognisable from the red tie and the blue shirt, with a red star attached to one of the sleeves, a bit fat and already bald, does not seem to be rushing anywhere.

In the following example it is the anthem of International Socialism which is being ridiculed:

Если ты весь мир насилья
 Собираешься разрушить,
 И при этом стать мечтаешь
 Всем, не будучи ничем,
 Смело двигайся за нами
 По проложенной дороге,
 Мы тебе дорогу эту

¹⁷⁵ 'Союз нерушимый республик свободных/Сплотила навеки Великая Русь./Да здравствует созданный волей народов/Единый, могучий Советский Союз!/ Славься, Отечество наше свободное/Дружбы народов надежный оплот!/Партия Ленина — сила народная/ Нас к торжеству коммунизма ведет! /Сквозь грозы сияло нам солнце свободы,/И Ленин великий нам путь озарил /На правое дело он поднял народы,/На труд и на подвиги нас вдохновил!'

'An unbreakable union of free republics/ was forged by Great Rus' forever./ Long live the united, the mighty Soviet Union, created by the will of the peoples!/ Glory to our free Fatherland,/ The trustworthy stronghold of the friendship of the peoples!/Through tempests, the sun of freedom shone to us/ And the great Lenin illuminated our path,/He induced us to the right cause/He inspired us to hard work and great feats.' The version quoted here is that of 1973.

¹⁷⁶ 'Any trifle can become/ The most important matter in your life. /All you need is to believe firmly/ That nothing matters more /And then no chill, no heat /Will prevent you /From dealing with nonsense/ breathless with enthusiasm.'
 Ibidem.

Можем даже уступить.¹⁷⁷

In the spirit of internationalism, the illustration shows representatives of different nations walking towards the top of a hill where a red flag is. However, they are not aware that a ravine awaits them beyond it. On the next page, a statue of Lenin points towards the flag, but is already covered in cobwebs. It is important to note that in this text the narrative voice uses the pronoun 'we'. This inevitably delineates the generation to which the narrative voice belongs from that of the audience. Child readers here seem to be told not to follow the adults' example, but rather to find their own road.

Bad Advice 2 opened with a new, brief introduction. Earlier editions of *Bad Advice* had been accompanied by the slogan: 'poslushnym detiam chitat' zapreshchaetsia' ('obedient children are not allowed to read').¹⁷⁸ Now, it is added that in the case of too obedient children these pieces of bad advice will be useful anyway: 'as a vaccination against stupidity'.¹⁷⁹ These introductory notes and the excerpts from *Bad Advice* which I have discussed suggest we can assign a specific ludic nature to this work. Every page of this book seems to challenge the reader to guess the real meaning of the advice. Each piece of it is a riddle to solve. Johan Huizinga, in his study of the meaning and the significance of play in culture, has argued that some sort of advice and the riddle represent a form of play, and he connects both to the ancient tradition of the sacred riddle, in which an ultimate truth had to be guessed and understood. Huizinga maintains that in many ancient cultures the play mode, especially in

¹⁷⁷ If you are going to destroy/ the whole world of violence,/and besides dream of becoming/ everything while you are nothing/ then follow us bravely/ along the paved way./We may even move over for you. *Vrednye sovety 1*.

Here are the first lines of the anthem: 'Весь мир насилья мы разроем/До основанья, а затем/ Мы наш мы новый мир построим,/Кто был никем, тот станет всем!', 'We will destroy this world of violence /Down to the foundations, and then/ We will build our new world. He who was nothing will become everything!'

¹⁷⁸ This slogan is present in *Vrednye sovety 1* and in *Vrednye sovety* (1990).

¹⁷⁹ *Vrednye sovety 2*. Pages are not numbered.

the form of the riddle, was the only access to sacred truths.¹⁸⁰ Since it was believed that ‘any knowing is directly related to the cosmic order itself’,¹⁸¹ during sacred feasts competitions that aimed to test knowledge of ‘holy things, their secret names’¹⁸² took place. Some traces of these competitions are noticeable still today in many legends and myths: they may also take the form of advice, proverbs or riddles, the understanding of which requires specific knowledge and skills. Huizinga remarks that ‘as civilization develops the riddle branches out in two directions: mystic philosophy on the one hand and recreation on the other’.¹⁸³

Bad Advice hides truths, and encourages children to develop and trust their own intellectual skills. The upside-down logic and the use of laughter in *Bad Advice* reveal a carnivalesque vein associated with a pedagogical attitude, which make this book part of what Lypp calls ‘poetical-pedagogical fools’ discourse’. By this expression, the Austrian scholar refers to the already discussed trend of children’s literature in Western Europe, very popular in the sixteenth century, which can be referred to as Grobian literature.¹⁸⁴ Grobian constantly breaks society’s rules. Laughter was, in these texts, an instrument for educational purpose, because it was easy to guess the correct behaviour for one’s everyday life: the opposite of what Grobian suggested. As Lypp maintains, in contrast to Grobian, the 18th century character of Struwwelpeter is

¹⁸⁰ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Development in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 105–18.

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

¹⁸² *Ibidem*.

¹⁸³ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

¹⁸⁴ In chapter two of this thesis, I established a parallel between the development of laughter in children’s literature discussed by Lypp for Western Europe and the Russian literary context for children in the 18th century.

punished for infringing social conventions and violating taboos, and punishments are as comical as they are extreme.¹⁸⁵

The concept of upside-down advice in children's literature was certainly not invented by Oster. Mark Twain wrote *Advice to Little Girls*, a provocative set of 'instructions', aimed to unmask hypocrisy in the principles of up-bringing and encourage children to think independently.¹⁸⁶ However, *Bad Advice* is different from Twain's text and from the literary examples discussed by Lypp. Oster's series rather appears as halfway between Grobian and Struwwelpeter literature. If readers were to follow the narrative voice's initial instructions while reading the book, they would draw conclusions such as: don't do dangerous things when you are alone, give up your seat in the tram, and always wash your hands. In fact, a more proper interpretation seems to be the following: be aware of social norms when these stem from good sense and logic and are useful for your wellbeing, but keep alive the subversive attitude that is intrinsic to childhood. 'Remain a Grobian!' suggested the sixteenth century texts, according to Lypp;¹⁸⁷ 'Be like this child!' *Bad Advice* appears to be saying. In this light, every single piece of advice seems to function as a general 'invitation to subversion'. This is how Larissa Rudova entitled her introduction to Grigorii Oster, in which much attention is devoted to *Bad Advice*.¹⁸⁸ Thus, the Russian child of *Bad Advice* seems to live in an upside-down world, where he picks his

¹⁸⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁶ Twain wrote the book in 1865 as part of *The 30,000 Dollar Bequest and Other Stories* (A PSU Electronic Classic Series Publication), pp. 196–7 <<http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/twain/bequest.pdf>> [accessed 13 June 2013]. An example of Twain's 'bad advice': 'If your mother tells you to do a thing, it is wrong to reply that you won't. It is better and more becoming to intimate that you will do as she bids you, and then afterward act quietly in the matter according to the dictates of your best judgment'. Ibidem, p. 197. Twain's humorous advice became a children's book in Italy in 2011: Mark Twain and Vladimir Radunsky, *Consigli alle bambine* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011).

¹⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 185.

¹⁸⁸ Rudova, 'Invitation to a Subversion: The Playful Literature of Grigorii Oster'.

nose while sitting with his feet on the back of a chair, travels through the world alone, and tears up books as symbols of imposed culture.

Nevertheless, the book shows some features of the Struwwelpeter texts. As in the latter, the child of *Bad Advice* is often punished for his subversive ventures, and this feature becomes particularly evident in *Bad Advice 2*. It is usually the father that performs the punishment, and this is always corporal. In other cases, the body of the child is involved in accidents that are again provoked by his rebellious or simply non-conventional behaviour, thus appearing as punishments. The violent consequences of the child's norm-breaking attitude are often comic. Nevertheless, the reiteration of violent scenes throughout the books is such that those who read *All Bad Advice*, one poem after the other – as the form of the published 'collection' allows and even encourages the reader to – will soon feel puzzled. Perplexity arises because on the one hand an adult narrative voice is inciting children to subversion, while on the other he is describing a rebellious child who is the object of punishment. We see the child tied up to a chair when he refuses to eat what he does not like, threatened with mom's rolling pin, with plasters on his backside, chased by an armed crowd, pierced by knives and scissors, or beaten and humiliated with his trousers pulled down.

The list of what the child is subjected to could carry on, but there is one image in the book that seems to summarize all the other representations of violence: the father's belt. It occurs obsessively throughout the three books, especially in the illustrations, where it always appears firmly held in the father's hands. Domestic violence was a widespread reality in Soviet Russia, especially among working class and peasant families, and it was the father who

traditionally carried it out.¹⁸⁹ In this regard, the display of violence in the book seems to hold a message for children and their parents. The former are warned about the aggression they are subject to, and are encouraged to claim their rights against those who are in a powerful position. The latter are invited to reflect on alternative, non-violent educative means. In *Bad Advice 1*, for example, we find this text:

Начиная драку с папой,
Затевая с мамой бой,
Постарайся сдать маме, —
Папа пленных не берёт.
Кстати, выясни у мамы,
Не забыла ли она —
Пленных бить ремнём по попе
Запрещает Красный Крест.¹⁹⁰

The illustration shows a battlefield, with the child on one side of it and parents on the other. The father is holding a belt, while, on the child's side, two soldiers are holding up a poster with a belt and a red cross on it, with the implicit message: don't use it against children.

However, a literary work such as *Bad Advice*, with its playful reworking of symbolic categories and dominant discourses, suggests we can interpret its violent component as something more than just a realistic element. *Bad Advice 1, 2 and 3*, and of *All Bad Advice*, appear indebted to the *steb* culture, and especially to the so-called *sadistskie stishki* (sadistic verses), with their staging of violence, and their almost 'splatter effect'. Sadistic verses were an underground phenomenon that started in the late 1970s. They consisted of very short verses full of black humour, with children as protagonists, that were

¹⁸⁹ See Kelly, *Children's World*, pp. 388; 390. Kelly underlines the fact that this was not a trait belonging to the Soviet time specifically, but rather something that was inherited by Soviet reality from other earlier eras of Russian history.

¹⁹⁰ 'When starting a fight with dad/ Or setting out a battle with mom/ Try to surrender to mom/ — Dad won't take prisoners./ By the way, check whether mom/ has forgotten/that the Red Cross forbids/ the beating of prisoners' bottoms with belts.' *Vrednye sovety 1*.

equally popular among adults and children.¹⁹¹ They were anonymous lines in which children were objects or agents of violence. These ‘short stories’ were likely to produce amusement or disgust, or a mixture of the two, in the listener, as is the case in the following examples:

Маленький Витя с ружьишком играл
Он с любопытством его разбирал.
Пальцем неловко нажал на курок –
Прыснули дружно мозги в потолок.

Девочка в поле гранату нашла.
«Что это, дядя?» спросила она.
«Дерни колечко», дядя сказал.
Долго над полем бантик летал.¹⁹²

The following piece of *Bad Advice* is reminiscent of the sadistic verses:

Кто не прыгнул из окошка
Вместе с маминым зонтом,
Тот лихим парашютистом
Не считается пока.
Не лететь ему, как птице,
Над взволнованной толпой,
Не лежать ему в больнице
С забинтованной ногой.¹⁹³

Mikhail Lur'e underlines that the genre of sadistic verses started in adult circles in the 1970s and became popular among children in the 1980s.¹⁹⁴ Other scholars have underlined generational issues beyond the transmission of this form of black humour in the 1990s, because they represented a meaningful part of the cultural background of those who had been students in the early 1980s and were now parents, eager to share with their children their old forms of

¹⁹¹ See *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, pp. 254–56. Yurchak offers an analysis of a different form of late Soviet black humour, including the *sadistskie stishki* in chapter 7: ‘Dead Irony: Necroaesthetics, “*Stiob*”, and the *Anekdot*’, 238–81.

¹⁹² ‘A little boy Vitia played with a gun/ taking it apart was tricky but fun./ His finger by accident pulled on the trigger./ His brain sprayed the ceiling with splatter and vigor’; ‘A little girl found a grenade in the field./ “What is this, uncle?” with trust she appealed./ “Pull on the ring,” he said, “you will find out.”/ For a while her bow will be flying about’. Ibidem, p. 254–5. Translations are by Aleksei Yurchak.

¹⁹³ Those who’ve never hopped off/ a balcony/ with mum’s umbrella/ cannot for now be called/ shock paratroops. /They won’t fly like birds/Above the alarmed crowd, they won’t lie in hospital/with a broken leg. *Vrednye sovety* 1.

¹⁹⁴ Mikhail Lur'e, ‘Sadistskii stishok v kontekste gorodskoi fol'klornoi traditsii: detskoe i vzrosloe’, *Antropologicheskii forum*, 6 (2007), 287–309, p. 288.

amusement.¹⁹⁵ It can be stated that from the 1980s to the mid-1990s sadistic verses were therefore part of adults' and children's culture simultaneously. According to Lur'e, children found these verses funny because they ridiculed adult culture, and especially those aspects of adult culture which were incomprehensible to them, or Soviet official children's poetry, characterized by a sugary tone. Adults, on the other hand, invested these verses with a broader satirical function, because they mocked and discredited Soviet discourse, including the myth of the happy childhood, the emphasis on seriousness and sentimentalism, and an overall 'pedagogical idiotism'.¹⁹⁶ Nonetheless, Lur'e maintains that what stimulated the production of sadistic verses among adults was not Soviet reality as such, and the intention to subvert its categories. Rather, the production of sadistic verses, much as the production of *anekdoty* (the Russo-Soviet joke), was part of a broader intellectual environment in which anti-Soviet discourse was a 'text' among many others, and participated in the creation of a sense of cultural belonging.¹⁹⁷

Furthermore, Lur'e argues that the main feature of these verses was not the attack on the Soviet, official, discourse, but their sadistic inspiration, their play with the categories of health and illness, life and death, wholeness and fragmentation of the body,¹⁹⁸ which may or may not be combined with political, anti-Soviet, motives. Yurchak underlines the fact that sadistic verses provoked a feeling of the uncanny in those who shared them.¹⁹⁹ According to Freud, this

¹⁹⁵ M. Iu. Novitskaia, 'Formy ironicheskoi poezii v sovremennoi detskoj fol'klornoj traditsii', in *Shkol'nyi byt i fol'klor: Uchebnyi material po russkomu fol'kloru*, ed. by A. F. Belousov (Tallin: Tallinskii pedagogicheskii institut, 1992) Vol. 1, pp. 100–23 (p. 105).

¹⁹⁶ 'Sadistskii stishok v kontekste gorodskoi fol'klornoj traditsii: detskoe i vzrosloe', pp. 290–1.

¹⁹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 292–3. Lur'e specifies that he does not refer to a restricted elite of intellectuals, but to a broad layer of 'rabotnikov umstvennogo truda', 'workers of intellectual labour'. Ibidem, p. 293.

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 296; 299; 301.

¹⁹⁹ *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p. 255.

feeling occurs when ‘something familiar and old-established in the mind [...] has become estranged only by the process of repression’.²⁰⁰ When something familiar and intimate is disrupted by something that makes evident its unnatural and constructed quality, people experience a feeling of disgust and horror which coincides with the uncanny. In this case, the ordinary person sees in these disrupting and inexplicable phenomena ‘the working forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-man but which at the same time he is dimly aware of in a remote corner of his own being’.²⁰¹

Notably, sadistic verses stimulated in Russian people a sense of coherent identity (the belonging to one specific circle, as Lur’e argues) and, simultaneously, a split in the self, the sense of estrangement which is implied in the uncanny. These dynamics between cultural self-identification, which Lur’e attributes to *sadistskie stishki*, on the one hand, and alienation, on the other, play a relevant role in *Bad Advice* and in its display of violence. It is possible to presume that the reference to sadistic verses as children’s and adults’ culture could be a way of facilitating the transmission of a pedagogical message. At the same time, violence and the staging of unpleasant transformations of the body (going bald or being wounded, breaking limbs and so on) occur not only when the child character has failed to behave properly or sensibly (by jumping from a balcony with an umbrella, for instance), but also when he acts upon the subversive influence of the narrative voice, for example, when he refuses to eat food he does not like. *Bad Advice 3* presents the reader with a last piece of advice which further complicates this contradiction. The text reads as follows:

Ничего прекрасней детства

²⁰⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, first published in *Imago* in 1919, reprinted in *Fünfte Folge*, translated by Alix Strachey <<http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>> [accessed 12 June 2013], p.13

²⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 14 [accessed 12 June 2013].

Человеку не дано.
 Свет его сквозь годы мчится
 В подрастающей душе.
 Знай, что в каждом взрослом сердце
 Есть заветный уголок,
 Там калачиком свернулся
 Папин старенький ремень.²⁰²

The illustration shows a trembling man in tears, looking at the white and black picture of a man with similar features, which we understand to be his father, caught in the act of beating a little boy by means of a belt. The boy is crying and his trousers have been pulled down. Next to the horrified man, an open trunk with a belt in it is visible, underlining the continuity between the picture – with the act of violence portrayed in it – and the current life of this adult. It should be noted that the belt in the trunk appears to be alive: one of its ends stands straight as if it were a snake which has just been woken up by music. The adult in tears has the facial features of Grigorii Oster. The narrative voice adopts the name of the author, and tells readers that he is the man who has been subject to violence and is potentially able to use violence, in turn, because of the belt he brings within himself. The belt becomes the symbol of a patronizing, oppressing power of which the adult feels a victim but also, at least potentially, a perpetrator.

The uncanny effect of this piece of advice is amplified by the fact that *Bad Advice 3*, the volume which contains this piece of advice, opens with a new introductory note that for the first time specifies that these vaccinations against stupidity are intended for teachers as well. Thus the circle of the interlocutors of *Bad Advice* enlarges, and involves children ('obedient' and 'disobedient'), and the main stakeholders in the educative process: parents and teachers. It is to all of them that the narrative voice makes his confession. This third book makes

²⁰² 'Childhood is the greatest present/ Man has ever received. /Its light gleams through the years/ As souls grow up./ You know that in the heart/ Of every adult/ There's a special corner,/ There, curled up, is dad's old belt.' *Vrednye sovery 3*.

reference to the Soviet discourse less frequently than the previous two, while comic violence on the body of the child is still present. The last text of the book abruptly interrupts the comic flow of upside-down advice, of infraction and punishments at the expense of a helplessly rebellious child.

Some recent contributions to the field of children's literature scholarship may prove useful for the understanding of the contradictions of *Bad Advice*, including violence, and this last text in particular. My analysis will draw on the concept of aetonormativity, coined by Maria Nikolajeva, and on her application of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival to children's literature.²⁰³ The concept of "aetonormativity" is analogous to that of 'heteronormativity', which is central in queer theory.²⁰⁴ According to it, the heterosexual group, who is in a powerful position in our society, imposes this sexual identity as the only norm, denying any legitimacy to other sexual identities. Similarly, Nikolajeva writes, in the relationship between the child and the adult, the former is nearly always forced to accept the latter's norm, and in children's literature, which is nearly always produced by adults, this aeto-normativity (from now on aetonormativity; *aeto-* in Latin means 'pertaining to age') is rarely questioned. Nikolajeva deepens further this aspect of literature for young readers by turning to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ For other applications of Carnival theory to children's literature, see, for example, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, pp. 120–57, or *Disturbing the Universe*, p. 35. Nikolajeva already addressed the notion of carnival in *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, associating it with that of polyphony (pp. 97–102).

²⁰⁴ The term 'heteronormativity' was coined by Michael Warner. See Michael Warner, 'Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet', *Social Text*, 29, 4 (1991), 3–17.

²⁰⁵ Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. See pp. 1–11 for the whole discussion about aetonormativity and carnival theory applied to children's literature. In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Trites, had already warned the reader of adolescent literature that the hero of these novels is nearly always defeated in a way or another: by entering adulthood in coming of age novels, or by dying or committing suicide. Nikolajeva, besides coining the term aetonormativity to explain this kind of relationship between the

When the concept of carnival is associated with literature, it usually refers to a set of narrative strategies where categories such as the corporeal, hyperbole, distortions and so on are the main features. Nikolajeva moves away from this understanding of carnival in literature, and draws attention to Bakhtin's view of literature itself as carnival. In her words, this is 'a symbolic representation of a socially liberating process, a subversive, that is, disguised, interrogation of authorities'.²⁰⁶ The narrative voice in a children's book, Nikolajeva maintains, functions as the ruler of the carnival, the one who has the power to allow members of the community to deviate from the existing order in total freedom from social restrictions, because this is the condition for the *status quo* to be maintained, once the carnival is over. As with all carnival, the carnivalesque liberation that the child is allowed in children's literature is temporary, and it occurs under special conditions. In children's literature, child heroes appear as powerful, brave, free, before coming back home, to parental supervision, or before dying, when they do not conform to adults' rules.

For my study, which aims to investigate how some children's books with a playful character which were written during post-perestroika expressed understanding of the relationship between adults and children in a time of enormous social and cultural changes, the concept of aetnormativity is relevant. It is especially so in the case of a book such as *Bad Advice*, which seems to convey to children the value of rebellion against imposed values. Nevertheless, the specific condition of the Soviet adult, officially deprived of independence as a care-provider by the State for decades, suggests we can modify the perspective of the Bakhtinian approach proposed by Nikolajeva, and

adult and the child, enlarges the field and takes into account children's literature *per se*, including ABC books.

²⁰⁶ *Power, Voice and Subjectivity*, p. 10.

consider *Bad Advice* as a carnival where the adult's and not the child's aspiration and desires are temporarily realized before the *status quo* is established again. In this analysis, I will consider the narrative voice as both the ruler and the real protagonist of the carnival within the book. The aspiration that finds a realization in *Bad Advice* is in the pedagogical value of the series. Its adult narrative voice opens the book by introducing himself as the independent promoter of a new form of upbringing, in which children of the post-perestroika period are asked to set themselves free from authoritarian approaches that require uncritical obedience, and think with their own heads. Once the child's independence and right to self-expression is encouraged, aetnormativity seems to be highly challenged. Indeed, adults' discourse and adult figures are often ridiculed throughout *Bad Advice 1, 2 and 3*:

Руками никогда нигде
 Не трогай ничего.
 Не впутывайся ни во что
 И никуда не лезь.
 В сторонку молча отойди,
 Стань скромно в уголке
 И тихо стой, не шевелясь,
 До старости своей.²⁰⁷

In another example:

Никогда вопросов глупых
 Сам себе не задавай,
 А не то ещё глупее
 Ты найдёшь на них ответ.
 Если глупые вопросы
 Появились в голове,
 Задавай их сразу взрослым.
 Пусть у них трещат мозги.²⁰⁸

The illustration to the second text shows a man wearing an academic mortarboard, lying on the floor, puzzled to the point of tears: he evidently has no

²⁰⁷ 'Don't touch / Anything anywhere./ Don't interfere with others' business./ Don't meddle./ Just stand in a corner./ Silent and still/ Until old age comes.' *Vrednye sovety* 1.

²⁰⁸ 'Never ask yourself / Silly questions./ Or you'll find / Even sillier answers./ When a stupid question/ comes into your head./ Ask adults straight away./ Let them frazzle their brains'. Ibidem.

answer to the question the child has just asked. Generally, throughout the book, adults appear just as incapable of providing answers as in this passage. By questioning aetnormativity, the adult narrative voice is promoting a new form of upbringing, and his claim to pedagogical agency appears to be grounded on this questioning of adults' power. In other words, his reliability as an adult depends on his capacity to mock adults' presumed omniscience and infallibility.

One may object that the narrative voice of *Bad Advice* cannot be seen as an adult who uses the carnival of literature to fulfil his wish of being an independent and reliable educator, because the book challenges precisely this reliability of adults. What is significant is that the narrative voice sets himself apart from the general category of adults by adopting what Lypp termed the poetic-pedagogical fool's discourse, which enables him to point his finger towards adults' shortcomings without himself being included in this category. It is by adopting the poetic-pedagogical fool's discourse that the narrative voice is able to claim the readers' trust. In the Western tradition, the fool lives in the court (and is called 'jester'), but as an outsider. His own space is liminal: at the feet of the throne, where no one else can stand, halfway between the king's place and the rest of the world.²⁰⁹ It should be noted that Martynov's illustrations of *Bad Advice* are typically set in the city outskirts. Periphery is by definition an edge, as is the liminal space of the fool. It is the ideal place for the staging of a norm-breaking attitude; it is the threshold, defined by Bakhtin as the 'chronotope of crisis and break in a life' and by Iurii Lotman as 'the hottest spot for semioticizing processes'.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ See Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 51; 226.

²¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas

The fool's discourse, directed at the overturning of values commonly shared by adults, be these values linked to the private, family context, or to a broader socio-cultural one, enables the adult voice to accomplish his carnival. This consists of a space in which his own ethical authority as an adult and an intellectual, and his capacity of providing care, is temporarily restored, even as external cultural and material conditions were denying both. In *Bad Advice*, the fool's discourse merges with features of other form of foolishness (*durachestvo*) which are specific to Russian culture, and in particular to the *iurodivyi*, or holy fool. The association of narrative strategies such as riddles, playful inversions and parody with *iurodstvo* was customary in Russia in the 1990s and earlier. As scholars such as Sergey A. Ivanov and Oliver Ready point out, these associations are often inaccurate, because they neglect the specificity of the language and the motivations of the *iurodivyi*.²¹¹ However, the fascination of Russian culture with the *iurodivyi* is significant *per se*, and while referring to the narrative voice of *Bad Advice* in terms of *iurodstvo* I will put emphasis on the cultural filter through which the *iurodivyi* has been transformed into a model of the Russian intellectual, which answered to a specific set of needs and values.²¹² In other words, beyond the historical and theological specificity of the *iurodivyi*, there exists the *iurodivyi* as a cultural myth, perpetuated, for example, in the works of Dostoevskii, or in the interpretations of the figure of Vasilii

Press, 1981, p. 248), and Iurii M. Lotman, 'The Notion of Boundary', in *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), pp. 131–62.

²¹¹ Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, p. 412; Oliver Ready, 'The Myth of Vasilii Rozanov the "Holy Fool" through the Twentieth Century', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 90.1 (January 2012), 33–64 (p. 33). For a discussion of Russian Postmodernist poets as *iurodivye*, see E. A. Gorobinskaia and L. M. Nemchenko, 'Simuliatsiia iurodstva', in *Russkaia literatura xx veka: Napriavleniia i techeniia*, iii (Ekaterinburg: Ural'skii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet, 1996), 182–195. The authors refer to authors such as Irten'ev, and maintain that they pretend *iurodstvo*, as another form of playfulness aimed at questioning the monologic stance of the *iurodivyi*.

²¹² 'The Myth of Vasilii Rozanov the "Holy Fool" Through the Twentieth Century', pp. 33–4.

Rozanov.²¹³ In Russian culture, the *iurodivyi* is associated with theatricality, implying elements of ambiguity; with truth-telling; or with suffering and Christ's passion.²¹⁴ Above all, the *iurodivyi* is 'a model of otherworldliness'.²¹⁵ In my analysis, I will discuss how the narrative voice of *Bad Advice* tries to embody the myth of the *iurodivyi* but eventually finds in its very code an obstacle, which puts an end to his carnival, or, in other words, puts an end to his self-representation as a capable pedagogue.

Both the common fool, the *shut*, and the holy fool, the *iurodivyi*, often rely on the power of laughter to communicate. Nonetheless, in Russian Orthodox culture it is only the *iurodivyi* who turns to laughter in order to transform the crowd ethically, and in this highest sense, to teach.²¹⁶ The profound changes that were occurring in Russia at the time *Bad Advice* was first published, as well as the fact that the book's object of mockery is not only a behavioural code that the community generally identifies with good manners, but also Soviet culture and its legacy, suggests we should consider the narrative voice of this book as expressing the wish to take part into the renewal of this society. The riddles, the jokes by means of which the narrative voice unmask the absurdity of many aspects of society, and of Soviet culture in particular, and the didactic purpose behind it corroborate the idea that this narrative voice is reproducing the typical

²¹³ Murav, *Holy Foolishness*; and 'The Myth of Vasilii Rozanov the 'Holy Fool' Through the Twentieth Century'. Other treatments of the *iurodivyi* in literature can be found in Ewa Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (Lanham, MD, and London: United Press of America: 1987), especially chapter 5, 'The Uses of Holy Foolishness in Literature', pp.125–58, and chapter 6, 'The Holy Fool and Russian Culture', pp. 159–96.

²¹⁴ 'The Myth of Vasilii Rozanov the 'Holy Fool' Through the Twentieth Century', pp. 36–7. Ready mentions Fedor Dostoevskii's novels as typical examples for the ambiguity of the *iurodivyi*, Aleksandr Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* for the truth-telling model, and Gleb Uspenskii's *Paramon Iurodivyi* for the *iurodivyi* as a model of suffering.

²¹⁵ 'The Myth of Vasilii Rozanov the "Holy Fool" through the Twentieth Century', 38.

²¹⁶ 'Smekh kak zrelishche', p. 85.

features of the 'intellectualized model of *iurodstvo*'.²¹⁷ In this chapter on Russian playful children's texts in the 1990s, I have referred to features such as whimsicality and eccentricity (implied in riddles and parody) as belonging to *chudachestvo*, which had a strong cultural significance in its own right. However, the last illustrated text of *Bad Advice 3* suggests that the cultural model of reference in Oster's series is more specifically *iurodstvo*. Here, indeed, the narrative voice takes on the features of this specific model, even including *podvig*.

The *podvig* is an ethical act whereby the would-be *iurodivyi* has the courage to acknowledge sin within himself. In this rested the meaning of the *iurodivyi*'s nudity: by confessing his sin and setting himself free from deceptions, he 'undresses'. Only after undressing can the *iurodivyi* leave the space of sin and undertake the road to holiness.²¹⁸ In the piece of advice that concludes *Bad Advice 3*, the narrative voice appears to be performing a real *podvig*. By acknowledging the belt, he takes the sin onto his shoulders, he humiliates himself before the eyes of the crowd, and has the courage to acknowledge sin, having got rid of self-deception. In accordance with the *iurodivyi*'s code, *Bad Advice* employs the disruption of commonly shared values and overturns what has been established.

Nonetheless, the narrative voice does not make any reference to a higher order, be it a religious or political faith. The significance of this difference between the narrative voice of *Bad Advice* and the *iurodivyi* can be clarified if we take into account the fact that the *iurodivyi* enjoys a very specific kind of

²¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 35.

²¹⁸ According to the dictionary by Vladimir Dal', the term *podvig* has its origins in the verb *podvigat'*, *podat' vpered dvigaias'* (to move forwards). Kauchtschischwili underlines the value of aspiration that lies in this linguistic root (see 'La santità laica nella letteratura russa', in *Forme della santità russa*, p. 259, note 11).

liminality. He is perceived as 'a man from another world at the very heart of this world': he takes the sin onto his shoulders, and includes himself among the crowd that has been so far the object of his mockery, but his extraneousness is guaranteed by his representing the transcendental on earth, and the promise of the realization of this transcendental order.²¹⁹ Without this eschatological dimension, the *iurodivyi's* actions are only *monstrous*, an abortion, as a possible etymology of his name suggests. Thus, I propose reading this final piece of bad advice as the end of the carnival: the narrative voice can no longer carry on teaching; his narrative has to stop here, and, indeed, the book ends here. This final piece of bad advice reveals the impossibility of an ethical renewal, or at least the impossibility for the narrative voice to take part in it. There is a paradoxical element here: by including himself among those who potentially contribute to violence and oppression, the narrative voice accomplishes the *podvig* of the *iurodivyi*, and he does this through the *iurodivyi's* shocking language. And yet, this figurative undressing turns into a declaration of pedagogical inadequacy. The *podvig*, which entails the *iurodivyi* to a didactic function, here nullifies itself. The shadow of violence and tyranny which supposedly keep on living within adults, and which had been the object of heated debates in the late 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, re-appears.

In *Bad Advice 3*, the narrative voice is revealed a victim of a system of violence and oppression, and thus as identified with the condition of the child, oppressed by those who are in a powerful position. At the same time, he recognises he is part of that system of impositions that he had been trying to subvert. In other words, he is in a powerful position compared to the child. An explanation of the numerous scenes of violence involving the child present in

²¹⁹ 'Follia e santità', p. 181.

Bad Advice seems to lie in this complex attitude. The child of *Bad Advice* tries to be a Russian Pippi Longstocking, but he cannot. Astrid Lindgren's child character lived alone, slept with her feet on the pillow, and had at her disposal plenty of gold to face her life independently. The child of *Bad Advice* is a Russian Pippi, but with cheeks swollen from being slapped. He is nearly always violently punished for his behaviour, because, after all:

Если мальчик хулиганит
Или девочка шалит,
Ловят их и бьют по попе,
Чтобы знали наперёд.
Это самый лучший метод
Воспитанья мелюзги.
Можно всех по попам шлёпать,
Кроме ос, шмелей и пчёл.²²⁰

Violence in *Bad Advice* stems from the clash between opposite ideals of play: the free play of the primitive child, who brings in novelty and change into society, and play as development into adulthood, which is a conservative ideal. Developmental ideals of children's play tend to demand that children should become like adults, and adhere to their norm, their worldview. The clash of opposite ideals of play in this book intertwines with, and appears amplified by, the clash between revolutionary idealism and necessity of obedience. Soviet society was founded by a revolution, and the revolutionary spirit theoretically remained the very heart of its ideology. In this ideology, the rejection of outmoded values and the concept of progress were fundamental categories. The child of *Bad Advice*, who is the hero of an ongoing overturning of values which are pointed to as false and outmoded, is carrying out a revolutionary ideal. Nonetheless, revolution imposes obeying to and aligning oneself with the

²²⁰ If a boy bullies/ or a girl is naughty/ they are beaten on the bottom/ So that they are warned/ This is the best method/ for bringing little ones up./ You can slap on the bottom everybody, except wasps, bumblebees, and bees. *Vrednye sovety 2*.

new system, and this denies the total adherence to the value of radical transformation. As Kelly remarks:

In early Soviet society, the classic model of self-representation was the 'conversion narrative', where a person showed solidarity with the regime by overcoming and eventually purging his or her human faults. Thus, the 'good children' of the Soviet regime could threaten the long-term viability of the system both by intention (because they were fluent in its rhetoric and imbued in its mentality, and ready to assault deviations from what they believed they knew was the appropriate line of development), and passively –because, by simply *remaining what they were*, they enacted the demise of the myth of radical self-transformation upon which Soviet legitimacy was founded.²²¹

By carrying out his inner desire to undertake a new active parental role, and to set children free from Soviet values of obedience and discipline, the narrative voice of *Bad Advice* enacts a revolutionary attitude that is supposed to be intrinsic to the Soviet citizen. But, although depicting adult figures and authoritative discourse as ridiculous, the narrative voice cannot go as far as showing his rebellious child, "his pupil" in the path towards revolution, victorious and free, like a Russian Pippi Longstocking. The child has to be punished, the father's belt claims its role, and it is the adult who handles it, embodying the other side of the revolutionary essence. In the end the narrative voice feels forced to admit that he has that belt too, that he is himself, at least potentially, an agent of coercion.

In *All Bad Advice*, published in 2004, the three books illustrated by Martynov were brought together. The collection is organized coherently so as to represent a narrative in its own right, developing the theme of the adults' carnival. It opens with the three introductory notes, now entitled 'Author's Reflections on Who Can Read This Book'. New illustrations sometimes reinforce the link with black humour, for example the text on the child who jumps from a balcony with mom's umbrella portrays the hero with a terrified

²²¹ *Children's World*, p. 597.

expression, while in *Bad Advice 1* he seemed to be enjoying the flight. 'The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food of the Ogre', which concluded *Bad Advice 1*, has not been included in this new version, as if it were superfluous in the plot which *All Bad Advice* develops. Other substantial changes concern the fact that the second book ended with a 'Proshchal'nyi sovet' ('Farewell Advice'), while now this appears at the end of the collection, after many texts drawn from *Bad Advice 3*, and immediately before the text on the belt that lies in the heart of every adult. In other words, the three books together form a coherent discourse on adulthood, a coherent carnival, with a neat macrotextual structure.

The Italian semiotician and literary critic Cesare Segre explains that we have a macrotext when 'texts, totally or partially autonomous, [...] have been grouped together to form a more ample text [in which] the overall structure of their forces of cohesion is reinforced'.²²² A crucial aspect of macrotexts is their coherence, and this 'must be considered in terms of progression whose later phase assimilates the earlier'.²²³ The structure of *All Bad Advice* respects this progression: the beginning, with the three 'reflections' establishes the pedagogical nature of the narrative voice, his being a truth-teller, with an ethical profile which makes him different from the audience he is addressing. One piece of advice after the other, this status of the narrative voice is re-affirmed, through the staging of violence and through numerous playful references to authoritarian discourse.²²⁴ The last piece of advice puts an end to the carnival,

²²² Cesare Segre, *Introduction to the Analysis of the Literary Text*, translated by J. Meddemmen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 31–2.

²²³ Ibidem, p. 32. About the notion of macrotext, see also Maria Corti's treatment of Italo Calvino's *Marcolvaldo*, in Maria Corti, *Il viaggio testuale: Le ideologie e le strutture semiotiche* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), pp. 185–200.

²²⁴ It is interesting to note that the illustration to the piece of advice which mocked the Soviet anthem now shows a crowd of people, headed by a child with a speaker. The crowd is demonstrating by holding placards and singing. The slightly modified symbols of the Soviet flag and slogans like 'Power to us' ('Vlast' nam') are visible on placards, while the words of the song the crowd is singing are reproduced above some

and the narrative voice, portrayed with Oster's features, admits not only his pedagogical inadequacy, but his dangerous potential.

All Bad Advice is a macrotext which states the temporary nature of the adult's carnival, making the final text about adults as agents of tyranny its last word. And yet, other collections of *Bad Advice* followed. The playful nature of *Bad Advice* is indeed a safety net, allowing the game to start again, and thus to re-open the carnival. The pattern of death and rebirth of the adult 'I' which I detected in the textual relationship between the letter to child readers written by Oleg (Kurguzov) and the poem 'la vzrosleiu' in *Tramvai* in 1993 is particularly prolific in the case of *Bad Advice*. Today, there are so many collections of *Bad Advice* that Oster has been accused of repetitiveness.²²⁵

Although recent collections of *Bad Advice* try to move away from the theme and the visual staging of violence on the body of the child, the image of the belt retains its symbolic significance in some cases. One of these is *Novye vrednye sovety* (*New Bad Advice*), which appeared in 2004, the same year in which *All Bad Advice* was published. It is illustrated by E. A. Bashchinskaia, whose style is characterized by bright colours and simple lines, so that the result is a general atmosphere of childish naivety, which contrasts with the provocative spirit of texts such as:

Дети, чаще радуйте родителей!
Пусть они от вас узнают первыми,
Что курить и пиво пить вы бросили

demonstrators' mouths: 'An unbreakable union...' ('Soiuz nerushimyi'...): the opening of the Soviet anthem. Here Martynov seems to address an audience which may not be able to recognise the intertextual references of the text. The illustration to the verses on the anthem of the Socialist International, instead, shows a man who is indicating the road to a little boy. The road is blocked by a large rubbish bin. In this case, the intertextual reference has become secondary compared to the generational issue.

²²⁵ See, for example, the interview with Lev Iakovlev, 'Detskie pisateli ne khotiat byt' avtorami', *Ex libris*, 10 August 2000
<http://www.ng.ru/ng_exlibris/izdat/2000-08-10/4_child.html>
[accessed 10 November 2010].

И на деньги больше не играете.
Даже карты, вот, решили выбросить.²²⁶

The first of these new pieces of advice is an open ‘invitation to subversion’, to use Rudova’s words, and an encouragement to react against any aggression:

Когда получишь в ухо,
Не лей напрасных слёз
И вежливо, но сухо
Ответь ударом в нос.²²⁷

And yet, in this collection the belt has kept its symbolic strength, and texts and illustrations form a coherent whole which conveys what I would define ‘the belt discourse’. For example, the illustration to the following text describes a New Year Party, with the Christmas tree surrounded by children:

На детском празднике,
Когда
Начнуть давать подарки,
Не стой застенчиво!
Вперёд
Протискивайся ловко.
Толкай девчонок,
Малышей
Отпихивай локтями...
И самый первый,
Раньше всех
Получишь ты...
По шее.²²⁸

On the next page, Santa Claus, surrounded by children who await their presents, pulls a belt out of his big bag. Thanks to the illustration, the text that

²²⁶ ‘Children, make your parents happy more often!/They should be the first to know/ that you have quitted smoking and drinking beer/ and that you no longer play for money./ You have even quitted cards.’ Grigorii Oster, *Novye vrednye sovety* (Moscow: Astrel’, 2004). Pages are not numbered. The relationship between Bashchinskaia’s illustrations and the texts of this collection works as the one between the initial setting of the *sadistskii stishok*, which was informed by innocence and harmony, and the final punch line of it, which disrupted them.

²²⁷ ‘If you’ve been hit on an ear/ don’t shed vain tears/ and kindly but firmly/ hit them back on their nose.’ Ibidem.

²²⁸ At a children’s party/ at the moment/ when presents are given/ don’t be shy! Squeeze cleverly ahead./ Push little girls/ Shove little boys with your elbows.../ And before anyone else, the very first one, you will get... Round your neck.’ Ibidem.

immediately follows the above-discussed one can be understood as a new formulation of the belt discourse:

Рви и пачкай всё, что мама
Надевает на тебя
И тебе пойдут и купят,
Много новеньких вещей.²²⁹

The illustration shows a shop where the only items sold are huge belts, in all possible shapes and colours.

The collection, published in 2009, *Vrednye sovety ottsam podrastaiushchikh detei* (*Bad Advice for fathers of adolescents*) offers other significant examples of the belt discourse. One of the illustrations, by A. Bil'zho, shows a young boy screaming:

Мама, мама, папа причиняет мне моральный и физический вре-е-ед!²³⁰

He is bent over, and his father holds him firmly with one hand grasping a belt with the other: the weapon he is beating the boy with. The piece of bad advice associated with this illustration reads as follows:

Объясните своему ребёнку,
Что человека, совершающего
неприличные поступки, румянец можно
появиться не только на щеках, но и
пониже спину.²³¹

The page on which the advice is displayed is almost entirely occupied by the enlarged detail of the above described illustration: a huge belt grasped by a man's hand.

Bad Advice ultimately exposes the difficulty of being in and outside the time, between committing oneself to a pedagogical mission and demonstrating

²²⁹ 'Tear and stain whatever mom makes you wear. Parents will go and buy for you so many new things.' *Novye vrednye sovety*.

²³⁰ 'Mum, mum, dad is subjecting me to moral and physical haaaarm!', G. Oster and A. Bil'zho, *Vrednye sovety ottsam podrastaiushchikh detei* (Moscow: AST-Astrel', 2009), p. 147.

²³¹ 'Explain to your child/ that the person who behaves inappropriately may blush not only on his cheeks, but on the lower part of the back as well.' *Ibidem*, p. 146

one's non-involvement in what has produced social evil. This was the dilemma which, in my analysis, Russian children's authors of the post-perestroika period confronted, and which they tried to resolve through playfulness. The need to restore the centrality and the educative function of the intellectual may be a possible reason for Oster's participation in a state-sponsored website. This author associated with ideals of subversion and rebellion against any form of authority, in 2004 made a decisive contribution to the setting up of the official website for children from eight to fourteen years of age about the president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin.²³² Behind this project there is the work of a composite team, consisting of child psychologists and other experts, but 'its main concept and most of the texts are created by Oster'.²³³ The analysis of this website goes beyond the purpose of my study, nevertheless, the fact that a children's author known for his supposed subversive attitude towards power is now the main author of a government-sponsored website whose aim is to make children know, appreciate and support the president of Russia, can hardly be approached as unproblematic. Grigorii Oster has justified his collaboration on the site by stressing its 'strictly educational value', its goal supposedly being 'to explain the principles of democratic government and the job of the president – not necessarily Vladimir Putin – to children'.²³⁴ The pedagogical agency has now moved into cyber space. This website seems to offer children's authors, and in particular Grigorii Oster,²³⁵ the possibility of another carnival, in which the intellectual embarks on a pedagogical role not only by turning to children, parents and teachers, and exploring the social and domestic environment, but

²³² <<http://www.uznai-prezidenta.ru/>>, an alternative address is <<http://kids.kremlin.ru/>> [both accessed 9 June 2012].

²³³ 'Invitation to a Subversion', p. 333.

²³⁴ Ibidem, p. 340.

²³⁵ Also Oleg Kurguzov took part in the creation of the texts for the website, specifically the section 'Reka vremeni-1'.

by colonizing political discourse. This is, at least potentially, a counterproductive act for a children's author, following which he risks being colonized by the political discourse. This question lies beyond the scope of the current study.

Conclusions

The new playful wave in Russian children's literature at the beginning of the 1990s was informed by a strong pedagogical impetus, which consisted of recreating structures of trust, and, ultimately, 'recreating culture', that is, restoring the consistency of the chain of meanings in a new coming together of signifier and signified. To this aim, they peeled away 'the literary and everyday skin' of objects, names and values, as the OBERIU had stated in their 1925 Manifesto.²³⁶ Playfulness became a metaphor for cultural renewal. However, this proved to be a hard enterprise. This was a time of profound changes in Russian society. The concept of childhood, in particular, had undergone radical transformations. The perception of children's innate happiness and of childhood as a "golden age" of human existence, coexisted with opposite perceptions associated with children's sorrow, and above all with the idea of adults as agents of violence and coercion, thus responsible for children's oppression. Social and economic difficulties added up to adults' fear of being inevitably compromised because they had grown up under an oppressive system. The child became not only one who had to be saved through literature, but the addressee of adults' confessions of inadequacy. The idea of the child's inner and even physical invulnerability, which had developed over the centuries, in some cases transformed the inner self of the child and his body into the site for the epiphany of truth, including the truth about the impossibility of recreating

²³⁶ 'The Oberiu Manifesto', p. 196.

culture. The field of play allowed adults to vent their own fears while carrying on assuming a pedagogical role, thanks to the reproducibility of play, its implying a never-ending starting over.

Bad Advice is the epitome of this form of playfulness. The narrative voice of this series is a male voice who addresses a child audience as the independent educator he was not allowed to be throughout the Soviet time, but who senses the burden of his own experience as a Soviet adult. The result is an uncanny narrative, in which the body of the child is continuously punished for his independence. In order to explain the dynamics between this inner desire to carry out an ethical transformation of society and the awareness of being part of the system which *Bad Advice* struggles to question, I have described the narrative voice of this series as a man who undertakes a *podvig* – an ethical act of inner renewal, thanks to which he is ready to transform the world he lives in. However, the *podvig* is the affirmation of a highest truth. The truth that this voice can bear witness to is that violence is the only bond linking one generation to the other. This ultimately denies the narrative and authorial voice of *Bad Advice* any possibility to represent a guide for the future generations. When the narrative voice appears to be ridding himself of self-deception (and, figuratively, *undressing*, as the *podvig* requires) by admitting his violent self, he is automatically pushed back to the impossibility of pedagogical agency.

The concept of carnival, which has been applied by Maria Nikolajeva to children's literature, has provided a theoretical framework enabling me to approach the book as the place where the narrative voice sees the realization of the claim to an independent pedagogical role, before coming back to a *status quo* in which he feels inadequate to the role he had dreamed of. The play dimension, however, allows the narrative voice to re-open the carnival, by

serialising *Bad Advice*, and reformulating his dynamics between the invitation to subversion and punishment, his belt discourse, in ever new ways.

Chapter 4

***Anekdot* culture and Russian children’s literature in the 2000s: Artur**

Givargizov and Natal’ia Nusinova

«Коммунизм» – что-то вроде летних каникул для детей и взрослых, но только круглый год.

“Communism”: more or less like summer holidays for children and adults, but they last all the year round.

Natal’ia Nusinova, *Priklucheniia Dzherika*, 2006

— А вы, наверно, не были ребёнком, — пошутил Коля. — Вы, наверно, пришелец с другой планеты. Вы когда злитесь, у вас даже искры из глаз летят.

‘But, probably, you have never been a child, [Igor Semenovich].’ Kolia joked. ‘Probably, you come from another planet. When you get angry, sparks even fly from your eyes’

Artur Givargizov, ‘Kogda ia byl malenk’ii’, 2006.

In 2004, *All Bad Advice* contained, in a coherent structure, texts which had been written from 1990 to 2001. This macrotext reiterated the adult narrative voice’s question “who am I?”, and the reply that the 2001 implied child reader of the third volume of *Bad Advice* had stimulated. That reply had defined adults as inadequate moral leaders. This chapter will investigate the attempt to modify this definition, and reassert the adults’ authority and/or reliability. This attempt takes place in a context in which the generational gap separating those who

came of age during the Soviet Union from children is perceived as particularly wide. Veselova's 2003 account of schoolchildren's ignorance of the Soviet ways of life demonstrates that this lack of knowledge is partly due to the adults' silence about their own experiences.¹ Therefore, the mocking of Soviet culture which we can observe in some of the books studied here can partly be seen as a form of conveying adults' specific experiences and culture.

The present chapter proposes an interpretation of certain forms of playfulness within Russian children's literature of the last decade, discussing their contribution to the construction of a new relationship between the adult and the child in post-post-Soviet Russia. It will investigate the evolution, in the 2000s, of the complex pedagogical momentum that found an expression in both the device of the inversion and in the humorous riddles of *Bad Advice*. Special emphasis will be put on the use of the *anekdot* culture within the works of Artur Givargizov and Natal'ia Nusinova.

Artur Givargizov (born in 1965) has rapidly become one of the most appreciated and discussed Russian children's authors, and is considered the heir of the avant-garde playful children's writers of the 1920s and the 1930s. Natal'ia Nusinova (born in 1955) is a cinema historian whose first children's book, *The Adventures of Dzherik*, was among the first to address the issue of the experience of the Soviet past for a child audience, and in a playful key.² I will discuss some of Givargizov's books and Nusinova's first novel as attempts to clarify the contours of adulthood through playfulness, and strengthen the

¹ Veselova, 'Istoricheskoe proshloe v sochineniiakh shkol'nikov na vol'nuiu temu', p. 127.

² Boris Minaev published *Detstvo Levy* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2001), while, in 2005 the St Petersburg publishing enterprise Iskusstvo Rossii published *Detstvo urodov* (*Monsters' Childhood*), by Liudmila Levitina, in 500 copies. These books share with Nusinova's novel the use of personal pictures. See the last section of this chapter for the discussion of this specific feature. *The Adventures of Dzherik* has been translated into French, Portuguese and Italian, and has seen three editions in Russia.

reliability of intellectual activity as a source of moral guidance. In my reading, these books aim ultimately at the realization, within the boundary of literary representation, of a harmonious society into which adults sharing a Soviet cultural background can comfortably integrate themselves. This project of acceptance and mutual understanding between generations, in which, as will be discussed, adults with a Soviet background overcome the wounds of history, has found a modality of expression in the *anekdot* and in forms of humour similar to *steb*.

In the analysis I propose for Givargizov's children's stories, in particular, mocking adults as parents and teachers is a way to dismiss past and current definitions of adulthood and childhood, opening the way towards the establishment of a new relationship between the two. I interpret some of Artur Givargizov's children's texts as reworkings of Soviet and early post-Soviet forms of humour, while, at the same time, mocking contemporary discourses. Yurchak's observations on the post-Soviet development of *steb* (to which the *anekdot* is akin) are here particularly pertinent. He states that, after the collapse of the Soviet system, '*steb* continued to remain relevant but in a new way, through a kind of cultural inversion. Now *steb* was directed not at official Soviet mythology, but at the new post-Soviet [...] sacred symbolic material'.³ Campaigns emphasising the family as the mirror of the nation's wellbeing, such as the posters in the Moscow tube, the centrality of family bonds in people's conceptualizations of reality,⁴ or the scandal provoked by TV series such as

³ Aleksei Yurchak, 'Gagarin and the Ravekids: Transforming Power, Identity and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Night Life', in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. by Adele Marie Barker (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2001 [1999]), pp. 76–109 (p. 91).

⁴ See the introduction for the discussion of these issues.

Shkola, (*School*),⁵ suggest that, in today's Russia, family, school and the role of adults as protectors of the young, represent the new post-Soviet sacred symbolic material.⁶ By focusing on family members and other supposed leaders of younger generations in a humorous, sometimes deprecating mode, Givargizov's children's texts are located on the boundary between adherence to this predominant discourse and a reaction against it.

Nusinova's childhood memoir *The Adventures of Dzherik* turns to forms of humour, including *anekdoty*, which celebrate the intelligentsia's ethos. However, while reaffirming the intellectual's moral leadership in society, the Soviet jokeloric corpus in her novel participates in the celebration of the family as both the starting point and the final aim of any moral and even intellectual activity. In Nusinova's work, the nuclear family is the space in which adults and intellectuals strengthen their reliability and their status of truth-tellers. The truth at stake, ultimately, is a private truth. Nusinova's use of Soviet jokes about Lenin and the *khodoki*, about the *Timurovtsy* and other elements of Soviet culture leaves history, with its possible culprits, as an open question and makes

⁵ The TV Series *Shkola* (2010), directed by Valeriia Gai-Germanika, was shown on First Channel. It claimed to be a frank portrayal of high school-children, teachers and parents in contemporary Moscow, and often addressed issues such as corruption, lack of a moral code, or teenagers' consumption of drugs. Originally shown in the late afternoon and at 23.30, it was shown only in the late evening slot after the vehement protests expressed by the government, critics, educators and the Orthodox Church. See a review by Joe Crescente, 'Valeriia Gai-Germanika: School (*Shkola*, TV 2010), *Kinokultura*, 28 (2010) <<http://www.kinokultura.com/2010/28r-school.shtml>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

⁶ It is significant that, on 10 November 2011 in a Moscow tube stop, people noted the presence of a new advertising hoarding in the metro encouraging parents to leave their children in an orphanage. Here, the poster said, they would receive a sound, traditional education, supported by the most updated technological means, visits from show-business personalities and rich presents from the orphanage's sponsors. Above all, once they left the orphanage, children would be given an apartment and two university degrees for free. The telephone number shown on the poster belonged to the Moscow Town Department of Family and Youth Politics, which quickly denied any involvement in the initiative. Although this episode falls outside the main time focus of this dissertation, it is nevertheless significant of the climate surrounding adults as care-providers in contemporary Russia, and I suggest this advertising hoarding is a *steb* reaction to this climate.

individual stories acceptable. As I will try to demonstrate, Nusinova's *The Adventures of Dzherik* inserts Soviet humour in a narrative aimed at repairing any possible rupture between the Soviet and the non-Soviet world, between childhood and adulthood, and between private and collective experiences of the Soviet Union, ultimately restoring the wholeness of the adult self and making possible the assumption of a pedagogical role.

In Nusinova's and Givargizov's children's texts, it is the kind of humour employed, and *anekdot* culture in particular, which offers the possibility of formulating a definition of adulthood. The works I will discuss in this chapter appear to rework *anekdot* culture, and in particular one aspect of it: the capacity of the *anekdot* to comment on an external object – a text, in the broadest sense of the term – and, at the same time, on the group to which the storyteller belongs. Thus, playfulness in children's writing continued to offer adults a field for self-definition as well as for the definition of the child other. In Givargizov's works, these two simultaneous processes of definition have adopted, and merged together, the traits of two specific kinds of *anekdot*: those respectively based on the mocking of the ethnic other and the mocking of the self. In a reworking of the 1990s cycle of jokes about the New Russians, which themselves were half-way between humour directed at an external group and self-humour, Givargizov's texts re-process the definitions of adults and children moving towards a reformulation of their respective statuses. At the heart of this ongoing reprocessing I detect a move away from the awareness of oppositions between the Soviet and the non-Soviet generations towards their reconciliation. This move is made possible through the creation of a liminal environment, in which the boundary separating Soviet and post-Soviet, childhood and adulthood is abolished, and enables the narrative 'I' to experience a rebirth.

These features amount to a ritualistic plot which can also be observed in Nusinova's autobiographical book. At the centre of this plot, both in Nusinova's novel and in Givargizov's works, is the figure of the trickster, embodied by characters and by narrators. While other scholars of Russian culture have mostly emphasised the nature of the trickster as a boundary-crosser, I will put emphasis on this figure's capacity to create a new boundary, in particular between the adult world and the child one.⁷ The nature of this boundary varies. If Givargizov's *So shkafo na velosipede (On a Bike with a Wardrobe)* features rebellious characters that constantly subvert social norms and transcend age differences, an analysis of issues of voice and implied readership demonstrates that at the centre of this book is a plot which eventually affirms social norms.⁸ In this plot the child becomes a child: compliant, amiable and collaborative; and the adult becomes an adult: wise, friendly and self-confident. Here the final establishment of pedagogical authority enables adults to represent themselves as having a non-harmful, non-violent impact on the lives of youngsters, to share their experience with them, and to bridge a generational gap.

In Nusinova's childhood memoir, the narrative 'I' similarly transcends chronological and age boundaries. Also in this case, the aim of boundary-crossing appears to be the clearer formulation of the statuses of the child and of the adult, and of the relationship between the two. In *The Adventures of Dzherik* this relationship is featured as allowing interaction without calling into question adults as repositories of valuable experience and knowledge. In collections of texts written by Givargizov which followed *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, trickster-

⁷ For interpretations of the trickster as a boundary crosser in Soviet children's literature, see Mark Lipovetskii, 'Buratino: Utopiia svobodnoi marionetki'; Maiofis, 'Milyi, milyi trickster: Karlson v sovetskaia utopiia o nastoiashchem detstve', and Konstan A. Bogdanov, 'Samyi chelovechnyi chelovek', in *Veselye chelovechki*, ed. by I. Kukulin, M. Lipovetskii, M. Maiofis, pp. 61–100.

⁸ Artur Givargizov, *So shkafo na velosipede* (Moscow: Egmont, 2003).

characters inhabit a world which remains deprived of any law or distinctive label: they do not turn into reasonable adults and children at the end of the book; they do not lead towards the creation of a new boundary. The chapter will discuss how the ongoing dynamics between the rejection of any contrived definition of adulthood and childhood, on the one hand, and the attempt at providing new definitions is at the heart of Givargizov's fictional world.

Givargizov's *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* and Nusinova's *The Adventures of Dzherik* share with Oster's *All Bad Advice* substantial structural features: they are macrotexts. The single texts brought together in these books are linked to each other in a coherent narrative structure which offers a key to the understanding of the narrative content. It is notable that these books were published within a brief length of time: respectively, in 2003, 2004 and 2006. Because *anekdot* culture plays a key role in Givargizov's and Nusinova's works, my analysis will consider them in the light of theories and analyses of the Soviet and post-Soviet *anekdot*.

The discussion of *The Adventures of Dzherik* will draw on narrative theory more extensively than previous textual analyses in this thesis. This is due to the fact that the specific nature of this text lends itself to a narratological analysis in terms of time and mood. The discussion of these issues allows an in-depth study of how this memoir marketed for children constructs a specific adult authorial identity.

Given the already discussed specificity of children's literature, focused on its child consumers, but produced and discussed by adults, the questions 'Who speaks?', 'Who sees?', and 'To whom?' are those which most scholars of children's literature are trying to answer. This does not necessarily imply the adoption of a narratological approach, but it is a fact that narratology occupies a

special place in today's children's literature scholarship.⁹

The distinction between voice and mood (a notion which includes the distance between the narrator and the story, on the one hand, and the perspective, or focalization, on the other) is crucial in the method of analysis proposed by Genette. This was inspired by Tzvetan Todorov's *Les catégories du récit littéraire* (1966). Genette redistributed functions in a way that made the categories of mood and voice profoundly different from the narratological study that had inspired them.¹⁰ This redistribution enabled the distinction between extra-, hetero- (and so on) diegetic narrators which are now common terms in the analysis of literary texts. Genette's categories of voice, mood and time are closely linked to each other, so that it is almost impossible to discuss one of them without the others being involved. Most importantly, Genette dispensed with the category of third person narration: there exists only a narrating *I*, focusing on her/his self, or on the character. Throughout this thesis I have drawn on Genette's view that all narrative implies a narrator, even when the latter's voice is covert. Issues of time and focalization will be particularly relevant in my discussion of Nusinova's texts. Nikolajeva underlines that the distinction between voice and mood is especially vital when investigating the adult agency of a children's book. Here, indeed, 'the difference between the narrator (the agency whose voice we hear) and the focalizer (the agency

⁹ In 1984, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and, in 1985, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* devoted a special issue to narrative theory and children's literature. Other works over time have followed, but the shared feeling is that new horizons are still to be discovered, in other words, that the potential of narratology is still far from being fully exploited. For a discussion of this topic and the history of the use of narratology in children's literature, see Mike Cadden, 'Introduction', in *Telling Children's Stories*, pp. vii–xxv (p. xx).

¹⁰ In *Les catégories du récit littéraire*, what Genette calls *voice* was referred to as *mood*, and Genette's *mood* was named *aspect*. Genette did not perform a simple renaming, because he linked the question of temporal distance between the narrator and narrative to the category of mood (specifically, to focalization). For Todorov, temporal distance concerned the type of discourse used by the narrator (what Genette calls *voice*).

through whose eyes and/or mind we experience the events) [...] is especially pertinent, since it emphasizes the discrepancy between the (adult) voice and the child point of view'.¹¹

Before moving to the analysis of the selected texts, I will provide an overview of the literary context in which Givargizov's and Nusinova's works appeared. This will show how, beyond the boundary of playfulness, Russian children's literature of the last decade is engaged in the reformulation of the ethical and moral values underpinning contemporary Russia. This amounts to a redefinition of the relationship among members of society, and their respective agencies. The playful children's texts I discuss below are involved in this process of redefinition, and focus on the relationship between adults and children.

4.1. Continuities and Ruptures in Russian Children's Literature at the Beginning of the New Millennium

In the first decade of the new millennium playfulness – especially playfulness which mocks official discourses, disrupts common expectations of adults' and children's behaviour and celebrates inversion – became a well-established tradition in Russian children's literature. Among the authors whose works typically display these traits are Mikhail Esenovskii, Sergei Georgiev, Artur Givargizov, Sergei Sedov, Tim Sobakin, and Andrei Usachev.¹² Today, playful children's books in Russia make reference to Soviet symbols less frequently

¹¹ Maria Nikolajeva, *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (Lanham, Maryland, and London: The Scarecrow Press, 2002), p. 7.

¹² Some examples: Sergei Georgiev, *Ukrotitel' sirenevykh begemotov* (Moscow: Egmont, 2007); Sergei Sedov, *Skazki pro mam* (Moscow: Samokat, 2008), Andrei Usachev, *Skazochnaia istoriia vozdukhoplavaniia* (2003), Tim Sobakin, *Pesni begemota* (Moscow: Drofa, 2000), Mikhail Esenovskii, *Glavnyi shpionskii vopros*, (Moscow: Egmont, 2009). Artur Givargizov's work will be thoroughly discussed in this chapter.

than *Bad Advice*, and, both visually and thematically, they try to address the lives of contemporary children. However, in some cases the link with the Soviet discourse is prominent.

Playful references to Soviet culture in some recent Russian children's books make adults' culture part of today's children's education and leisure experiences. Usachev's *Skazochnaia istoriia vozdukhoplavaniia (Fantastic History of Aviation)*,¹³ followed by *Skazochnaia istoriia moreplavaniia (Fantastic History of Navigation)*,¹⁴ are two examples of this trend. In a humorous fashion, they bring together Russian fairy tales, heroes of children's books which were extremely popular during the Soviet period, such as Karlson or Vinni Pukh, episodes of the Bible, Greek mythology and Soviet heroes, such as the aviator Valerii Chkalov. Both books fall into the category of the typically post-Soviet mockery of 'serious', scientific, culture, but, compared to their predecessors of the 1990s, there is little or no trace of sarcasm and criticism towards Soviet values and culture. The wish (discussed in previous chapters) to promote an unconventional upbringing through narrative strategies associated with the concept of play combines with the need to bridge a growing gap between adults who came of age during the Soviet era and children. In 2004, Mark Lipovetsky hypothesized that, once Russian Postmodernism, with the playful references to Socialist Realism and Soviet culture which were one of its hallmarks, had reached the status of mainstream culture, the presence of playful references in Russian literature, cinema or TV programmes could aim at 'the deconstruction of the binary opposition between the post-Soviet present and the Soviet past,

¹³ Andrei Usachev, *Skazochnaia istoriia vozdukhoplavaniia (Fantastic History of Aviation)* (Moscow: Rosman, 2003).

¹⁴ Andrei Usachev, *Skazochnaia istoriia moreplavaniia* (Moscow: Rosman, 2004).

which served as the basis for the post-Soviet mentality in the 1990s'.¹⁵ According to this hypothesis, Soviet elements in Russian popular culture of the 2000s are devoid of their ideological meaning, and are 'thereby playfully yet effectively restoring historical continuity by connecting past and present in an axiologically neutral field'.¹⁶ The playful children's books under discussion in this chapter partly confirm this argument, although in children's literature the progressive deconstruction of the opposition between Soviet and post-Soviet occurs at the same time as authors appear to mark their own Sovietness, as if telling children: This is the world in which your parents and grand-parents lived, although you know nothing about it.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, in today's Russia the gap dividing the new generations from the old is even more profound than in other countries: 'we are mammoths for them', Natal'ia Nusinova declared discussing her book about her childhood.¹⁷ Her words suggest that adults are experiencing a feeling of separation from children not only because of the age difference, but also because they came of age during the Soviet era. Russian children's literature written in the 2000s bears signs of a feeling of displacement on the part of adults, and of what, in 2003, Iuliia Veselova defined as 'the loss of a communal language' between adults and children. I argue that the playfulness employed in some books by Givargizov and Nusinova, and in particular their

¹⁵ Mark Lipovetsky, 'Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period', *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, Vol. 48, 3 (Autumn, 2004), 356–77, p. 359. In the same essay, Lipovetsky suggests another hypothesis, according to which the use of Socialist Realist forms and the use of Soviet symbols are a way to offer recognisable and simple forms of entertainment to the masses, provide Russian audiences with a shared identity and restore the ideal of the community.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Interview with the author, held in Moscow, 9 June 2011. Typed notes.

use of forms of irony similar to the Russo-Soviet joke, the *anekdot*,¹⁸ constitutes an attempt to find a solution to this feeling and restore adults' reliability as leaders of the younger generations.

Frequent references to technology and contemporary slang in some recent children's books, in particular, appear as an attempt by adults to demonstrate their capacity to address a readership which inhabits a brand new world, with its own language, different from the one of the other world, where adults live. The Soviet culture in which these authors came of age becomes, in turn, a set of terms, objects, symbols and practical habits which have disappeared. In this environment inhabited by people and objects bearing the mark of the new, adults appear bewildered, almost in need of guidance in a world so unlike the one they grew up in.¹⁹ For example, in the 2009 novel *Vremia vseгда khoroshee (Time is Always Good)*, by Andrei Zhvalevskii and Evgeniia Pasternak, post-Soviet society is a landscape of habits, objects and terms that emphasises the Sovietness of those whose childhood took place before perestroika.

Time is Always Good draws a comparison between Soviet and contemporary childhood, emphasising the use of technology and social media as markers of the difference separating the post-Soviet from the Soviet world. One of the two protagonists is a child in the year 2018, Olia, who uses the computer and internet but has only virtual friends, and a virtual life that remains separate from her life at school. The book suggests that she does not know the value of literature and of active learning, because she has never memorized

¹⁸ In the next section of this chapter I will provide a detailed analysis of the specific features of the *anekdot*, sometimes referred to, following Graham's, *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo–Soviet anecdote*, p. iv, as Russian or Soviet joke.

¹⁹ 'In the social conditions we live in, our store of knowledge is as limited as children's', the children's writer Iurii Nechiporenko declared. Interview with the author held in Moscow, 20 May 2011. Typed notes.

poetry or historical dates and uses the computer to do her homework.²⁰ The other protagonist of the book, Vitia, lives in Moscow in 1980. He has many friends and a good family, is a good student and a devoted Pioneer, but has to deal with ideological issues in his everyday life. The book ultimately conveys the sense of an almost ontological difference between Soviet and post-Soviet children by virtue of technology and the ideology-free environment the latter live in. This difference is marked in the 2011 edition of the book which opens with quotations of reviews written by child readers in juvenile slang. These comments serve not only as a proof of the general appreciation of the novel, but also as a guarantee of its modernity, its ability to address a contemporary audience.

Other children's books recently published in Russia reveal adults' attempts to approach the contemporary child by using slang as this child's own language, while, at the same time, portraying idealized child characters strongly reminiscent of the heroes of Arkadii Gaidar's *Timur and his Team*. In Marietta Chudakova's 2005 detective story, *Dela i uzhasy Zheni Osinkinoi: Taina gibeli Anzheliki (Zhenia Osinkinaia's Life and Terrors: The Mystery of Anzhelika's Death)*, and in the last book by Natal'ia Nusinova, *Kuriachii Bog (The God of the Fence, 2012)*, which followed her autobiographical *The Adventures of Dzherik*, young protagonists speak juvenile slang but often seem to act according to canons which can be associated with Gaidar's novel.²¹

²⁰ The lifestyle of the protagonist is similar to that of contemporary children.

²¹ Olga Murgina underlined these features in Chudakova's book. See her review 'Novyi Timur?' <<http://bibliogid.ru/articles/2197>> [accessed 3 February 2013].

The post-Soviet children's detective novel offers other examples. As Larisa Rudova observes, here positive characters are embedded in a consumer society, and make use of the most recent technological items, although these child characters are 'idealized and made into desirable models of behaviour', like 'recontextualized versions of *Timur i ego komanda*'. Rudova considers these references to the consumer society as the expression of a new way of conceiving middle class values in early post-Soviet Russia. Larissa Rudova, 'From Character-Building to Criminal Pursuits: Russian

If, as I maintain, these references to technology as the attributes of youth reveal a feeling of bewilderment on the part of adults approaching children, as if adults were strangers in a world populated by unfamiliar objects and terms, this feeling should not be interpreted as due to a practical lack of IT knowledge. The number of internet and mobile users in Russia is very high, and it grew by 25-30 percent per year between 2005 and 2010.²² In summer 2010, 61% of the Moscow adult population used the internet.²³ Many children's authors, including some whose work I discuss in this thesis, take an active part in on-line magazines and websites of children's literature.²⁴ However, in spite of their growing popularity at all levels of Russian society, new technologies constitute one of the markers of post-Soviet Russia. Significantly, *anekdoty* about new Russians in the 1990s had their protagonists handling up-to-date mobile phones and other wonders of modernity. In the Russian urban environment of the 2000s, the new objects of modernity are no longer the prerogative of an elite attracting people's suspicion, but the distinctive mark of youth.²⁵ Their use on the part of adults requires effort, and the wish to adapt oneself to a new language. Ultimately, while underlining the difference between Soviet and post-Soviet cultures, and the Soviet and post-Soviet generations, the aforementioned children's books also try to overcome this gap.

Children's Literature in Transition', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, pp. 19–40 (p. 31).

²² Alexei Pankin et al., *Mapping Digital Media: Russia: A Report by the Open Society Foundations*, 10 August 2011

<<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/mapping-digital-media-russia-20110923.pdf>> [accessed 3 February 2013].

²³ Fom editorial board, 'Internet v Rossii: Dinamika proniknoveniia. Leto 2012'

<<http://runet.fom.ru/Proniknovenie-interneta/10598>> [accessed 10 March 2013].

²⁴ For example *Elektronnye pampasy*, ed. by Iurii Nechiporenko, is a popular platform for many of the children's authors whom I have mentioned in this study

<<http://www.epampa.narod.ru/index.html>> [accessed 10 March 2013].

²⁵ Rudova's observations about the children's *detektiv*, summarized in the note n.10, suggest that this trend started in the 1990s and became particularly evident in the 2000s.

This cultural chasm adds up to a never fully solved dilemma concerning the identity of the adult in relation to younger generations. We have seen that the obstacles which adults encountered in their attempt to assume an independent educative role and re-define adulthood after perestroika were due not only to adverse socio-economic conditions. The feeling, sometimes the awareness, of belonging to a community governed by violence, which makes its members violent, complicates their assumption of a pedagogic role. In the 2000s, the sense of a generational difference which is conveyed by books such as *Time is Always Good* appear to further complicate adults' identity as providers of care and education as unresolved. Meanwhile, a ubiquitous rhetoric puts emphasis on the capacity to provide care and education as the only possible definition of adulthood and citizenship.

In the social and political context of the Putin era, which some observers of Russia define as a new stagnation, and which offers new challenges for educators, playful ways of addressing a child audience are officially recognised. The playful literary trend is best described by the children's book series *Gorod masterov* (Town of Masters), where the masters in the title are defined as follows:

мастера выдумки и фантазии, смеха, игр и приключений: – в общем, самые настоящие МАСТЕРА ДЕТСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ!²⁶

The series was started in 2003 by Egmont Russia, a publisher responsible for 70% of Russian children's magazines, and is edited by Maria Artem'evna. The title pays homage to the play of the same title written by the Soviet children's writer Tamara Gabbe in 1943. As Maria Poriadina observes, by quoting this once beloved children's theatre play, editors meant to please adults of the

²⁶ 'Masters of tricks and fantasy, laughter, play and adventures – in other words, the real masters of children's literature!'

Soviet generation.²⁷ However, the series aims to renew Russian children's literature, for example by launching new authors, such as Artur Givargizov. In 2005, Egmont launched the series '*Shkola prikola*' ('School of *Prikol*'; *prikol* is another term for *steb*). All the books in the series consist of short prose texts or poems with a humorous content based on the device of the inversion of expectations. Smaller publishers such as '*Samokat*' or '*Rozovyi zhiraf*' are also contributing to the popularity of playfulness within Russian children's literature. Supporting the argument that playfulness, especially in the form of very short humorous stories, enjoys the status of a well-established literary tradition in today's Russia is the fact that, in 2002, Egmont Russia together with *Detskaia literatura* (Children's Literature Publishing) published a collection of children's short stories by Russian authors called *Klassiki* (Classics) that was dominated by playful texts. The title claimed the existence of a valuable corpus of contemporary Russian children's literature, countering the very popular argument that only the Soviet era had produced good quality children's texts. The stories brought together in this collection were presented as having the right to aspire to the label of 'classic works for children'.

The collection *Classics* includes short stories written by Russian children's authors who emerged between the end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, and most of them are champions of playful children's literature: Oleg Kurguzov, Tim Sobakin, Sergei Sedov, and Andrei Usachev. These authors were members of the literary group *Chernaia kuritsa*, and some of the stories of this collection had appeared in children's magazines such as *Tramvai* in the early 1990s. *Classics* was named Book of the Year in 2003 by the Russian Federal Agency for Print and Mass Communication and the Moscow

²⁷ Mariia Poriadina, 'Gorod masterov. — M. Egmont Rossiia', *Znamia* 1 (2004) <<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2004/1/poriad.html>> [accessed 5 April 2013].

International Book Fair. Among the members of the jury were academics, critics, illustrators and other experts in the field.²⁸ The book also includes some texts written by Artur Givargizov, who had published short stories in various magazines in the late 1990s, but never a book of his own. The title of the collection confirms the link between literature, humour and play: *klassiki* is also the name of a popular playground game, usually called hopscotch in English. The illustration on the cover of the book showed a typical hopscotch structure with numbers in squares, and two children standing at a corner. A brief introduction by the editors explained the double meaning of the title, openly encouraging readers to join them in a 'game' by reading this book.²⁹

It should be noted that books such as *Classics*, or those which are included in the series *Gorod masterov* and *Shkola prikola*, are published in small print runs (from 3,000 to 5,000 copies), and that their promotion remains a battle on the part of publishers and other professionals involved in children's literature.³⁰ Furthermore, copies of these books are mostly available in St Petersburg's and Moscow's libraries, book stores and schools, while in the provinces children are still, as a rule, being offered less contemporary authors, such as Agnia Barto and Samuil Marshak.³¹ For this reason, the discussion of the books selected for this chapter should be understood as referring to the limited environment of the big Russian cities. In this urban context, the

²⁸ Moscow International Book Fair [authors non specified], 'Kniga goda' <<http://www.mibf.ru/index.php?page=27>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

²⁹ *Klassiki: Luchshie rasskazy sovremennykh detskikh pisatelei*, ed. by Lev Iakovlev (Moscow: Detskaia literatura and Egmont Russia Ltd, 2003), p.3. Critics identified Mariia Artem'evna, editor of Egmont-Rossia, as the author of this explanatory text.

³⁰ Nonetheless, Givargizov's success is growing. For example, *Kak so vzroslymi* (Moscow: Vremia: 2011), which mostly re-publishes the texts gathered in *Try-try-try-my: Avtobus i drugie* (Moscow: Vremia, 2006), was published in 10,000 copies.

³¹ So stated Irina Balakhonova, chief editor of Samokat Publishing in a 2010 interview during the 23rd Moscow Book Fair: Iana Makarova and Viacheslav Shumov, 'Moskovskie izdateli rasskazali, chto chitaiut deti' <<http://www.ria.ru/video/20100904/272272103.html>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

aforementioned awards and editorial initiatives suggest the existence of an attempt to canonize contemporary playfulness and the concept of play as a mediator between adults and children within the field of children's literature.³²

There exists, however, a trend within Russian children's literature and criticism which seemingly departs from play and playfulness as an appropriate educative approach in children's literature. Indeed, other books that have received literary awards and critical appreciation besides the playful ones are those that address themes that were a taboo during the Soviet era, for example children with mental or physical handicaps. Ekaterina Murasheva's *Klass korreksii* (*Class of Correction*, 2007) addresses this topic, while in 2006 Liudmila Ulitskaia took over leadership of the project *Drugoi, drugie, o drugikh* (*Other, Others, Otherwise*). The project consists of twenty books, each by a different author, and promotes tolerance, addressing themes such as homosexuality.³³ In 2003, the critic Evgenii Ermolin expressed unease about a national mainstream literature allegedly unable to provide Russian audiences with intense reading experiences. He associated this incapacity with the employment of playful narrative strategies. 'In the new century, as it turned out, there is no place for play. Today's times' Ermolin states, 'require artists and

³² School curricula do not seem to emphasise playfulness. For example, the presence of Kharms in handbooks of Russian literature for school children who are between ten and thirteen years old is minimal. I am thankful to Dr Joanne Shelton for this information. On the occasion of the 23rd Moscow Book Fair, held in 2010, some editors proposed the inclusion of new children's authors within the school curricula (see 'Chto chitaiut sovremennye deti' <<http://www.book-navigator.ru/node/2911>> [accessed 13 April 2013]).

³³ The first book was published in 2006. See Larissa Rudova's review of the project: <<http://www.wgrclc.com/reviews/other-others-otherwise/>> [accessed 15 May 2013] and two interviews with Ulitskaia about the project: Anton Zhelnov, "Drugie—ne chuzhie": Liudmila Ulitskaia zadumala uvlech' detei rasskazami o kul'turakh i traditsiakh', *Vedomosti* 150 (August 15, 2006): <http://www.pressmon.com/cgi-bin/press_view.cgi?id=1639264> [accessed 15 May 2013]; and Natal'ia Kochetkova, 'Pisatel' Liudmila Ulitskaia: 'Nashi knigi o cheloveke, kotoryi ne takov, kak vy.'" *Izvestiia* 106 (June 19, 2006), <<http://izvestia.ru/news/314682>> [accessed 15 May 2013].

people to be responsible'.³⁴ The promotion of children's books addressing 'serious' issues in Russia seems to be driven by a call for responsibility similar to the one advocated by Ermolin in mainstream culture. Beyond the issue of the literary quality of these children's works, they embody an idea of children's literature as an act aimed at having a social impact, in terms of promotion of social values and shaping of the new citizen, which turns children's literature into (or brings it back to) a social project and an act of socialization.³⁵

Children's books that mock adults and social conventions and invite the child reader to laugh, such as the ones I discuss below, are related to this context, engaged as they are in deconstructing and reconstructing discourses on adults and children at the same time as they rework Soviet culture in a playful fashion. I especially focus on the role assigned to humour and the *anekdot* culture for carrying out these deconstructive and constructive processes.

4.2 The Soviet *Anekdot* and Its Self-Reflexive and Ethnic Implications

The roots of the late Socialist joke are in the historical and satirical anecdotal literature of the 18th and 19th century Russia. This narrated factual, often private events, and its protagonists were members of social elites: monarchs, aristocrats, or military leaders. A parallel folk genre made fun of anonymous representatives of social types: the peasant, the landowner, the priest, the fool and so on.³⁶ Throughout its development the *anekdot* has always shown a high

³⁴ E. Ermolin, 'Literatura i svoboda', in *Novye pisateli: Forum molodykh pisatelei Rossii*, ed. by Irina Kovaleva, Vypusk vtoroi (Moscow: Knizhnyi sad, 2004), 552–66, p. 554. Arzamastseva and Nikolaeva quote Ermolin's ideas in their discussion of late 1990s Russian children's literature and playfulness. *Detskaia literatura*, p. 471.

³⁵ I am thankful to Oksana Lushchevska for this observation.

³⁶ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, pp. 31–61. See also Valerii Tiupa, 'Communicative Strategy of the Anekdot and the Genesis of Literary Genres', *Russian Journal of Communication*, 2.3/4 (2009), 161–70, pp.162–3. Tiupa detects the core of

degree of flexibility: while being influenced by many genres, it has colonized other genres in turn (the novel, for example).³⁷ As Seth Graham observes, the Soviet *anekdot*, which flourished in post-Stalin culture, tended above all to mock official narratives about specific themes, especially manifested in films or songs, rather than those themes directly, e.g. political leaders or heroes of the Revolution. These films and songs represented ‘the ongoing official autobiography and ethnography of the country and its citizens’.³⁸ Graham maintains that the *anekdot* sub-culture put itself in competition with this official autobiography, by offering an alternative, auto-satiric, strategy for self-representation.

In particular, Graham has analysed a specific form of joke which is directed towards the very group that produces it, in other words, towards Soviet Russians. It is, ultimately, a form of reflexive humour, or in Graham’s words, a form of ‘ethnic reflexivity’.³⁹ As he points out, ‘Soviet culture was the site of parallel discursive projects with incongruous strategies of representation, including strategies of *self-representation*’.⁴⁰ His analysis draws partly on Christie Davies’s study, *The Mirth of Nations*, in which many forms of in-group joke-telling are discussed. Davies compares Jewish and Scottish self-humour, maintaining that some peoples have developed self-humour for reasons that include a passion for intellectual argumentation, a high philosophical tradition

the *anekdot* in the following characteristic of the anecdotal narrative: it ‘creates an *occasional* (accidental) view of the world, which with its “carnavalesque” invertedness and its curious unexpectedness rejects, distorts, and profanes the etiquette norms of human interactions.’ ‘Communicative Strategy of the Anekdot’, p. 166.

³⁷ Tiupa, instead, maintains that the *anekdot* is actually ‘the “grandfather” of the novel, as well as of the short story’. ‘Communicative Strategy of the Anekdot and the Genesis of Literary Genres’, p. 169. Tiupa implies that the *anekdot* appears as permeable because it actually constitutes the historical roots of modern literary genres.

³⁸ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 158.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

and the mere fact that that specific people may tend to mock any aspect of life and thus feel particularly at ease with mocking itself: 'familiarity breeds jokes'.⁴¹

Nonetheless, Davies highlights the existence of another key feature of self-reflexive joke-telling. This feature is the underlying self-awareness of being a separate group. For example, the Scots and the Jews 'display a sharp awareness of a distinctive and highly valued identity that is in one sense or another problematic, and that raises the questions "who are we?", "how do we define ourselves?"'.⁴² In addition, Davies argues, through jokes people play with the forbidden, and this includes inter-ethnic verbal aggression. Against the argument that self-denigrating jokes are a defensive mechanism or a form of inward aggression on the parts of peoples who have experienced adversity, Davies maintains that joke-telling is one of the 'ways of playing with [...] the experience of adversity in a humorous fashion'.⁴³

Graham interprets Davies's analysis as suggesting that an ethnic group might tell jokes about itself so as to take ownership of its own stereotype. In his words, these jokes 'preempt the use of that image by more powerful and/or potentially dangerous out-groups'. 'The image of the Russian in underground *anekdoty*' Graham argues, 'functioned as an implicit rebuttal of state-produced or state-sanctioned representations of the Russo-Soviet "ethnos", [therefore] such *anekdoty* do evince a collective awareness of an out-group.'⁴⁴ In these jokes, Russians are alcoholics, lazy, disorganized and superficial. The other more powerful and potentially dangerous 'group', against which these jokes

⁴¹ Christie Davies, *The Mirth of Nations* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 94.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, pp. 157– 8.

allegedly offered a defence, was the State which promoted the superiority of the Socialist way of life, and imposed a univocal biography of the Socialist citizen.

As the main scholars that have dealt with the *anekdot* emphasize, the environment that produced this form of oral folklore was that of the creative intelligentsia. When Soviet Russians depicted themselves in negative terms in these reflexive jokes, their self-mocking implied an element of self-celebration, not least for contradicting the official image of the Soviet man.⁴⁵ As Graham colourfully notes, ‘the “injured, pallid, unhappy” protagonists of the *anekdoty* frequently defend their right to a squalid or otherwise defective existence, wherein the earth of the Motherland merges with collective feces’.⁴⁶ Therefore, many of the shortcomings that Russians attribute to themselves in *anekdoty* are actually part of a positive behavioural code.⁴⁷ Graham goes so far as to stress that any form of intertextual *anekdot* (mocking the Soviet text, in the broadest sense) is ultimately self-referential also in an ethnic sense.⁴⁸ *Anekdoty* are, in other words, a comment on a text and a comment on the self at the same time. They form another possible biography, different from the official one.

According to some scholars of Russian culture some *anekdoty* expressed popular resentment towards those who were perceived as outsiders, such as Georgians, Jews or Ukrainians. Through *anekdoty*, these groups were often blamed for being unscrupulous profiteers, interested only in materialistic

⁴⁵ Christie Davies observes about Scottish self-mocking that ‘The ambiguity of humor is such that the jokes *both mock and celebrate* Scottishness and the distinguished traits of Scottish people’, emphasis in the text, *The Mirth of Nations*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 167.

⁴⁷ See also Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997), pp. 78–9: *anekdoty* ‘glorified and reproduced the image of the Russian male/Russian *narod* as powerful, menacing, mischievous hooligan, wreaking havoc on the societies and economies he/it touches, contaminating and spoiling everything along the way.’

⁴⁸ Seth Graham, ‘Varieties of Reflexivity in the Russo-Soviet Anekdot’, in *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. by Lesley Milne, pp.167–79 (pp. 16–78).

aspects of life. Emil Draitser, who has devoted extensive research to Soviet humour, maintains that these ethnic jokes were based on ethnic stereotypes. In his view, they represented 'the Russians' way of reassuring themselves, [...] a self-therapy of sorts that helped to allay anxieties about the possibility of confrontation'.⁴⁹ As in many other countries, in Russia ethnic *anekdoty* were sometimes borrowed from the corpus of reflexive jokes that belonged to the minority that was now the object of mockery, for example Jews or Georgians. An indigenous joke may be borrowed by an ethnic group and redirected towards another group, or an old non-ethnic joke can be 'ethicised'.⁵⁰

Among Russian ethnic jokes, the popular cycle about the Siberian ethnic group Chukchi has been the object of a specific reading. Chukchi had little contact in real life with Soviet Russians, and nothing in their habits could provoke popular resentment. Accordingly, their characterization differs from all the others provided by ethnic jokelore. This cycle is particularly relevant for my discussion of the legacy of *anekdot* culture in Givargizov's and Nusinova's children's texts, because of its representing a mixture of ethnic and self-reflexive humour.

Chukchi were portrayed as simpletons, and many of the *anekdoty* about them appeared as re-workings of old tales about fools.⁵¹ From the fool, the Chukchi inherited a uniform consisting of funny, oversized clothes and some sort of stick, be it a fishing pole, a spear or a rifle.⁵² The majority of *anekdoty* depict Chukchi as childlike, naively-stupid simpletons. Graham notes that this

⁴⁹ This tendency, Draitser points out, increased with the beginning of perestroika, when provinces demanded autonomy or independence and ethnic conflicts started acquiring greater relevance in Soviet society. Emil Draitser, *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998), p. 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁵¹ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 192; *Taking Penguins to the Movies*, p. 98.

⁵² *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 193.

overall common portrayal has also prompted a counter-impulse, so that Chukchi in some jokes reveal some unexpected wit. Barskii, Draitser and Graham agree that the cycle on Chukchi should be read as another form of self-satire, Chukotka being 'a hyperbolic synecdoche for Russia'.⁵³ In other words, the *anekdoty* on Chukchi represented an overemphasized concentration of traits that actually belonged to Russia. 'The Russian subconscious ethnos' Graham points out, 'exports negative aspects of its self-image onto a geographically remote Other.'⁵⁴

One of the ways in which Russian people reacted to the social and economic changes that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union was by directing *anekdoty* at those who had managed, in one way or another, to succeed and make money, while the rest of the population was experiencing dire conditions: in other words, New Russians. Some discussion of this specific kind of post-Soviet *anekdoty* is vital for my discussion, as Givargizov's work appears to have borrowed some of the typical features of this cycle, in particular its protagonists' boorish amorality.

Among the so-called New Russians were scientists, members of the Soviet era *nomenklatura*, ambitious young people and criminals.⁵⁵ However, as Emil Draitser points out, *anekdoty* about New Russians tended to consider all of them as criminals. He notes that the adjective 'new' did not only bear an ironic overtone – it also marked the difference between these people and the 'old' Russians, the producers of these jokes. 'Old Russians' perceived themselves

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 201. See also *Taking Penguins to the Movies*, pp. 94–7, and Lev Abramovich Barskii, *Chelovek! Eto zvuchit gor'ko. Eto prosto smeshno. V pervom chtenii. Anekdoty* (Moscow: Kh.G. S, 1992), p. 195.

⁵⁴ *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 201. Graham, Draitser and Barskii maintain that Chukotka was for Russia as much a peripheral, poor, Asiatic and weird a place as Russia was for Europe. See ibidem, and also *Taking Penguins to the Movies*, pp. 94–7, and *Chelovek!*, p. 195.

⁵⁵ Harley Balzer, 'Routinization of the New Russians?', *Russian Review*, 62, 1 (January 2003), 37–53, p. 39.

as being those 'who, despite the dramatic political and social changes, remained true to their perception of themselves as a group, as a non-materialistic people much more concerned with cultural and spiritual values than with profit-making.'⁵⁶ Seth Graham identifies Old Russians with the creative intelligentsia. For them, 'New Russians were not merely guilty of theft and violence, but were also morally, culturally and intellectually offensive'.⁵⁷

Draitser maintains that the majority of jokes about New Russians were an adaptation of old jokes about Georgians or Jewish people, circulating already in the 1950s. Others were part of the corpus of jokes about Ukrainians or Chukchi, or about the Soviet *nomenklatura*. Like these old targets, jokeloric New Russians were either described as stupid simpletons, ignorant and inept, or as greedy and corrupt, and their children were even more so, according to the proverb 'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree'.⁵⁸ However, Draitser observes that there is a crucial distinction between the old Soviet ethnic *anekdoty* and those about New Russians: in the latter case 'the objects of popular resentment are not outsiders, but the tellers' own ethnic kin'.⁵⁹ In this sense, 'most jokes about New Russians are old ethnic jokes turned inward: they ridicule the stupidity, low culture, criminality and extravagance of a subset of [the joke tellers'] own group'.⁶⁰ From this point of view, Draitser continues, the

⁵⁶ Emil Draitser, 'The Rise and Fall of the Jokeloric New Russians', in *Uncensored? Reinventing Humor and Satire in Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. by Olga Mesropova and Seth Graham (Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica Publishers, 2008), pp. 79–98 (p. 79).

⁵⁷ Seth Graham, 'The Wages of Syncretism: Folkloric New Russians and the Post-Soviet Popular Culture', *Russian Review*, 62.1 (January 2003), 37–53, p. 39.

⁵⁸ 'The Rise and Fall of the Jokeloric New Russians', pp. 81–5.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 93. Elena and Alexei Shmelev, instead, put emphasis on the ethnic nature of *anekdoty* about New Russians. See 'Evolution of a speech genre: The Case of Russian Canned Jokes', *Russian Journal of Communication* 2.3/4 (2009), 171–84, p. 174.

⁶⁰ 'The Rise and Fall of the Jokeloric New Russians', p. 93. It should be noted, however, that Graham identifies another source for this portrayal of New Russians (consisting of 'profound amorality, lack of refinement, and intellectual bankrupt') in the *anekdoty* about the Soviet *nomenklatura* (see 'The Wages of Syncretism', p. 39).

epithet 'New Russian' is not ironic, but rather literal, implying the acknowledgement that the culprit of the Russian moral collapse is to be found within the boundaries of Russian ethical space. Graham reinforces this interpretation by stating that jokeloric New Russians were but 'incarnations of the altered society produced by economic reforms'.⁶¹ In his view, *anekdoty* about New Russians are a counterpart of *anekdoty* about Chukchi: if Chukotka was a geographical displacement of unpleasant traits that belonged to Russian themselves, jokeloric New Russians are a social and demographic displacement, a 'fooltown' in their own right. Graham suggests that *anekdoty* on New Russians were stating that Russians were as out of place under capitalism as much as they were under Socialism.⁶²

Towards the end of the 1990s, jokes about New Russians started losing their popularity. The reason for this seems to lie in the economic catastrophe of 1998 that did not spare New Russians, leaving little room for mocking their tendency to flaunt their wealth.⁶³ I suggest that in 2003, with the first book published by Artur Givargizov, the cycle entered children's literature. In *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, indeed, and in the following books written by this author,

Aleksei Levinson identified in the 'Nep-man' of the 1920s Moscow an earlier example of New Russian, underlying the existence of anti-nepman *anekdoty*. See Aleksei Levinson, "Novye russkie" i ikh sosedi po anekdoticheskim kontekstam', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 22 (1996), 383–5, p. 383.

⁶¹ 'The Wages of Syncretism', p. 47.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p.49.

⁶³ Moreover, Draitser points out that the crisis of the rouble strengthened local sellers to some degree, which helped business to be perceived in more positive terms among Russians. See 'The Rise and Fall of the Jokeloric New Russians', p. 97. A sign of this change in the perception of wealth was the internet competition '*Chudesnye istorii o den'gakh*' ('*Marvellous Stories about Money*'), resulting in the 2002 collection of short stories *Talan*, ed. by Tat'iana Tolstaia. The hero of one of the stories, *Domofon (Intercom)*, was a New Russian, introduced in a funny but sympathetic light. See Feder Andreev, 'Domofon', in *Talan*, ed. by Tat'iana Tolstaia (Moscow: Podkova 2002), pp. 97–106. See the following article by Tat'iana Tolstaia as the president of the jury for the selection of the stories: T. Tolstaia, "Koshelek intimnee obnazhennogo tela", *Argumenty i fakty*, 30 January 2002
<http://gazeta.aif.ru/online/aif/1110/08_01> [accessed 5 April 2013].

anekdoty about New Russians underwent a distinctive reworking. As I will discuss below, after entering children's literature the cycle about New Russians acquired new functions, offering a tool for deconstructing assumptions about adulthood and childhood towards a renewed approach to children. It is worth noting that Davies emphasises the value of the encounter with the other as the main element responsible for the production of both ethnic and self-referential humour, while many scholars of Russian culture who have dealt with the *anekdot* point at the fear of the encounter and the mistrust towards the other as the main factors that underlie this culture. The coexistence of these two attitudes towards the encounter with another group is one of the main features of Givargizov's short stories, or 'long *anekdoty*'.

4.3. Reprocessing Adulthood and Childhood: Artur Givargizov's

Children's Texts as 'Long *Anekdoty*'

Artur Givargizov, born in 1965, is one of the most popular children's authors of the so-called 'post-post-Soviet era', the years that followed the election of Vladimir Putin as president of the Russian Federation in 2000. Since the publication of Givargizov's first book by Egmont Russia, *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, in 2003, he has won Russia's main literary prizes for children's literature, and received critical acclaim.⁶⁴ Although he has also written children's poetry, Givargizov is best known for his collections of humorous short texts. To

⁶⁴ Before *So shkafo na velosipede*, Givargizov had published a book of rhymes, *Moi bednyi sharik* (Moscow: Dom detskoi knigi, 2002). However, the print run was extremely small, therefore critics consider *So shkafo* as his debut. He had also published verses and short stories in children's magazines (for example *Kukumber*, *Prostokvashino*, *Toshka*, *Murzilka* and *Koster*). See http://www.egmont.ru/press/smi/detail1910/?sphrase_id=641 [accessed 27 February 2013].

Among the several prizes Givargizov and his books have been awarded we find: 2002 and 2006 'Alye parusa' Award; 'Siniiaia ptitsa'; 2005 'Kniga goda' award for *Zapiski vydaushegosia dvoechnika*; 2006 'Zavetnaia mehta' and 'Marshak Award'; and 2011 Kornei Chukovskii Award.

the title of 'master of short humorous stories', critics have added 'the new Kharms' because of the absurdist elements that are present in his texts.⁶⁵

Givargizov's stories are about the lives of ordinary people: school-children, their parents and their teachers. They are set in the common sites of a child's life: home, school, and the playground; every day their child protagonists confront teachers, parents and other relatives whose behaviour is far from exemplary. In Givargizov's short (very short, in most cases) stories, adults are inadequate, irresponsible, ignorant, corrupt, rude and narrow-minded. Parents do not care about their children's lives and wellbeing, nor do teachers care about children's learning at school. Most parents seem to be obsessed by their children's admission to a music school, and by the children's unwillingness to work hard at improving their musical skills. The music classes and the musical instrument itself are the most recurring themes in Givargizov's work, as suggested by titles such as *Ekzamen na barabanshchika (Drum Exam)*⁶⁶ or *Entsiklopediia babochkoi s barabanom (Encyclopaedia in a Bow Tie with a Drum, from now on Encyclopaedia)*.⁶⁷ On the cover of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, Givargizov's first book, a child is standing on a window sill carrying his violin. The reader will soon realize the meaning of the title: the child's father has tied him to the cupboard so that he will practise the violin instead of riding his bike outdoors.

In many of Givargizov's short stories, parents are ready to pay bribes for their children to be admitted to the school of music, and teachers, in turn, demonstrate a great deal of imagination in asking for bribes in ever new ways:

⁶⁵ See, for example, Maria Poriadina's review of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* <<http://bibliogid.ru/articles/1283>> [accessed 5 April 2013]; or Ol'ga Lebedushkina, 'Begstvo ot nel'zia: Detskie knizhki kak vzrosloe chtenie', *Druzhba narodov*, 2 (2008) <<http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhba/2008/2/le12.html>> [accessed 5 April 2013].

⁶⁶ Artur Givargizov, *Ekzamen na barabanshchika* (Moscow: Vremia, 2010).

⁶⁷ Artur Givargizov, *Entsiklopediia babochkoi s barabanom* (Moscow: Egmont, 2010).

ЧТО ДЕЛАТЬ С ПИАНИНО

- Здравствуйте, ребята! На сегодняшнем уроке пения мы будем...Что? Ни за что не догадаетесь. Могу поспорить с кем угодно на десять рублей, что не догадаетесь. Ну же! Есть желающие спорить?
- Я!
- Мячиков? Кляди сюда десять рублей. Вот так. Теперь отвечай.
- Мы посадим...
- Неправильно, Мячиков. Ты проспорил. Кто ещё?
- Мы приделаем...
- Ты, Зубов, деньги клади, а потом — "Мы приделаем ". Хитрый такой!
- Мы приделаем...
- Неправильно. Следующий. Что притихли? Ставлю два к одному. Кто хочет разбогатеть? Молодец, Клеточкина. Клади сюда денежки.
- Мы будем...
- Ах, как жаль! Ай, ай, ай! Почти угадала. Ну, ничего, в следующий раз. Ладно, дальше поехали. Что-то я рук не вижу. Нужна еще десятка. Кто смелый? Придётся по алфавиту. Анисимов. Деньги давай! Вот так. Я пошла в магазин.
- Вера Петровна.
- Что тебе ещё, Анисимов?
- А с пианино что делать?
- Можешь его, Анисимов, с лесницы спустить.
- Так ведь мы на прошлом уроке спускали.
- Значит, сегодня повторение темы прошлого урока.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ What shall we do with the piano?

- Hello, guys! Today's class will be on...Guess what? You'll never guess. I wager anyone ten roubles that you'll never guess. Come on! Who wants to bet?
- Me!
- Miachikov? Put your ten roubles here. Well done. Now answer.
- We will set...
- Wrong, Miachikov. You've lost. Who else?
- We will attach...
- You, Zubov, first put down the money, and then 'we will attach'. You scoundrel!
- We will attach...
- Wrong. Next one. Why are you so quiet? I'll bet you two to one. Who wants to become rich? Great, Kletochkina. Put your money here.
- We will...
- Ah, what a pity! No, no, no! You were nearly there. Well, it's alright, next time. Ok, let's go on. How come I don't see your hands up? We need ten roubles more here. Who is brave enough? Then I will call you in alphabetical order. Anisimov. Give me the money! There you go. I'm off to the shop.
- Vera Petrovna.
- What else do you want, Anisimov?
- What shall we do with the piano?
- Well, Anisimov, you can throw it down the stairs.
- The thing is that we already threw it during the last class.
- This means that today we will revise our last class's topic.
- So Shkafom na velosipede, p. 53.*

Adults often reveal themselves to be sly and even brutally violent. When this happens, the child takes the role of the *durak* (stupid, fool), as in the following example:

ЛАДУШКИ

- Здравствуйте, ребята, садитесь. Обложкин, к доске.
- Чиво-о-о-о?
- Чиво слышал.
- Чиво-о-о, чиво-о-о вы сказали?
- К доске, я сказала. По-бырому!
- Чиво-о-о, чиво-о-о, чиво-о-о?
- Ты чо, не понял, Обложка! Ща в рог.
- Я чо, Вер Петровна, лысый?
- Считаю до тридцати восьми. Тридцать шесть, тридцать семь с половиной...
- Ну и чо будет?
- Ничо. Увидишь.
- Ну и чо я увижу?
- Узнаешь.
- Ой, напугали. Двойку, что ль, поставите?
- Всё, ты меня, Обложкин, достал!
- Вы чо! Больно же! Совсем, что ль?!
- Я тебя предупреждала. Быро к доске.
- Ну ваще-е-е-е! Глобусом, ваще, под них... Да иду, иду.
[...]⁶⁹

The illustration that accompanies this text in the 2003 edition of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* shows a slightly bent-over young boy, with crossed arms and dark

⁶⁹ Little Fingers

- Hello, guys, sit. Obloshkin, come to the blackboard.
 - Wha?
 - Whatcha've heard.
 - Wha-a, whatcha say?
 - To the blackboard, I said. Now!
 - Wha? Wha?
 - You don't get it, Obloshka! I'll give your skull a good beating!
 - Why, Vera Petrovna, am I bald?
 - I'll count up to thirty eight. Thirty six, thirty six and a half...
 - And wha' happens next?
 - Nothin'. You'll see.
 - So, what'll I see?
 - You'll know.
 - Wow, that's scary. Will I get an 'E'?
 - Right, Obloshkin, now I'm fed up with you!
 - Hey, you! That hurts! Are you mad?
 - I told you I would do it! To the blackboard, right now!
 - Hey, come on! Not with a globe, I mean. I'm coming, I'm coming...[...]
- Ibidem, p. 55. Eventually the boy is asked to repeat a well-known nursery rhyme: 'Ladushki, ladushki'.

shadows around his eyes. The teacher, Vera Petrovna, stands above him holding a globe in one hand threateningly, as if she were the master of the world.

Child protagonists of Givargizov's stories, such as 'Clever Zubov' (the hero of *Khitrii Zubov, Clever Zubov*)⁷⁰ or 'the Renowned Dunce' (the hero of *Zapiski vydaiushchegosia dvoechnika, Notes of a Renowned Dunce, 2005*)⁷¹, are not only victims, however. Rather, they mirror the adult world on a smaller scale. They are no less incline to robbery and corruption than their parents or teachers, as we see in the following examples:

УВАЖАЕМАЯ ЛЮДМИЛА ПЕТРОВНА

Зубов два раза подходил к новой учительнице по химии и два раза многозначительно говорил:

-Людмила Петровна, моя мама-стоматолог.

Она или не слышала, или делала вид, что не слышит.

«Может быть, не слышит», подумал Зубов.

Он подошёл к Людмиле Петровне в третий раз и изо всех сил закричал прямо в ухо:

– Людмила Петровна, моя мама – сто-ма-то-лог!!!

– А?! – спросила Людмила Петровна и поставила к уху ладонь.

– Ребята, – обратился Зубов к классу, – у кого из вас мама – ухо-горло-нос?

–У меня, – поднал руку Мячиков.

–Тогда, Мячик, это по твоей части, – сказал Зубов. –Только проси для всех.

Мячиков подошёл к доске и крупно написал:

«Уважаемая Людмила Петровна, у меня мама – ухо-горло-нос. Если вы мне, Зубову, Кулакову, Чесноковой, Гаврилову, Сереберцевой поставите пятёрки, я говорю с мамой насчёт ваших ушей!» Мячиков закончил писать и внимательно посмотрел на Людмилу Петровну.

–Ребята, – обратился он к классу после некоторой паузы. –У кого из вас мама – окулист?⁷²

⁷⁰ Artur Givargizov, *Khitrii Zubov* (Moscow: Drofa plius, 2006).

⁷¹ Artur Givargizov, *Zapiski vydaiushchegosia dvoechnika* (Moscow: Egmont, 2009 [2005]).

⁷² 'Dear Liudmila Petrovna'

Twice Zubov went up to Liudmila Petrovna, the new chemistry teacher, and said, in a significant tone of voice:

"Liudmila Petrovna, my mum's a dentist."

Either she didn't hear him, or she pretended she hadn't heard.

"Maybe she can't hear", Zubov thought.

He went up to Liudmila Petrovna a third time and shouted out loud with all his strength: "Liudmila Petrovna, my mum is a den-tist!!!"

"Huh?" she said, cupping her palm to her ear.

ПОГНАЛ ПО КРУГУ

- Здравствуйте, ребята, садитесь. Сейчас к нам на урок придёт комиссия. Если она вдруг спросит, что вы знаете...
- Мы ничего не видели, ничего не знаем, и вообще это не наше дело.
- Не выскакивай, Коробкин! Я имею в виду — о нотах. Что вы знаете о нотах?
- А я уж думал, нас накрыли медным тазом.
- Лучше не думай, а скажи, что ты знаешь о нотах.
- Обижаете, Вера Петровна. Пусть я не знаю ни о каких таких нотах, зато гвоздём могу открыть любой...
- Цыц, Коробкин! Молчать!
- [...]
- Петя, может быть, ты что-нибудь слышал о нотах?
- Естественно.
- Так отвечай!
- А что я с этого буду иметь?[...] ⁷³

The mask of the unscrupulous rogue and the one of the *durak* appear to be interchangeable, and both adults and children of Givargizov's fictional world alternately wear them both. Adult characters, indeed, sometimes appear as

“Guys,” Zubov said to the class. “Do any of you have a mum who is an ear-nose-and-throat specialist?”

“I do”, Miachikov raised his hand. “Right, then, you do it”, said Zubov. “But ask for everyone”.

Miachikov went to the blackboard and wrote in capital letters: “Dear Liudmila Petrovna, my mum is an ear-nose-and-throat specialist. If you give me, Zubov, Kulakov, Chesnokova, Gavrillov and Serebertseva an ‘A’, I’ll talk to my mum about fixing your hearing!”.

Miachikov finished writing and looked attentively at Liudmila Petrovna.

“Guys,” he said to the class after a while. “Do any of you have a mum who’s an optometrist?”

Ibidem, pp. 60–1.

⁷³ ‘They chased around’

- Hello, guys, sit down. The committee is about to come to class. If suddenly they ask whether you know...
 - We saw nothing, know nothing and overall it’s not our business.
 - Don’t start, Korobkin. I’m talking about notes. What do you know about notes?
 - Oh, I thought we were done for.
 - Don’t think. Rather, tell me what you know about notes.
 - You are offending me, Vera Petrovna. Ok, I know nothing about these notes of yours, but if you give me a nail I can open any...
 - Shush, Korobkin! Shut up!
 - [...]
 - Petia, maybe you have heard something about notes?
 - Of course.
 - Answer the question then!
 - What will I get in out of it?
- So shkafom na velosipede*, p. 24.

losers, simpletons, or weird fools. In other words, all characters of Givargizov's fictional world act either as *chudaki* (weird fellows) or as greedy and violent cheats. In the following examples, taken from *On a Bike*, two teachers, Zinaida Alekseevna and Vera Petrovna, are portrayed as inept and dumb fools, but in other stories the former is ready to poison her pupils,⁷⁴ while the latter is that very teacher who beats one of her pupils with a globe and cheats children in order to take money out of them:

УБИТЬ КОМАРА

Однажды на Зинаиду Алексеевну сел комар. И Зинаида Алексеевна его убила. Но перед смертью, собрав последние силы, комар сказал человеческим голосом:

— Эх, Зинаида Алексеевна, я ведь раньше тоже был учителем – по труду.

И умер.

А Зинаида Алексеевна пошла в милицию и во всём призналась.

И Зинаиду Алексеевну держали в милиции десять лет, пока не выяснилось, что этот комар никаким учителем по труду раньше не числился.⁷⁵

СТРАХ

Однажды Вера Петровна проснулась рано утром и почувствовала, что боится идти в школу. "Что со мной?" — думала Вера Петровна. Она померила температуру — температура оказалась нормальная. Она померила давление — нормальное. Она померила туфли — не жмут. Пальто — сидит хорошо. "Тогда почему?" — подумала Вера Петровна. И тут она поняла. Вернее она вспомнила, что завтра в

⁷⁴ See 'Laboratornaia', *Ibidem*, p. 79.

⁷⁵

To kill a mosquito

One day a mosquito settled on Zinaida Alekseevna. And Zinaida Alekseevna killed it. But before the mosquito died, it gathered its final strength, and said, in a human voice:

– Ah, Zinaida Alekseevna, I was a teacher too, you know, a design and technology teacher.

And then it died.

Zinaida Alekseevna went to the police and confessed everything.

And Zinaida Alekseevna was held at the police station for ten years, until it was established that the mosquito had never worked as a design and technology teacher.

Ibidem, p. 12. This story bears resemblance abstract *anekdoty*, a much beloved subgenre. They applied 'the genre's signature device – a sharp, terminal disruption of the logical flow of discourse – on the genre's own expected discursive trajectory, towards a punch line'. *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*, p. 146.

школу придет медсестра и будет делать прививки от Кулакова, на которой у всех учителей аллергия.
Вера Петровна очень боялась уколов.⁷⁶

The irony and the narrative form of the stories featuring these rogue-*durak* characters exhibit many elements of the *anekdot*. For example, usually a punch line concludes a sketch, and the initial context is set by a sentence in which a verb is followed by its subject ('однажды решил Коля поступить в музыкальную школу').⁷⁷ The fact that many texts by Givargizov are in the form of a dialogue, with no intervention by a narrator, also allows a comparison with the narrative form of *anekdoty*.⁷⁸ Givargizov himself declared that some of his stories can be defined as 'long *anekdoty*'.⁷⁹ This expression is not uncommon in today's Russian jokeloric repertoire. The proliferation of long *anekdoty* is encouraged by Russian internet sites on jokes, which have affected some of its typical linguistic features of the oral form, including brevity.⁸⁰ However, Givargizov's readers, sometimes polemically, have perceived Givargizov's work

⁷⁶ Fear

One day Vera Petrovna woke up early in the morning and felt she was afraid of going to school. "What's wrong with me" Vera Petrovna thought. She measured her temperature – temperature was alright. She measured her blood pressure – it was alright. She measured her shoes – they were comfortable. The coat fitted well. "Why then?" thought Vera Petrovna. And suddenly she understood. Rather, she remembered that on the next day a nurse would come to school and give vaccinations against Kulakov, to whom all the teachers were allergic.

Vera Petrovna was scared of jabs.

So shkafo na velosipede, pp. 83–4.

⁷⁷ 'One day Kolia decided to enrol in the school of music.' See the stories 'Eskimoskaia narodnaia pesnia' and 'Restoran', in *So shkafo na velosipede*, pp. 15; 73. For this aspect of the linguistic structures of the *anekdot*, see Elena and Alexei Shmelev, 'Evolution of a Speech Genre', pp. 172–3.

⁷⁸ See A. F. Belousov, 'Sovremennyi anekdot', in *Sovremennyi gorodskoi fol'klor*, ed. by A. F. Belousov, I. S. Veselova, and S. Iu. Nekliudov (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2003) pp. 581–98 (p. 581).

⁷⁹ See the interview with Givargizov, 'Artur Givargizov: "Ja veriu v letaiushchie violoncheli"'

<<http://www.chitaem-vmeste.ru/pages/material.php?interview=78>>

[accessed 10 April 2013].

⁸⁰ 'Evolution of a Speech Genre', p. 176.

as being akin to old Soviet jokes, and not to the new post-Soviet ones.⁸¹ And yet, only sometimes do we find in his work explicit references to Soviet *realia*, or to the Soviet discourse. I maintain that Givargizov's short humorous stories bear significant traces of the Soviet *anekdot* genre in that they merge together the ethnic and the reflexive joke, further reworking the cycle of jokes about the New Russians.

4.3.1. From New Russians to 'New New Russians'

When Artur Givargizov's collections of stories started appearing with major publishers in 2003, *anekdoty* about New Russians had already lost much of their popularity.⁸² Although the *dvoechnik* or the *otlichnik* are common protagonists of school *anekdoty*, Givargizov's rude, greedy, corrupt and violent adults are strongly reminiscent of jokeloric New Russians, and child heroes appear to be cast in the same mould. The following *anekdoty* are so similar to Givargizov's texts that they might well have appeared in one of his collections, albeit their protagonists would not have been referred to as children of the New Russians:

⁸¹ On the 20th July 2005 *Komsomol'skaia pravda* defined *Zapiski vydaiushchegosia dvoechnika* as 'anekdoty about fifth-grade school children' <<http://www.egmont.ru/press/smi/detail1891/>> [accessed 13 April 2013]; O. Murgina, in her review of *So shkaфом na velosipede* defines these texts as 'skazki-anekdoty' (tales-jokes) <<http://bibliogid.ru/articles/1283>> [accessed 13 April 2013]. Maria Poriadina defines the theatre scripts of *Kontrol'nyi diktant i drevnaia grecheskaia tragediia* as 'stsenki-anekdoty, see her review 'Proverochnaia rabota i sovremennaia drama' <<http://krupaspb.ru/piterbook/recenzii.html?nn=790>> [accessed 13 April 2013]). In the following review, the critic Tat'iana Igumnova defines *Try-try-try-my: Avtobus i drugie* (Moscow: Vremia, 2006) a collection of 'stale jokes' (*anekdoty s borodoi*) <<http://prochtenie.ru/index.php/docs/867>> [accessed 13 April 2013]. Here, instead, a reader underlines the similarity between *Zapiski* and *anekdoty*: <<http://recensent.ru/nushka/719/>> [accessed 13 April 2013], while another reader defines Givargizov's poems as 'poetic *anekdoty*': <http://read.ru/review/by_book/380031> [accessed 13 April 2013].

⁸² Givargizov published his first short stories in the journal *Satirikon* in 1997. See the 2003 interview on the website 'Bibliogid': 'Pisateli o sebe: Givargizov Artur Aleksandrovich' <<http://bibliogid.ru/articles/1062>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

A teacher has his pupils write an essay entitled “If I were Chairman of a Corporation...”

The pupils are all writing diligently; but the son of a New Russian is gazing out the window.

“And why aren’t you writing?” The teacher asks.

“I’m waiting for my secretary.”

A New Russian is checking his son’s homework:

“How much is two times two?”

“Seven.”

“Not seven. It’s four.”

“I know that. But I feel like bargaining.”⁸³

The stories quoted earlier demonstrate how the child characters of Givargizov’s story are strongly attached to money, an attribute of New Russians. In the following excerpt from Givargizov’s story ‘Chernyi iashchik’ (‘The Black Box’), children demonstrate their familiarity with weapons, which, again, confirms their link with New Russians, who were perceived as ignorant and rich delinquents. The teacher in the story approves of her pupils’ statements, demonstrating her affinity with them:

— Здравствуйте, ребята, сегодня я расскажу вам о роялях. Вот скажи мне ты, Банкин, что такое рояль?

— Рояль — это такой чёрный ящик, похожий на здоровенную кобуру пистолета.

— Правильно, Банкин.

— А скажи мне, Мячиков, почему рояль чёрный?

— Чтобы ночью было не видно.

[...] ⁸⁴

If, according to Aleksei Levinson, *anekdoty* about New Russians showed that these members of the post-Soviet society were ultimately perceived as newcomers who violated the norm,⁸⁵ in Givargizov’s work it is the whole society, and not a subgroup, that violates the norm. This society places itself as the ‘new

⁸³ Both the *anekdoty* are in ‘The Rise and Fall of Jokeloric New Russians’, p. 85.

⁸⁴ – Hello, guys, today I’ll tell you about grand pianos. Now tell me, Bankin, what is a grand piano?

– A grand piano is that black box which looks like a big pistol holster.

– Correct, Bankin. And you, Miachikov, why is a grand piano black?

– So you can’t see it at night. [...]

So *shkafom na velosipede*, p. 10. This story is also in *Ekzamen na barabanshchika*, which almost entirely republishes the stories of *So shkafom na velosipede*.

⁸⁵ Aleksei Levinson, ‘Novye russkie i ikh sosedy po anekdoticheskim kontekstam’, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 22 (1996), 383–5, p. 383.

norm’, the ‘new normality’. Everyone seems to be part of it: children, parents, teachers, and the creative intelligentsia. If, as Draitser maintains, this 1990s cycle of jokes turned inward, towards a subgroup of the joke tellers’ own environment, accusations formerly directed only toward ‘the other’, Givargizov’s texts bring to completion this shift, and portray the whole of Russian society as made of greedy, violent, sometimes dumb, sometimes sly, profiteers.

The portrayal of an amoral society that we find in Givargizov’s works should not be understood as a social critique. When jokes that were formerly aimed at external elements – showing Georgians, Ukrainians or the New Russians as ‘greedy profiteers’– apply to the whole of the Russian society, the effect is the representation of a world in which all social norms are abolished, and children and adults, learners and teachers mirror one another. It is a chaotic state, one that precedes the establishment of a distinction between what is right and what is wrong. Occasionally, amorality finds its counterpart in a-temporality: adults and children seem to share the same culture and the same historical memory. In other words, they inhabit a land which includes Soviet and post-Soviet features. In *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, Kolia meets the committee for the admissions to the school of music. When asked to show his musical skills (‘Ну-ка, спой мальчик’, ‘Well, sing, little boy’), the child starts his performance, which seems to be a mocking of Socialist Realist aesthetics, in which artists were asked to reproduce reality:

— Вот пришёл я в музыкальную школу, — запел Коля, — а комиссия мне говорит: «Ну-ка, спой мальчик», вот я и пою, что пришёл я в музыкальную школу, а комиссия мне говорит: «Ну-ка спой, мальчик», вот я и пою, что пришёл...
 — Стоп, стоп, стоп!!! — закричала комиссия. — Что ты поёшь?
 — Что вижу, то и пою [...] ⁸⁶

⁸⁶ – I’ve come to the school of music’ Kolia sang ‘ and the committee tells me: ‘Well, sing, little boy’, and I sing that I’ve come to the school of music, and the committee tells me: ‘Well, sing, little boy’, and I sing that I have come...
 – Stop, stop, stop!!! – the committee cried out – ‘What are you singing?!

We can also find traces of this a-temporal dimension in *Notes of a Renowned Dunce*. This collection concludes with a section called *Bloknot* ('Notebook'). In it, micro stories about the main protagonist, Kolia, are introduced by epigraphs, allegedly quoting shop advertising slogans, bus-stop announcements, and other texts which one may come across in everyday life. One of these is *The Book about Tasty and Healthy Food*. In *Notes*, the epigraph that pretends to quote this book is a piece of *steb* humour in its own right:

Если картошка оранжевая и пахнет апельсинами, значит, это плохая картошка. Что-то с ней не то. Может быть, это вообще не картошка.⁸⁷

The reference to the *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* is one of the elements demonstrating that Givargizov's child characters share, at least partly, adult (i.e. Soviet) culture. Even if one of the recurrent themes of the stories is the impossibility of mutual understanding between children and adults, a closer look at such details reveals that, in fact, children and adults belong to the same world, – a world deprived of a defined temporal dimension – albeit they do not show any awareness of it.

Adult characters, on the other hand, inhabit a well-defined temporal dimension. They do mention aspects of Soviet every-day life as their own past. A comparison with jokes about the New Russians is once again useful for an understanding of this aspect of Givargizov's work. Graham sees the *anekdot*-al New Russian as being 'new' not only because he is the product of post-Soviet Russia, but also because 'he has no historical memory, no knowledge of Russia before the Yeltsin reforms'.⁸⁸ Givargizov's protagonists do reveal signs of

– I sing what I see.

So *shkafom na velosipede*, p. 15.

⁸⁷ 'If the potato is orange in colour and smells of oranges, it means it is not a good potato. There is something wrong with it. It may well not be a potato at all.' *Zapiski vydaiushchegosia dvoechnika*, p. 141.

⁸⁸ 'The Wages of Syncretism', p. 45.

historical memory. The boorish protagonists of Givargizov's work are 'old': undeniably aware of Russian history, in spite of their monstrous ignorance and rudeness. Among the specific elements of Soviet everyday culture that have become part of Givargizov's reworking are, for example, the collection of scrap metal (*sbor metalloloma*), which sometimes adult characters remember with sweet nostalgia.⁸⁹ The Sovietness of adults who often adopt the amoral behaviour of the New Russians enhances the impression that Givargizov's work tends to extend the traits of an amoral monstrosity to the whole of Russian society, beyond any chronological or generational boundary. Children play with the Soviet discourse as if it were part of their everyday environment, while adults refer to the Soviet culture as to the past.

4.3.2. Givargizov's Stories as *Anekdoty* about Adults: A New Form of Self-Reflexivity

Ultimately, Givargizov's work is strongly focused on adults and adult culture. It should be noted that many cycles of *anekdoty* became part of children's folk repertoire once they became obsolete among adults, and *anekdoty* on the New Russians were no exception.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, by entering a literary corpus –

⁸⁹ Kelly discusses the collection of scrap metal that *Timurovtsy* attended to during the Great Patriotic War (*Children's World*, p. 554.) The practise became part of the two weeks of socially useful work which children devoted themselves to at the end of the school year, and it was one of the most highly valued activities of Pioneers and members of the Komsomol until the end of the 1980s. See Nicholas De Witt, *Education and Professional Employment in the U.S.S.R.* (Washington: National Science Foundation, 1961), p. 130, and Sergei B. Borisov, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' russkogo detstva*. 2 vols. 2nd ed. (Shadrinsk, Russia: Shadrinskii pedinstitut, 2008), pp. 498–9.

⁹⁰ In 1997, Trykova noted that this cycle had not entered children's folklore yet, but in 2001 the scholar underlined that *anekdoty* about the New Russians were already part of the repertoire of children's *anekdoty*. See O. Iu. Trykova, *Sovremennyi detskii fol'klor i ego vzaimodeistvie s khudozhenstvennoi literaturoi* (Iaroslavl': IAGPU im. K. D. Ushinskogo, 1997), p. 114, and O. Iu. Trykova, 'O sovremennom sostianii zhanrov detskogo fol'klora', in *Pedagogicheskii vestnik*, 3–4 (2001) <http://vestnik.yspu.org/releases/doskolnoe_obrazovanie/12_5/>

Givargizov's works – which puts so much emphasis on adults and on their cultural memory, *anekdoty* about New Russians remain part of adult culture, and contribute towards making Givargizov's long *anekdoty* self-reflexive in a very specific way. Indeed, they are *anekdoty* about adults and adult culture produced by an adult.

Drawing on Davies, Graham maintains that self-directed humour in the Soviet Union stemmed from the confrontation with another group, and that this group was the State, the promoter of a univocal biography of the Soviet citizen. The citizens of today's Russia are being asked to adhere to a univocal biography, centred on their pedagogical skills and their capacity to convey a culture which is seen a stable set of values. However, I do not consider the rhetoric surrounding school and family values as something imposed from above, and which the creative intelligentsia tries to resist. Rather, this rhetoric seems to represent 'the new post-Soviet sacred symbolic material', to use Yurchak's expression, and Givargizov's stories can be read as a *steb* reaction to it. All the same, Graham's and Davies's approach to self-denigrating humour offers a valid point of reference for interpreting Givargizov's texts. Following their cultural analysis of the joke and the *anekdot*, I suggest we should consider these children's texts as showing adults' self-awareness as an out-group in terms of age and cultural background. In other words, Givargizov's stories can be read as the expression of adults who came of age in the Soviet context, and today wonder 'who are we?', and 'how can we define ourselves?' These questions, I maintain, are prompted by the non-Soviet implied child reader. The narrative mode in which a reply has been formulated here is the *anekdot*,

[accessed 8 March 2013]. The same article was published in the monograph by O. Iu. Trykova, *Detskaia literatura i fol'klor: Aspekty vzaimodeistviia* (Iaroslavl': IAGPU im. K. D. Ushinskogo, 2003), pp. 46–55.

sometimes refined through the filter of the absurdist style of the avant-garde of the 1930s.

Givargizov's children's books can be read as expressing the problematic identity of adults with a Soviet background who perceive a deep gap dividing them from the new generations. Children do not seem to be longer conceived of as victims, but rather as a strong, powerful, and potentially dangerous group, with their self-confidence in the modern world, and with their store of knowledge, which might prove to be more fruitful than that of adults. This interpretation is not suggested only by the literary context, discussed earlier, in which I detected a sense of bewilderment on the part of adults. It is Givargizov's work itself which reveals elements of fear towards the child.

Givargizov's stories seem to swing between two almost opposite poles. On the one hand, his work empowers child readers, offering them subtle forms of humour about the shortcomings of adults and the paradoxical aspects of the reality adults have built, and making them aware of the numerous stereotypes that adults have created of children. On the other, it sometimes infantilizes them, as if fearing their cultural self-sufficiency.

The first of Givargizov's collections of stories, *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, allows me to ascribe these elements of infantilisation to adults' need to clarify the contours of their own identity in the confrontation with children. In this book the child eventually becomes a *child*, seeking adults' guidance, and having left behind his independence. The transformation of the rebellious child into an obedient one takes place at the end of the book, and, as I will try to demonstrate, develops out of the representation of the amoral reality so far discussed. It is a totally homogeneous, monstrous, world, in which characters constantly cross ethical and social boundaries. Nothing and nobody stands out

affirming its ethical superiority, not even the narrator or Givargizov himself whose name is mentioned in one of the stories.

4.3.3. Authorial Self-Exposure and the Portrayal of a Monstrous Reality

Givargizov himself appears among the adults featured in these short stories, and he does not remain outside the monstrous reality these stories describe. The effect of the boundary-crossing that takes place in them is the resetting of reality, the creation of an environment in which old behavioural norms and social conventions are abolished. After this resetting, everything can experience a rebirth and new boundaries can be established. The authorial self participates in this resetting by slipping into the fictional reality, winking at the skilled reader who is able to recognise him. This takes place in the short story 'Mechtat' ne vredno' ('It Doesn't Hurt to Dream'), in which a boy, Serezha, dreams of disguising himself and robbing a bank. He is forced to kill whoever recognises him, including various teachers at the school of music, among whom is Artur Aleksandrovich, Givargizov's name and patronymic. Most readers are likely to know that Givargizov teaches music at school, because interviews and short biographies repeatedly underline this detail in Russia. By including his own name among those of the people Serezha dreams of killing, Givargizov becomes part of his amoral fictional world. Artur Aleksandrovich is likely to be half a *durak* and half a thug as are Vera Petrovna and the other victims of Serezha's dreaming. It would seem that Artur Aleksandrovich is stuck in the grime that the author Givargizov describes story after story, and there is no grandiosity in this self-reference, nor is there any attempt to mock grandiosity –

only a discrete self-mention in which his name merges with other names of monstrous human beings.

In the chapter about *Bad Advice*, I based my discussion of the narrative voice on the tradition of the *iurodivyi*, a term whose root, *urod*, means monster. I maintained that, by adopting a code which can be associated with the figure of *iurodivyi*, the narrative voice of *Bad Advice* spoke as the one who knew where the truth lay. He claimed the right to convey the truth to younger generations, in an attempt to overcome the impasse represented by the *chernukha* aesthetics. However, at the same time as trying to overcome the cul-de-sac of the *chernukha*, the narrative voice was running the risk implied in this aesthetic: the impulse towards the *podvig* – part and parcel of the *iurodivyi*'s code – if pursued to its extremes had the power to deny the speaker any right to truth-telling, and make his monstrosity literal. By following that impulse, the narrative voice of *Bad Advice*, assuming the physical features of Grigorii Oster, admitted that he was part of the world of falsity and oppression he initially wished to subvert. On the one hand, this confirmed the narrative voice's difference, his being the only one able to state the truth. On the other, this form of self-exposure undermined a crucial feature of the *iurodivyi* and of the fool: their liminal position in relation to the object of their attacks. In contrast to Oster's work, Givargizov's stories are not concerned with the question of a truth to state and convey, but with disrupting commonly accepted norms and abolishing social labels. Authorial self-exposure participates in these forms of disruption.

Authorial self-exposure involves the peritext, and the elements of it that contribute to defining the combination of narration and focalization types,⁹¹ in particular with reference to *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* and *Notes of a*

⁹¹ Genette makes a distinction between focalization (perspective) and narration (narrative voice). See *Narrative and Discourse*, pp. 189–94.

Renowned Dunce. Visually, *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* resembles the school notebook of a child. The title of every short story appears to be hand-written on squared paper, and the style of the illustrations imitates children's drawings, a feature that becomes even more marked in *Notes of a Renowned Dunce* and in *Kontrol'nyi diktant i drevnegrecheskaia tragediia (The Dictation and the Greek Tragedy, 2009)*.⁹² However, the stories collected in *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* are preceded by three 'dedications' on squared paper in which an ambiguous focalization makes it impossible to state whether the thoughts expressed by the narrative voice belong to an adult or a child:⁹³

Посвящение № 1

Все двойки, прогулы, синяки, отлетевшие пуговицы и расстроенные музыкальные инструменты, которые есть в этой книге, посвящаются прекрасной Сердюковой из 6 класса "Э". И прекрасной Сюзюмовой из 9 "О". И Срезниковской, она тоже ничего.

Посвящение № 2

Вся секретная информация получена от ученика 6 класса "В", разведчика Трясунова Саши (фамилия и имя очень сильно изменены). Посвящается Саше и всем разведчикам, которые учатся в школе (на тройки — чтобы не выделяться). Особенно тем, которые учатся в музыкальной. Особенно если на виолончели.

Посвящение № 3

Если твоих родителей хотя бы двенадцать раз вызвали к директору, если ты знаешь, что такое настоящая жирная двойка, если при слове "пианино" ты уже не падаешь в обморок, можешь почитать эту книжку. Развались как-нибудь вечером на диване и почитай.⁹⁴

⁹² Artur Givargizov, *Kontrol'nyi diktant i drevnegrecheskaia tragediia: P'esy dlia chteniia* (Moscow: Samokat, 2009).

⁹³ For the concept of variable focalization, see *Narrative and Discourse*, pp. 194–8.

⁹⁴ Dedication no. 1

All the 'E' marks, truancies, bruises, missing buttons and out-of-tune musical instruments which are in this book are dedicated to the wonderful Serdiukova from the sixth 'E'. And to the wonderful Siuziumova, from the ninth 'O'. And to Sreznikovskaia – she 's not bad either.

Dedication no. 2

All the secret information was received from a pupil of the sixth 'B', the secret service agent Triasunov Sasha (surname and name were strongly modified). These pages are dedicated to Sasha and to all the secret service agents who study at school (and get an 'C', so they won't be noticed). Especially to those who study at the school of music. Especially if they are studying the cello.

Dedication no. 3

If your parents have been called to the headmaster at least twelve times, if you know what a real, absolute 'E' is, if at the word 'piano' you feel faint, you can read this book. Lie down on the sofa in the evening and read it.

The first dedication could have been addressed by any school-boy to his beloved girl classmate(s). The second dedication leaves the reader with a question: did the fictitious Sasha share his secret information with a school-mate or with an adult, for example a teacher, Artur Aleksandrovich, who is now thanking him for his trust? The third dedication is no less puzzling: is this piece of advice coming from someone who is as old as the reader, or from an adult, someone who knows school-children well, especially those who attend the school of music (so, again, Artur Aleksandrovich)? At any rate, these dedications evince a narrative voice who wants his presence to be perceived, in spite of the fact that the short stories that are gathered in this book display narrative strategies usually associated with anonymous and imperceptible voices, such as the one of a folk-tale or of a script of a theatre play.⁹⁵

Similarly, *Notes of a Renowned Dunce* swings between a child and an adult perspective. Many details, beyond the title itself, suggest that the book we are holding in our hands is a school notebook. For example, it is ring-bound.⁹⁶ In addition, the upper part of every single page shows hand-written notes that specify, day after day, the moment in which the short story that follows was written down: '01/09, recess', '02/09, Physics', '3/09, after classes'; '4/09, Literature' and so on.⁹⁷ The illustrations strengthen in the reader the impression of holding the notebook of a school-child, because they reproduce the style of

So shkafo na velosipede, p. 4.

⁹⁵ *Kontrol'nyi diktant* is a collection of micro-plays that reveal the influence of the *anekdot* genre. Some of these plays are part of *So shkafo na velosipede*, while other texts of this collection are a playful reworking of folk-tales. The distinction between these and *anekdoty* based on folktales (Ivan Durak and so on) is very fluid.

⁹⁶ All the books of the series *Shkola prikola* (of which *Zapiski vydaiushchegosia dvoechnika* is part) are ring-bound.

⁹⁷ *Zapiski vydaiushchegosia dvoechnika*, pp. 5; 7; 9–10. From p. 94 to p. 134, in the section called 'Al'bom', the hand-written notes simply specify the overall order of the short stories: 'First Story', 'Second Story', 'Third Story', and so on.

childish scribbles. And yet, the texts of the short stories are typed, which contradicts the abovementioned impression.⁹⁸

What is more, nothing in the short stories gathered in *Notes of a Renowned Dunce* suggests the presence of a child narrator. The Dunce to whom the *Notes* should belong is Kolia, but the texts gathered in this journal refer to him in the third person. None of the texts of this collection and of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* defines a specific narrator. Instead, we are presented with a 'narrative of events': 'a transcription of the (supposed) non-verbal into the verbal',⁹⁹ with neither the personal intervention of the narrative voice nor a specific linguistic register enabling the reader to identify a child or an adult narrator. Many texts consist of mini-dialogues – a 'narrative of words',¹⁰⁰ in which the narrative voice is totally covert.¹⁰¹ Sometimes the punch-line is pronounced by the narrative voice, but such cases report the point of view of one of the characters.¹⁰² The question arises as to the relationship between this mimetic narrative and those features of the peritext which emphasise the

⁹⁸ It is interesting to compare the visual layout of Givargizov's *Notes* with Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (N.Y.: Amulet Books, 2007). The latter too imitates the personal journal of a child, and the texts appear as being hand-written. The absence of this feature in *Notes* enhances the ambiguous identity of its narrator.

⁹⁹ *Narrative and Discourse*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁰ In a narrative of words, 'the narrator does not narrate the hero's sentence; one can scarcely say he imitates it: he recopies it [...].'*Ibidem*, p. 169.

¹⁰¹ The discussion of the mimetic narrative so far conducted does not refer to the final part of *So shkafo na velosipede*, 'Muzykal'nye instrumenty', which will be analysed separately in this chapter. Furthermore, in *So shkafo na velosipede*, there is one case in which the narrator abandons his detached tone. This takes place in the short story 'Na moem meste', *Ibidem*, p. 97.

¹⁰² Like, for example, in the aforementioned story 'Strakh', or in 'Ekzamen na khoroshuiu sobaku'. Here a little girl wants a dog, but her parents tell her that a good dog costs a lot of money. She starts selecting stray dogs on the street according to their maths skills, and eventually finds herself with fifteen dogs. She now feels 'a very rich person', but the moral message (stray dogs are no less smart than those with a pedigree, never judge a book by its cover and so on), is disrupted by the punch line, pronounced by the narrator: 'because a good dog, as parents say, cost a lot of money'. *So shkafo na velosipede*, pp. 7–8.

presence of a narrative persona,¹⁰³ albeit an ambiguous one, who is child and adult at the same time. My interpretation is that in these 2003 and 2006 children's books, the peritext makes the narrative voices part of the same world in which the characters of the books live: a norm-free world which offers itself to the reader as a theatre in which children and adults alternate wearing the masks of the torturer and the victim, merging together elements of the 'new Russia' and the Soviet era, as well as childhood and adulthood. In their ambiguity, the narrators embody this amalgam.

The lack of clarity does not concern only the identity of the narrator, but also his relationship to the child hero/es and child readers. In the aforementioned dedications, the narrative voice of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* addresses child readers sometimes as one of them, and one of the school child heroes of the book, sometimes as an adult. This is reminiscent of James Matthew Barrie's *Peter Pan and Wendy*, and of the analysis that Jacqueline Rose devotes to this book. Rose severely criticises the opening passage of Barrie's 1911 text, in which there is 'no clear distinction between the narrator and the child he describes'.¹⁰⁴ She points out the importance of an unwritten rule, which

demands that the narrator be adult *or* child, one or the other. It does not really matter, provided that it knows, with absolutely no equivocation, which it is, and that it uses that knowledge to hold the two instances safely apart on the page.¹⁰⁵

Rose warned against the ethical implications of offering child readers ambiguous subject positions. I suggest that what underlies the absence of any clear distinction between the narrative voice, the rude, almost bestial,

¹⁰³ By 'mimetic' I mean a narrative 'being defined by a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer'. *Narrative and Discourse*, p. 166.

¹⁰⁴ Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

protagonists and the implied child reader in Givargizov' work is the need to abolish any previous definitions of adult and children, in search of a new reformulation of the two. This corpus of self-denigrating humorous texts is the site in which adults ask themselves who they are, stimulated by a child other who is an object of fear and attraction. In other words, if the books under discussion, as much as Barrie's *Peter Pan*, reveal signs of 'confusion of the tongues',¹⁰⁶ this confusion seems to create the precondition for the reformulation of adulthood and childhood.

The trajectory from the confusion of the tongues towards the redefinition of adulthood and childhood is visible in *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*. The game of projections of Soviet and non-Soviet, adult and child features that takes place throughout this book is replaced, at the end, by its symmetrical opposite: the separation of adults from children. This collection of irreverent short stories, in which a very sophisticated form of irony is employed and complex themes are tackled, concludes with a section called 'Muzykal'nye instrumenty (Korotkie istorii)' ('Musical Instruments (Short Histories)', from now on 'Musical Instruments'). Here, semi-serious historical details about musical instruments are provided, the result being a very light and naive form of humour, mostly directed at encyclopaedic culture and at the relationship between adults and children. The transformation of children into *proper* children and of adults into *proper* adults starts here, as a structure of power relationships between the narrative voice and the implied child reader is established. This structure

¹⁰⁶ I am here referring to Sándor Ferenczi, 'Confusion of the Tongues between the Adult and the Child: The Language of Tenderness and of Passion', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 30 (1949), 225–30. Ferenczi states the dangers that occur for the personality of a child, a patient, or a pupil when he or she identifies with those to whose love and authority they are subject (parents, psychoanalysts, teachers). This essay plays a relevant role in Rose's discussion of the ambiguous relationship between the narrator, the child hero and the child reader in *Peter Pan* (see the Chapter 3 of her book, 'Peter Pan and Literature for the Child: Confusion of the Tongues').

realizes a dream of harmonization and integration of different generations in the community.

4.3.4. 'Musical Instruments' and the Infantilisation of the Child

In 'Musical instruments' we find children addressing adults as *diadia* (lit. Uncle, a sort of affectionate 'Mister'), bored Scots falling asleep while playing the bagpipes; and the hornpipe, in Russian *zhaleika*, producing a sound which is very useful for lamenting with mummy (*zhaleet'* in Russian meaning to lament): 'Come o-o-on, give me ninety-y-y-y-rou-u-u-u-ubles to buy o-o-o-o-oranges'.¹⁰⁷ This narrative tone sharply contrasts with the subtle humour of *anekdoty*. The narrative voice has stopped telling jokes with a complex meaning about society and human beings. None of the voices of *Musical Instruments* displays forms of irony which can be compared to the texts of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, such as 'Children's School of Music',¹⁰⁸ or to 'Who's there?'.¹⁰⁹ The long *anekdoty* of this and other collections ('All Power to Pedagogues', from the collection *Classics* and *Notes of a Renowned Dunce*, is another good example of Givargizov's sophisticated humour) empower the child reader, acknowledging his capacity to understand what Julie Cross defines as 'high forms of humor', which include 'humorous parody, comic irony, satire, and humorous metafictional narrative devices'.¹¹⁰ In 'Musical Instruments', on the contrary, the child reader becomes part of a hierarchical relationship in which he is the learner and the

¹⁰⁷ *So shkafo na velosipede*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 51–2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

¹¹⁰ Cross, *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature*, pp. 14–5. *Anekdot*-telling itself, as Tiupa explains, puts the teller and the listener on the same cultural level: 'The *anekdot* is a situation of dialogic agreement (in particular, the laughing one) of the equal individuals. *Anekdot* as a speech act assumes that the teller and the listeners share a common horizon, a mutual confidence in the communication and the acritic (ungoverned) equality of the interacting consciousness'. 'Communicative Strategy of the *Anekdot*', p. 167.

adult is the teacher. Here the narrator has left behind his ambiguous identity: clearly, the speaker of 'Musical Instruments' is an adult. Having left behind the mimetic narrative of the short stories, this narrator uses a friendly but wise tone, able to instruct while amusing his young interlocutors. The clever implied reader of the long *anekdoty* has turned into a naive child, while the narrator adopts a paternalistic tone:

Гармоника была изобретена в Берлине в 1822 году, она — родственница органа, а ещё больше — фисгармонии. (Даже мой прадедущка не знает, что такое фисгармония.)¹¹¹

Какой самый древний инструмент на земле? Электрогитара? Ничего подобного — свистулька. А от свистульки произошли все духовые инструменты. И, между прочим, орган. Да, орган — духовой инструмент.

Представляете! От свистульки произошёл орган!

Подойдите к милиционеру и скажите: «Дядя, от вашего свистка произошёл орган». Ему будет приятно.¹¹²

We may read this conclusion of the book as the end of the carnival in Nikolajevian terms. In other words, the implied child reader and the child character of *On a Bike* is allowed to experience freedom only for a short length of time, before adults' power, the *status quo*, is reaffirmed. Patriarchal models are deeply rooted in Russian culture, nonetheless, the condition of adults as providers of care and upbringing in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts makes problematic the application of the notion of *status quo* here. As underlined in the previous chapters, adults' right to exercise their independent authority in how to raise children was not acknowledged in the Soviet Union, and when political

¹¹¹ The accordion was invented in Berlin in 1822. It is a relative of the organ, and, even more, of the harmonium. (Not even my grand-grandfather knows what a harmonium is).

'Музыкальные инструменты', in *So shkafo na velosipede*, p. 103.

¹¹² What is the oldest instrument on earth? The electronic guitar? Not at all, it's the whistle. All the wind instruments came out from the whistle. Including the organ. Yes, the organ is a wind instrument.

Can you imagine! The organ came out from the whistle!

Go up to a policeman and tell him: 'Sir, the organ came from your whistle.'

He will like that.

Ibidem, pp. 104–5.

and social changes seemed to guarantee this right, new tensions and social circumstances intervened making it hard to carry out a parental role.

Givargizov refers to carnival as the key to approach his work, but he sees the essence of carnival in the coming together of opposites and in the crossing of hierarchies. He explained this while rejecting accusations of being 'non-pedagogical':

Опять оправдываться, объяснять, что всем нам необходим отдых от серьезности? Что это такая вот карнавальная непедagogичность, которая сближает учителей и учеников... Все уже давно об этом знают.¹¹³

This view puts emphasis on the coming together of children and adults, but does not provide an explanation for the distance between the two that 'Musical Instruments' abruptly establishes.

My interpretation of the conclusion of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* draws on the idea that Russian playful children's literature of the 1990s expressed the wish and, at the same time, the impossibility of reaching a position from which to deliver an adequate educative model. I suggest that the ending of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* should be associated with the desire to reach that position, and to overcome any confusion between adult and child tongues. The initial ambiguity of the narrative voice and the merging of the child and the adult world participate in the creation of a boundary-free environment which is a precursor to the establishing of a boundary separating adults from children. With the insertion of 'Musical instruments' at the end of the book, adults define their own adulthood.

¹¹³ 'Apparently it is necessary to explain once again that we all need a break from seriousness. That my work is non-pedagogical only in a carnivalesque vein, which is able to bring together teachers and learners... This all has been common knowledge for a long time now' 'Artur Givargizov: "Ia veriu v letaiushchie violoncheli..."' <<http://www.chitaem-vmeste.ru/pages/material.php?interview=78&journal=75>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

The humorous appendix to *On a Bike* further emphasises the significance of the musical instrument, which is a recurrent element in almost all of Givargizov's books. Adults' obsession with the admission of their children to the school of music, and with the need for them to practise a musical instrument (usually, the violin) can be read as a battle for the recognition of adults' authority. Throughout the books, story after story, this battle never reaches a conclusion, being featured as a continuous clash of forces. The involvement, within what we can call the musical instrument discourse, of teachers as the other main stakeholders in the educative process of children contributes towards making the musical instrument the symbol of adult culture as much as the belt was in *Bad Advice*.

In Oster's work, the obsessive presence of the belt conveyed adults' fear that the construction and the transmission of culture, meant as a set of values, from one generation to the other could take place only through violence. Violence, therefore, was featured as the only stable link between one generation and the other. In Givargizov's work, both on the verbal and the visual levels, the musical instrument mediates between the adult and the child world in a way that allows the child to express his or her own self, albeit within certain limits. The initial sequence of illustrations of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* is a telling example of this. The cover, the inside-cover and the title page, with illustrations by Lena Savina, seem to sum up a sort of a basic plot that shapes the whole collection. On the cover, we see a little boy dressed for a concert performance, holding a violin on the one hand and a bow on the other. He is caught in the typical pose of the artist who is thanking his audience at the end of a performance, with wide-open arms and a large smile on his face. This boy is standing on a window sill. The apartment at his back is his theatre stage, the

setting for his performance. It may be replaced by the other sites that are part of the everyday routine of this child: the school and the courtyard. The inside cover illustration shows the facade of the same building. We can see the silhouette of a little boy (presumably the same of the cover) practising the violin. The fact that it is night-time enhances the sense of hardship that the little boy is experiencing. On the title page, the third illustration of the sequence shows we see our hero indoors, riding a bike like a circus acrobat. His arms are triumphantly open wide; he holds a violin on one hand and a bow on the other, and he has one foot on the handlebars. The performance is made spectacular by a detail that is alluded to in the title: the bicycle is pulling along a big wardrobe by means of a rope that is attached to one of the boy's ankles. As the reader will realize later on, the child's father has tied him to the wardrobe to force him to practise instead of playing outdoors.

These illustrations describe an ongoing progression from a child passively subject to adult's power to a child creatively accepting the adult world into his own. In other words, the child of the illustration manipulates the instrument of torture to realize his own performance. He is taking ownership of the violin, but he is not freely riding outdoors, as he wished to. Ultimately, this child has not defeated oppressive power and violence, the symbol of which, in *Bad Advice*, was the belt. Indeed the life of this child, who is tied to a wardrobe and is forced to play the violin, is strongly affected by the adults' will. The musical instrument passes from adults' to children's hands sanctioning their cultural integration, but also separating children from adults within a definite power relationship.

The initial sequence of illustrations of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* works as a model plot that the rest of the book confirms; a plot in which eventually the

child is given, and accepts, a specific role, the role of the child. In 'Musical Instruments' the adult formulates this role as follows: As a child you are to laugh at the naive jokes that I, the adult, have in store for you. In 'Musical Instruments', the appendix to *On a Bike, with a Wardrobe*, the child reader and the adult narrative voice have become parts of a harmonious community; indeed the implied child reader here accepts adults as teaching figures wishing to convey their experience to younger generations.

The creation of a harmonious society through the infantilisation of the one who enters it, as well as the presence of objects symbolizing a form of integration into the community, allows me to associate the book with a ritualistic pattern that was typical of the Socialist Realist novel, and which *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* reworks in a contemporary key. As Katerina Clark explains, in Socialist Realist coming-of-age novels 'the elder hands the initiate some objects or token that symbolizes belonging to the "tribe"-e.g. a banner, badge, or Party card'.¹¹⁴ The giving of a symbolic object sanctioned the integration of the initiate into the collective body.¹¹⁵ I suggest that, in *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, the musical instrument is akin to the symbolic object of Socialist Realist literature. Clark notes that, from high Stalinist culture on, the Socialist Realist master plot displayed the maturation of the son-hero thanks to the intervention of a paternal figure, but always kept a clear distinction between sons and fathers. By finding their place in the collective body, sons turned into perfect sons, while fathers

¹¹⁴ Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, pp. 172–3. For further discussion of the Socialist Realist novel as a *bildungsroman*, see Hans Günther, 'Education and Conversion: The Road to the New Man in the Totalitarian Bildungsroman', in *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, ed. by Hans Günther (London : Macmillan in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1990), 193–209.

¹¹⁵ Lipovetsky detects the same scene in some recent cinematic and literary representations of the New Russians, wherein the symbolic object the initiate is given is 'a thick wad of dollars'. See 'New Russians as a Cultural Myth', p. 59.

could only see their sacredness confirmed and reinforced.¹¹⁶ The dialectic, so central in Russo-Soviet culture, between spontaneity (*stikhiinost'*) and consciousness (*soznatel'nost'*) resulted in model sons embodying positive examples of the former, while full consciousness was model fathers' prerogative. In the 1930s,

The father-and-sons paradigm replaced the Five-year Plan ideal of infinite fraternity and provided a new pattern for determining status within the 'family' in terms of a hierarchy of maturity and care. But, despite the many gradations of maturity, society's sons were not to grow into fathers; rather they were to be perfected as model sons.¹¹⁷

During the 1940s, Soviet literature showed an even closer link between the nuclear family and the Great Family, and the typical hero was a husband or a father.¹¹⁸ Aleksandr Prokhorov maintains that during late Stalinism the myth of the Great Family weakened, and that the Thaw revived this mythology by presenting a generation of true fathers, those that had perished during the war. The ideal father was now an absent father, but this only strengthened the 'the quest for the ideal associated with his name'.¹¹⁹ Mark Lipovetsky confirms the fact that the Thaw, in spite of its anti-Stalinist ideology, ultimately rewrote totalitarian mythologies, including those associated with fatherhood. He claims that, from the 1960s to the 1980s, these mythologies frequently merged with liberal discourses allowing 'the perpetuation of a balance, however fragile, with society and the individual', but this balance rested on 'the connection of the war themes with the father figure, or more precisely, with the idealization of patriarchal values and corresponding models of social order'. In the 2000s in Russia, Lipovetsky maintains, these models have been significantly

¹¹⁶ *The Soviet Novel*, p. 120.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 201.

¹¹⁹ Aleksandr Prokhorov, 'The Myth of the Great Family in Marlen Khutsiev's *Lenin's Guard* and Mark Osep'ian's *Three Days of Viktor Chernyshev*' in *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Films* ed. by Helena Goscilo and Yana Ashamova (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 29–50 (p. 30).

reinforced.¹²⁰ The aspects of the Socialist Realist plot which I have discussed here match those needs of adults that I assert underlie Givargizov's books: to overcome a generational gap so profound as to make adults' culture sterile, and affirm adults' capacity to act as skilled pedagogues in spite of the wounds of history, which were so painfully exposed in *Bad Advice*. In Givargizov's *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, the wish to contribute to a non-authoritarian pedagogical approach through literature ends in the adherence to patriarchal models that are still deeply rooted in Russian culture, promoted by official discourses.

4.3.5. Mythological and Ritualistic Features in Givargizov's work:

Characters and Narrative Voices as Tricksters

'Musical Instruments' constitutes the last phase of a self-creating process: adults here give birth to themselves, they are the agents of their own *transformation* into adults. This finds a representation in mythological and ritualistic discourses, and the narrative of Givargizov's books contains ritualistic features. Once again, the New Russians in *anekdoty*, as well as in other literary and cinematic expressions, bear traces of mythological discourses.

In 2002, when New Russians had ceased to be the butt of *anekdoty*, the film director Pavel Longuine declared that since the New Russians' era was over it was time to create their myth:

Real mythology is not concerned with moral values, but, rather, with the question of vital activity and energy. Myths describe energy in its primordial and premoral state. [...] There are myths about titans, who precede the gods, and drastically over-shadow them with their independence from moral norms. The 90s are an age of titans rather than of gods. Titans of water, time, petroleum, and aluminium, all having grown from a coupling of heaven and earth, and in a barbaric, inhuman way having altered and shaped our lives.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Mark Lipovetsky, 'War as the family value: Failing Fathers and Monstrous Sons in *My Stepbrother Frankenstein*', in *ibidem*, pp. 114–37, p.115.

¹²¹ Lev Karakhan, 'Pavel Longuin, Aleksandr Timofeevskii: Konets dinozavrov', *Iskusstvo kino*, 4 (2002) <<http://kinoart.ru/archive/2002/04/n4-article1>> [accessed 13

Literature and, above all, cinema were, in Longuine's view, the main fields for the mythologization of the New Russians. As Mark Lipovetsky highlights, Longuine and his interlocutors showed a positive attitude towards the creation of this myth, expressing their faith in its constructive value for the popular mentality. This myth-making process and the value which underlies it are actually to be found, Lipovetsky argues, in the very first representations of New Russians:

From their very first appearances, the New Russians were seen as mythological figures closely associated with the vital, constructive, and destructive energies hidden within the social chaos of the post-Soviet era. [...] They were viewed as standing financially above – yet in other aspects dramatically below – the norms of mundane reality, as beings possessing a sui generis code of behavior incompatible with that of mortals. Naturally, such a perception required mythological, rather than rational, models.¹²²

Lipovetsky, with Graham, maintains that the main mythological model for this representation of the New Russian is the trickster.¹²³ This was the ancient mediator between gods and men; he sometimes acted as the gods' messenger, sometimes as a thief, stealing from the gods what men needed, like Hermes and the Titan Prometheus. In Lewis Hyde's words, the 'trickster is a boundary-crosser'.¹²⁴ As he argues, the trickster is found at the edge of society and of culture, as well as at the boundaries between what is right and wrong, sacred and profane, male and female, and, most importantly in our case, young and old: 'in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction'.¹²⁵ The grey-haired child, like the creative idiot or the wise fool, is an ambiguous figure whose crucial function is to overcome a moment of stasis and solve an ethical

April 2013]. The translation provided here is by Mark Lipovetsky, in 'New Russians as a Cultural Myth', *Russian Review*, p. 54. It should be noted that Longuine and Lipovetsky do not distinguish between oligarch and New Russians.

¹²² 'New Russians as a Cultural Myth', p. 55.

¹²³ *Ibidem*; and 'The Wages of Syncretism', p. 49.

¹²⁴ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1999 [First Published in 1998 by Ferrari, Straus and Giroux]), p. 7.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*.

trap: 'where someone's sense of honorable behaviour has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again'.¹²⁶ This association with a moment of stasis brings us back to the blind alley which the 1980s *chernukha* had reached in terms of pedagogical agency on the part of adults.

In this study, I have maintained that the narrative voice of *Bad Advice* should be interpreted as trying to overcome that blind alley, by means of play. In children's literature of the 2000s, the use of discursive patterns that can be associated with the trickster and its functions suggests that the pedagogical relationship between adults and children is still affected by this blind alley, complicated by the sense of displacement perceived by adults with a Soviet background in contemporary Russia.

The narrative voice of Givargizov's main works is part a world of Titanic tricksters, which confirms further his difference from the pedagogical holy fool of *Bad Advice*. Within his literary carnival, the latter had tried to affirm himself as the one who is aware of the difference between needless social conventions and substantial truths, and is able to convey to children the capacity to distinguish between the two by means of clever riddles. While *Bad Advice* was informed by the logic of the *podvig*, the logic that underlies the narrative voice and the overall adult narrative agency of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, *Notes of a Renowned Dunce*, *The Dictation* and other books by Givargizov should be read in the light of *hybris*. This was the ancient Greek word for a gesture of impertinence. Douglas M. Mac Dowell suggests other possible translations for this term: 'animal spirits', 'exuberance', 'ebullience', 'bounciness',

¹²⁶ Ibidem.

'bumptiousness', or 'egotism'.¹²⁷ In ancient Greece, the act of *hybris* is a serious expression of arrogance if carried out by man, but it seems to be part of the demiurge-trickster's role to perform these impertinent acts, and to shape human destinies by means of them.

An apt Russian counterpart concept for the specific form of *hybris* which is employed by Givargizov's heroes is *khamstvo*, denoting vulgarity and brashness. The capacity of *khamstvo* to designate the *hybris* of the trickster is underscored by its etymology. The term *kham* (of which *khamstvo* is a derivate) first referred to a vulgar and disrespectful person from the 19th century, but it entered Russian language from Old Church Slavonic in the 18th century, and derives from the name of Noah's son, Ham, who dared to ridicule his father, breaking the sacred rules of respect and compassion.¹²⁸ Lipovetsky observes that the main protagonists of Russian history, from Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great, from Rasputin to Stalin and even to Khrushchev, are associated with an infringement of the sacred, and he also notes that 'the perception of a trickster as a Patriarch and cultural hero is intrinsic to Russian cultural history in general'.¹²⁹ Hyde clarifies this perception and sees it in a broader anthropological context: 'the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on'.¹³⁰

Prometheus, already mentioned by Lipovetsky in his discussion of the cultural mythologization of New Russians, fulfils this disruptive function.

¹²⁷ Douglas M. MacDowell, 'Hybrids in Athens', *Greece and Rome*, 23, 1 (April, 1976), 14–31, p. 19.

¹²⁸ For the etymology of *khamstvo* and *kham* see A. V. Semenev, *Etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka: Russkii iazyk ot a do ia'* (Moscow: Iunives, 2003) <<http://enc-dic.com/semenov/Ham-291.html>> [accessed 13 April 2013].

¹²⁹ 'New Russians as a Cultural Myth', p. 66.

¹³⁰ *Trickster Makes the World*, p. 9.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that he is also a cultural hero, the provider of a specific cultural definition, and thus, ultimately, an agent of construction. The myth of Prometheus, in other words, embodies what Hyde observes about the trickster: he sometimes creates, rather than crosses, a boundary, 'or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight.' In the very act of crossing the boundary between heaven and earth, between gods and men, Prometheus establishes a new boundary, bearing out that 'boundary creation and boundary crossing are related to one another'.¹³¹

The Italian anthropologist and scholar of religions Ugo Bianchi devoted an in-depth study to Prometheus as trickster, and his arguments expand Hyde's ideas, offering a key to the understanding of the narrative voice of the children's books under discussion. According to Bianchi, Prometheus's intervention in human destinies makes the separation between men and gods radical: as a consequence of his fraudulent deeds – his acts of *hybris* – human beings are sharply and definitely separate from gods.¹³² Bianchi argues that, in the myth, Prometheus takes part in the creation of the cultural conditions of humanity the way it is now.¹³³ Indeed, he is also considered the creator of those arts and techniques that make human life possible, and also fruitful.

What links Bianchi's study on Prometheus to this study of Givargizov's work is his identification of only one soteriological (pertaining to the doctrine of salvation) element in the myth of Prometheus: its justifying the present cultural

¹³¹ Ibidem, p. 7.

¹³² Here Bianchi refers to the fact that Zeus took his revenge on Prometheus's acts of *hybris* by sending to humanity sorrow and many evils (including the woman, Pandora). Ugo Bianchi, *Prometeo, Orfeo, Adamo: Tematiche religiose nel destino, il male, la salvezza* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo e Bizzani, 1976), pp.189–91. The relationship of mutual influences between gods and humans is typical of the so-called 'mystic tradition'. Bianchi's argument about Prometheus as trickster is on pp. 188–232.

¹³³ Ibidem. On this point, see in particular pp. 203–04, in which Bianchi treats the myth of Prometheus in Aeschylus's tragedy, *Prometheus Bound*. Prometheus, as the Titan who made culture possible inspired Simone Weil's poem *Prometheus* (1938).

conditions of humanity.¹³⁴ The myth is ultimately linked to the need to accept human existence as it is.¹³⁵ Likewise, the demiurge-tricksters of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* ultimately separate the child and the adult lands from each other in search of a model of adulthood and parenthood that includes and accepts adults as they are. The continuous crossing of borders performed by the 'grey-haired children' of Givargizov's fictional world breaks down the opposition between the Soviet and the non-Soviet generation, and allows a relationship between the two to be redefined. Levi Strauss's view on the trickster as a mediator can be applied to 'Musical Instruments': 'mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution'.¹³⁶ I can rephrase by saying that, in *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, mythical thought progresses from adults' perception of being an out-group towards their transformation into an in-group: fully integrated within the community thanks to the formulation of a well-ordered network of relations among its members.

4.3.6. *Encyclopaedia with a Bow and a Drum* as a New Reformulation of Adulthood and Intellectual Agency

Aetonormativity is not the only 'resolution of oppositions' that we can find in Givargizov's books. 'Musical Instruments' was expanded and published as a separate book, *Encyclopaedia with a Bow and a Drum*, in 2010. Here the humorous texts of the 2003 appendix are accompanied by other semi-serious encyclopaedic entries about Russian writers, composers and key concepts such

¹³⁴ *Prometeo, Orfeo, Adamo*, pp. 209–11.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 212. The subsequent transformations that the myth has undergone throughout the centuries in literary production, from Aeschylus to Simone Weil, have emphasised this aspect, for example the fire that Prometheus steals has been compared to philosophical wisdom.

¹³⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, translated from the French by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York, London: Basic Books, 1963), p. 224.

as 'authority', 'upbringing', 'self-education' 'inspiration', or 'convictions'. The book makes fun of didacticism and most of these encyclopaedic entries share in common the tone of 'Musical instruments'. Child characters and, by extension, child readers are not monsters, but just a bit naughty. They are not corrupted or covetous, they just do not want to wake up in the morning when it is time to go to school, and they sprinkle water on people passing by. 'Punishment', the encyclopaedia states, occurs 'when children don't do anything bad, and yet they are not allowed to ride their bicycle'.¹³⁷ There is no space for the infernal world of ever-present corruption which is typical of Givargizov's works, especially of those we have here discussed.

Encyclopaedia is characterized by a general lightness, which becomes a patronizing tone in the short texts about musical instruments. The common denominator of these texts seem to be the wish to deprive categories such as culture, law, upbringing or authority of their gravity, which is what many 1990s and even 1980s (if we think of Oster's *Legends and Myths from Lavrovyi Lane*, 1980) children's books aimed at, giving adults the possibility to take their first steps as independent pedagogues. In spite of the presence of some entries in which adults' supposed superior knowledge is questioned,¹³⁸ in *Encyclopaedia* the adult world and the child one are set apart because the narrative voice often uses a patronizing and reassuring humorous tone. A text on Chaikovskii, for example, says that he wrote many works ('More than one hundred! Maybe even more than one thousand!!!'¹³⁹), but when he was eleven he wrote a letter to his

¹³⁷ Artur Givargizov, *Entsiklopediia s babochkoi i barabanom* (Moscow: Egmont, 2010), pp. 8; 68.

¹³⁸ For example, the entry 'Samoobrazovanie' ('Self-education'), in *Entsiklopediia*, p. 88.

¹³⁹ 'Chaikovskii Petr Il'ich (1840–1893)', in *Entsiklopediia*, p. 103. The book is recommended for children of primary and early secondary school ('mladshego i srednego shkol'nogo vozrasta', from 6 to 13 years of age) as is *Zapiski*

parents begging their pardon for three bad marks he had received the week before, and promising not to do it again in the future.¹⁴⁰ In this bright and light-hearted narrative, references to Artur Givargizov as a character can only enhance the friendly relationship between the implied child reader and the implied author.¹⁴¹

The conflict-free world of *Encyclopaedia* establishes a relationship of mutual trust and affection between the authorial voice and the child reader, but the harmony of this world is nonetheless threatened by a passage indicating that *chernukha*, in other words bleakness and violence, surrounds the child reader.¹⁴² At the letter 'R', indeed, we find the entries 'Remen' ('Belt') and 'Ritorika' ('Rhetoric'). Significantly, the latter immediately follows the former:

Ремень
 Богатые люди украшали ремни драгоценными камнями.
 Рыцари носили широкие защитные ремни. У рыцарей всё было защитное: штаны, рубашка, ботники, — всё из железа.
 Ремесленники прикрепляли и ремням ключи, кошельки, телефоны.
 А бедняки ничего не прикрепляли.
 Вот стихотворение одного бедного поэта:
 О ремне четыре поэмы сложено.
 «“Забота” с ремнём» — картина. Аллегорическая.
 Написан трактат философский. А вещь-то не сложная.
 Только кожи полоска, дырки и металлическая
 Застёжка.
 Ну и так далее.
 Там ещё две тысячи строк.
 А смысл — не надо усложнять простые вещи.
 За эту поэму поэту заплатили три золотые монеты.
 Копейки!

vydaiushchegosia dvoechnika. *So shkaфом na velosipede* is recommended for early secondary school children ('srednego vozrasta').

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁴¹ See the entries 'Bochka' ('Barrel') and 'Smenka' ('Change of shoes'), Ibidem, pp. 23; 89.

¹⁴² In one short story in *So shkaфом na velosipede*, 'Na moem meste', Serezha's father beats him with a belt, saying that Serezha would do it too if their roles were reversed. This is the only short story of this collection in which the narrative voice comments on the object of the narrative, although only through the reproduction of a sound expressing confusion (or disgust?): 'И закончив на этом объяснение, папа брал ремень и делал то что, по его мнению, делал бы Серёжа на его месте, если бы папа был на месте Серё...тьфу... и т.д.' (p. 97). 'And, by that, having concluded his explanation, dad took the belt and did what, in his opinion, Serezha would have done in his place, if dad had been in Sere... huff!... and so on.'

Риторика

Ораторское искусство.

«Omnia domestica atque urbana mitto, quae tanta sunt ut numquam Hannibal huic urbi tantum mali optarit, quantum illi effecerint».

Цицерон.

Красиво. А вот переведёшь — некрасиво.

Про бедствия. И что даже Ганибал не пожелал бы Риму столько зла, сколько причинили внутренние бедствия.

Как новости.

Какое же новости искусство! Обычные новости.

Цицерон.

Поэтому лучше не переводить.

Не переводишь, вроде ничего.¹⁴³

The two texts together form a complex discourse on violence, oppression and injustice, and on the fact that the one who is, so to speak, responsible for words

¹⁴³ Belt

Rich people embellished belts with precious stones. Knights wore large defensive belts. Everything they had was defensive: they had iron pants, shirt and boots. Artisans attached keys, wallets and telephones to belts.

Poor people attached nothing.

Here is a poem written by a poor poet:

Four epic poems were composed on the belt.

And an allegorical picture: "Troubles with the belt"

There is a philosophical treatise on it. But it is not a complicated thing.

A leather band, holes

And a metal clasp.

And so on.

There still are two thousand lines there.

Here is their sense: don't make simple things complicated.

For this poem the poet got three golden coins. Pence!

Rhetoric

Oratory art.

["All these private matters, all these transactions which took place in the city, I say nothing about; though they are of such a nature that Hannibal himself never wished so much evil to this city, as those men have done."]

Cicero.

Beautiful.

And yet, if you translate it, it's ugly.

It's about atrocity. It says that not even Hannibal would have wished Rome all the evils provoked by internal tribulations.

It's like TV news.

What has art to do with TV news! It has to do with everyday news.

Cicero.

That is why it is better not to translate.

If you don't translate, it looks alright.

Entsiklopediia, p. 84. The quotation in Latin is from the speech of T. Cicero 'On the Subject of the Consular Provinces'. The translation provided can be found in M. Tullius Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero, literally translated by C. D. Yonge* (London: George Bell & Sons, York Street, Covent Garden, 1891)

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0020:text=Prov.:chapter=2&highlight=hannibal> [accessed 13 April 2013].

(here the poet and the orator, and, implicitly, the authorial voice of *Encyclopaedia*) can reveal the nature of violence to the community, even when this violence has been made unrecognisable. At the same time, the two texts tell child readers that it is also their responsibility to unmask the forms of oppression they witness in their own society, inviting them to sharpen their own analytical skills, and their capacity to interact with literary texts ('if you don't translate, it looks alright').

The nature of the pedagogical approach of the book is inconsistent: a patronizing tone (epitomised by the texts on the musical instruments) which infantilizes the child readers is sometimes replaced by forms of irony that stimulate their capacity to address complex themes. The narrator of *Encyclopaedia* is an adult who offers himself as a source of guidance, but the abrupt shifts in the tone make the way he wants to assume this guidance unclear, which suggests that the search for a distinctive identity on the parts of adults writing for children is continuing. Significantly, the first entry of this encyclopaedia is 'Avtoportret' ('Self-Portrait'). Here the narrator explains that 'a self-portrait cannot be completed':¹⁴⁴ the artist will always feel the need to add or delete something, unable to see him- or herself in those fixed features. Here the narrative voice declares his search for identity.

The question arises as to whether there is a relationship between this work and others populated by tricksters: *Notes of a Renowned Dunce*, *Try-Try-Try-My*, *The Dictation or Ancient Greek Tragedy* and so on. *Encyclopaedia* provides a voice different from the anthologies of long *anekdoty* written by Givargizov, those anthologies in which the adult and the child world mix with one another. *Encyclopaedia* brings to a logical conclusion the otherwise never-

¹⁴⁴ *Entsiklopediia*, p. 7.

ending collection of *anekdoty*, and at the same time appears as irreconcilable with them, as the sign of an unresolved tension between a child-centred utopia that is still alive, and which pushes children towards political (in the broadest sense of the term) agency, and another utopia, in which adults want to be accepted as they are, rather than promoting change. This unresolved tension, in my view, accounts for the inconsistency of the pedagogical approach and the narrative tone in *Encyclopaedia*.

Givargizov's work features the further development of a contradictory attitude towards childhood that dates back to the early Soviet time. As Kelly stresses, the Bolsheviks 'pushed [children] to the forefront of ideological discussion', which implied trust in and empowerment of their intelligence.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, the skilled, powerful child, endowed with political awareness represented a threat for a society in which 'infantilisation of the masses was part and parcel of the regime myth of the future utopia'.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, in Aleksandr Prokhorov's words, 'to enter the future, the new Soviet man had to accede to a state of eternal infancy'.¹⁴⁷ In other words, the child was at the centre of the utopian vision of the future as an agent, but this vision collided with another one, in which not only children, but the whole of Soviet society was *infantilized*: conceived of as enthusiastically obedient to and trustful of an authoritarian father, which was the State.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ *Children's World*, p. 256.

¹⁴⁶ Aleksandr Prokhorov, 'Arresting Development: A Brief History of Soviet Cinema for Children and Adolescents', in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, pp. 129–52 (p. 129).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁸ Evgenii Margolit, 'Prizrak svobody: Strana detei', *Iskusstvo kino*, 8 (2002) <<http://www.kinoart.ru/archive/2002/08/n8-article14>> [accessed 9 June 2012] Dobrenko maintains that 'The ideal of socialist realism is a grown up child'. See Evgeny Dobrenko, 'Auto/Bio/Agio/graphy, or Life as a Genre: Alesha Peshkov-Maxim Gorkii-Mark Donskoi', in 'Rethinking Russian Autobiography', special forum of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 7. 1 (1992), 61–83, p.166.

The set of values which the child implied reader of *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* and *Encyclopaedia* has accepted is no longer embodied by the State or a political leader. These books establish the older generation, adults, as the source of authority. However, at the core of Givargizov's work is the uncomfortable coexistence of three factors: adults who came of age during the Soviet era; post-post-Soviet society, in which they claim their role as repositories of experience and sources of guidance for the young generations, and a State-sanctioned biography of adults which excludes the existence of inner conflicts and anxieties in the act of assuming a pedagogical role. Givargizov's long *anekdoty* dismantle this biography, but the search for a new definition of adults and for a space in which an independent and creative pedagogical role can be experimented is full of obstacles. These are sometimes overcome by turning to comfortable patriarchal models. The recourse to these models may also be motivated by a concern that the mythological representation of the 'new new Russia' as corrupt, violent and indifferent to any norm ultimately risks defining 'New new Russians' as inadequate care-providers.¹⁴⁹

Natal'ia Nusinova's *The Adventures of Dzherik*, in which the author recalls her childhood, offers an interesting comparison with Givargizov's work because the narrative voice of this book turns to various forms of humour, including the *anekdot*, in its attempt to establish adults' credibility and reliability. Soviet *anekdot* culture is here a high intellectual code, and Nusinova's autobiographical tale can be read as expressing the same concern on the part

¹⁴⁹ Graham explains that the implication of *anekdoty* about the New Russians was that they were out of place under capitalism, as much as Russians, as butts of Soviet jokes, were out of place under Socialism. In his words, 'it is perhaps the cul-de-sac of cynicism that is the most serious obstacle to the cycle [on the New Russians]'s continued productivity'. 'The Wages of Syncretism', p. 50.

of adults that I have identified in my discussion of Givargizov's work: the need to overcome a pedagogical impasse, without running into a new one.

4.4. *The Adventures of Dzherik*: Crafting the Self through Soviet Joke Culture

The Adventures of Dzherik was not initially intended for a child audience, nor had the author, Natal'ia Nusinova, ever written for children previously. She is an internationally acclaimed cinema critic and historian, daughter of the cinema script writer Il'ia Nusinov. The book was nonetheless published by Samokat, an independent children's publisher in Russia. Only the semi-serious 'List of Difficult and Soviet Terms' which concludes the book was meant for child readers, and the author was encouraged to insert this semi-serious appendix by the editorial board.¹⁵⁰ What is relevant here is not the initial intention of the author to write or not to write a children's book, but the fact that the book was eventually published as suitable for a child audience.

The book is labelled as 'avtobiograficheskaia povest', an autobiographical tale. It is a recollection of the author's childhood, which took place in the 1960s. As Nusinova states in the introduction, in this book fantasy and actual memories merge together. In spite of the absence of an actual plot, so that each chapter may be read separately, the chronological order in which the memories are placed gives the narrative a coherent structure, making it similar to a short novel rather than a collection of tales.

The rich narrative encompasses many forms of high humour, including *anekdoty* and *steb* as a parody of Soviet culture. The beginning of the book, mocking a political leaflet, is an example of *steb* adapted for a child audience,

¹⁵⁰ Interview with the author, 9 June 2011, typed notes.

and because of its position seems to establish the hallmark of the whole narrative:

Все дети имеют право любить собак.
 Все дети имеют право мечтать о собаке.
 И все дети имеют право просить, скулить, канючить, клянчить и приставать к родителям, чтобы им купили собаку.
 Им говорят: «Не нуди!», а они все равно нудят, вздыхают и жалуются на свою трудную судьбу и тяжкую долю до тех пор, пока собака не появится у них в доме, потому что их дело правое и рано или поздно они непременно победят в своей справедливой и честной борьбе за собаку.¹⁵¹

I detect three main functions of humour in Nusinova's narrative, and each of them will be discussed below. First, *steb* and other forms of Soviet humour are part of a cultural code shared by a generation of intellectuals which the book addresses. Second, humour smoothes out the tensions which are provoked by recalling difficult personal and collective experiences. Third, humour contributes to mediating between two different and opposite elements or dimensions: then and now, the Soviet generation and the non-Soviet generation, the protagonist's happy childhood and the tragic nature of some events that took place at that time. Thanks to this mediation, humour preserves the continuity between the child 'I', Natasha, and the adult 'I', Natal'ia. These three functions are linked to one another. They should be seen as part of a specific approach to the adult and the child readership, and, at the same time, as the representation of the dynamics between the child 'I' and the adult 'I', on the one hand, and between the private and the collective, on the other.

¹⁵¹ 'All children have the right to love dogs.
 All the children have the right to dream of a dog.
 And all children have the right to whine, moan, ask and implore their parents to buy a dog.
 They will be told: "Now stop it!", but they won't – they will sigh and lament their hard destiny and their grave fate until a dog appears in their homes, because their cause is right, and sooner or later they will certainly win their just and honest fight for a dog'.
 Natal'ia Nusinova, *Priklucheniia Dzherika* (Moscow: Samokat, 2006), p. 12.

The title refers to Natasha's dog, the companion of many childhood experiences. The pet starred in the famous children's film *Vnimanie, cherepakha!* (*Watch Out, Tortoise!*, 1972), whose script was written by Nusinova's father. Therefore, the title makes reference to a personal memory, but at the same time pays homage to cinema. Each chapter hosts hidden or overt quotations from Soviet and non-Soviet films. These references to cinema are as much part of the culture shared by Nusinova's generation as Soviet humour is, exemplified by the aforementioned 'political leaflet', or by the final semi-serious 'list of Soviet terms'. As G. A. Shipova observes, in *The Adventures of Dzherik*, 'Nusinova holds a dialogue with the adult reader by means of intertextual links and cultural codes'.¹⁵²

The early 1990s already saw Russian childhood autobiographies featuring 'the mutual cultural code of the author's generation',¹⁵³ expressed through film, literary history, music or sport. Marina Balina considers the references to a common cultural code within these autobiographies as a form of protection on the parts of authors 'against a dominant official history'.¹⁵⁴ In *The Adventures of Dzherik*, references to Soviet humour, cinema or songs appear to be mostly aimed at establishing a dialogue with other intellectuals of the Soviet generation, and reinforcing their status of moral and intellectual leaders.

In the introduction the author is clearly addressing an adult audience when she poses the question of how to explain to today's school-children what *Timurovtsy* or old Bolsheviks were, and above all how to answer children's

¹⁵² G. A. Shipova, 'Reprezentatsiia obraza "Ia" v khudozhestvennoi avtobiografii o detstve (na materiale povestei P. V. Sanaeva "Pokhoronite menia za plintusom" i N. I. Nusinovo "Priklucheniia Dzherika")', *Vestnik MGOU, Seriia "Russkaia filologiiia"*, 5 (2011), 77–81, p. 78.

¹⁵³ Marina Balina, 'The Tale of Bygone Years: Reconstructing the Past in the Contemporary Russian Memoir', in *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, ed. by Beth Holmgren, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), pp. 186–209 (p. 194).

¹⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

question: 'Why did you allow all this to happen?'¹⁵⁵ Thus, talking about Soviet society necessarily implies addressing the issue of responsibility. The authorial voice shares her worries with other adults, by addressing them as part of her readership ('dear readers' is the opening of the introduction). However, this is not the starting point for a self-incrimination, as happened in the 1990s. In an attempt to provide an answer to the question 'Why did you allow all this to happen?' the focus shifts to a plural third person subject: 'Not all of the people who "did the revolution" and "built communism" were bad. Often they were naive and, anyway, as all the rest of the people on earth, they were different, each in his own right.'¹⁵⁶ Nusinova quotes the cinema director Jean Renoir, and his film *The Rules of the Game* (1939), where it is said that 'each has his own truth'. 'These people had their truth' Nusinova carries on, 'which was their fallacy, their *Grand Illusion*'. Are we always right, on the other hand?'¹⁵⁷ These words set adults free from the burden of history and the issue of personal responsibilities, the fear of suffering from permanent damage having grown up in the Soviet Union, raised by Soviet parents and grandparents, and the fear of damaging the next generation in a chain reaction.

In effect, the book sets adults free from the obsession with what I defined, referring to Oster's *Bad Advice*, the 'discourse of the belt'. Aware of addressing an educated audience, the authorial voice trusts in the adult readership, and establishes a relationship of solidarity with them. It is no coincidence that the book is dedicated to 'adults who understand everything'.¹⁵⁸ These adults, the introduction says, may not know the specific meaning of some of the Soviet terms which are mentioned in the memoir. Nonetheless, the

¹⁵⁵ 'K chitateliam', *Priklucheniia Dzherika*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁷ Ibidem. *La Grande Illusion* is a 1937 film by Jean Renoir.

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 2.

dedication suggests that they will, all the same, know how to dispel child readers' doubts when these hear of that weird bygone time. Nusinova's book carries out in its own way a 'utopia of harmonization', as Givargizov's *On a Bike with a Wardrobe* and *Encyclopaedia* do. However, if in its three dedications the narrative voice of Givargizov's 2003 book has an ambiguous character, Nusinova, from the introduction of *The Adventures of Dzherik*, claims the right to moral leadership as an adult, an intellectual, and as the member of a family of intellectuals.

4.4.1. No 'Alternative I': Conflict-free Truth-Telling in Nusinova's Novel

Truth-telling on the part of adults leaves behind the bleakness of the *chernukha* and finds a place in this memoir thanks to the fact that the book reworks and merges together what Marina Balina defines as the Soviet canon of the happy childhood, on the one hand, and the early post-Soviet developments of the childhood memoir, on the other. In the 19th century, writers such as Lev Tolstoy had described childhood as a time of happiness, away from the troubles of adult life. According to Balina, after the revolution the model of the 'happy, happy childhood' moved directly from the aristocrats' world into the world of Soviet Russia.¹⁵⁹ Now, childhood that had taken place before the revolution was depicted as marked by injustice and deprivation (e.g. Gorky's *Childhood*, S. Marshak's *A Life's Beginning*, and K. Chukovskii's *The Silver Crest*),¹⁶⁰ whereas

¹⁵⁹ Marina Balina, 'The Autobiographies of *Glasnost*: the Question of Genre in Russian Autobiographical Memoirs of the 1980s', *a/b Auto/Biographical Studies*, 7, 1 (1992), 12–26. By the same author see also: 'Russian Autobiographies of the Twentieth Century: Fictions of the Self', *a/b Auto/Biographical Studies*, 11.2 (Fall 1996), 3–7.

¹⁶⁰ Gorky's autobiographical book was written in 1913, but, as Balina explains, became the model for the Soviet depiction of childhood in the pre-revolutionary Russia as unhappy. Marina Balina, "'Wounded Narratives": Jewish Childhood Recollections in Post-Soviet Autobiographical Discourse', in *The Poetics of Memory in Post-Totalitarian Discourses*, ed. by Johanna Lindbladh (Lund: CFE at Lund University, 2008), pp. 15–26 (p.16).

childhood that had taken place after the revolution had to be described as happy.¹⁶¹ During the Soviet period, the representation of the non-Soviet childhood, be it pre-revolutionary or Western, adhered to an 'anti-childhood canon'.¹⁶²

Early 1990s autobiographical narratives put the idea of the happy, perfectly harmonious, Soviet childhood into doubt and most of them do this by displaying a fragmented reality 'that seek[s] no legitimizing correlation with official history'.¹⁶³ In her analysis of a set of childhood memoirs written in the early 1990s Russia, Balina suggests that:

In the post-Soviet childhood narrative, which reflects on the Soviet experience of its author, the process of layering is quite the opposite: in this case, it is the personal recollection that is overlaid on top of the elements of the 'happy' Soviet childhood model. Although this creates the same multilayered effect, the authors of these narratives have a different goal in mind: this superimposition helps them to camouflage their painful searches for self-identity.¹⁶⁴

In these 1990s memoirs, personal details or excerpts from private documents sometimes intertwine with historical events and disrupt their linearity. Subjectivity subordinates history, in an attempt to seek liberation from the norms of Socialist Realism canons, such as the linearity of the plot and the subordination of the individual to the collective.¹⁶⁵ Balina suggests that in the early post-Soviet childhood memoir 'concrete episodes are presented as parts of a puzzle that the author tries to gather together in order to achieve wholeness

¹⁶¹ 'Wounded Narratives', pp.17–8. This imperative led Samuil Marshak to hide the most positive aspects of his childhood or to modify some others so as to adhere to this 'anti-childhood' narrative.

¹⁶² Balina provides examples of writers who on some occasions managed not to respect this strict division between the unhappy pre-revolutionary childhood and the 'happy, happy childhood' of the Soviet time. See *ibidem* pp. 16–17.

¹⁶³ Marina Balina, 'The Tale of Bygone Years', p. 201. See also Marina Balina, 'Literaturnaia reprezentatsiia detstva', *Detskoe chtenie*, 1 (2012), 43–66, p. 58.

¹⁶⁴ 'Wounded Narratives', p. 18.

¹⁶⁵ For these features of Socialist Realism, see Clark, *The Soviet Novel*.

as a person'.¹⁶⁶ She underlines that in many of the autobiographies written in the late 1980s and the early 1990s it is Soviet reality which has become the site of the anti-childhood canon: adulthood is achieved through material difficulties, and the protagonist goes through traumatic injustice, and real or metaphorical orphanhood.¹⁶⁷

The novelty of the memoirs written after Perestroika is not limited to the inversion of the Soviet canon. A feature which can be noticed in the late 1980s but which is more pronounced in the 1990s is that the author holds a dialogue with him- or herself. Elizabeth Bruss considers autobiography as having two main centres – the author of the text and the author in the text, who is the object of the narration.¹⁶⁸ Discussing 1980s and early 1990s Russian memoirs, Balina adds a third centre, called 'the alternative I': the self who could have existed if it had not been for Soviet history. 'The "alternative I"', Balina writes, 'is the author who was not realized and could not be realized, because he himself, the author of the text, did not give this "I" the chance to develop'.¹⁶⁹ In the early post-Soviet autobiographies, an 'actual I', the author of the text, is in contrast and in dialogue with this 'alternative I'.

The Adventures of Dzherik is the memoir of a happy childhood in which humour, as well as other narrative features, allows 'the actual I', Natal'ia, to undertake a serene and harmonious dialogue with 'the child I', Natasha. There is no 'alternative I' who never had the possibility to exist and who now claims attention. On the contrary, Natal'ia is what Natasha promised to become, in

¹⁶⁶ 'Wounded Narratives', p. 21. In this essay Balina refers to memoirs written by Soviet Jewish authors as particularly representative examples of a general trend that includes autobiographies written by non-Jewish authors.

¹⁶⁷ 'Literaturnaia representatsiia detstva', p. 59.

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 70; 72.

¹⁶⁹ 'The Autobiographies of Glasnost', pp. 18–19.

spite of the weight of history in her own life. This progression can be inferred already from the introduction. Nusinova defines her book as ‘a love story’, in which two little girls – Nusinova’s autobiographical self and her sister Tania – were raised surrounded by loving figures, whose protective actions lasted ‘even when many people and facts of their childhood turned into a memory’. Thus, the introduction informs the reader that, by virtue of family bonds, Natasha’s values are Natal’ia’s. Thanks to this intense emotional experience Natal’ia and Natasha can embark upon speaking of the Soviet era to the child audience – an audience which finds this society alien. The framework of family values and family bonds makes truth-telling, which had triggered a tormented self-incrimination between the 1980s and the 1990s, almost conflict-free.

4.4.2. The Family as the Centre for the Production of Meaning

The function of the *anekdot* and of humour in this childhood memoir is tightly linked to the role of family bonds: both humour and love are called upon to fill the many gaps of the child’s Soviet experience, created by voids of sense or by painful circumstances. Humour, and the *anekdot* in particular, aids family bonds in the shaping of a narrative voice that has overcome the conflicts stemming from introspection and acts as a mediator between two opposite dimensions: then and now, adulthood and childhood, Soviet and non-Soviet eras. This mediation acquires the form of a harmonious dialogue between the Soviet child, Natasha, and Natal’ia, the adult who has reached another awareness of social and political issues. It is significant that the reverse of the frontispiece explains that the book ‘launches a bridge between our times and that epoch, from which we all, inhabitants of today’s Russia, come to a greater or lesser extent’.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ *Priklucheniia Dzherika*, p. 4.

Natasha is, in many respects, a Soviet child, and this is a key factor that makes the aforementioned mediation possible. According to G. A. Shipova, in Nusinova's book the child protagonist is isolated from society, because her family's values are different from those imposed by the Soviet environment.¹⁷¹ And yet, Natasha longs to be a member of the Pioneers, to sing Soviet songs in a choir, and appears to be well acquainted with the Soviet lexicon. Although the final 'List of difficult and Soviet terms' reveals that the child actually misunderstands some specific words, she is more often puzzled by idiomatic expressions such as 'Time flies', or entire situations that have little to do with Soviet reality. In fact, Natasha demonstrates that she understands, and often approves of, key aspects of Soviet society. For example, when her grandparents have to get married again with a civil rite, Natasha asks her grandmother why she does not explain to authorities that they married each other in a church before the revolution. On the old woman's reply, 'What are you saying? I'm a member of the party', Natasha comments: 'Well, yes, right'.¹⁷²

Family – the 'silkworm's cocoon', 'the tortoise's shell', as Natal'ia defines it in the introduction¹⁷³ – protected Natasha, allowing her to be part of Soviet society: to live through school propaganda, antisemitism, the censorship of her father's scripts, and the news of Stalinist repression having killed her paternal grandparents. These aspects of Soviet society did not damage her in any way. Within the narrative, tragic experiences, Lev Tolstoi's school, attended by Natasha's grandmother as a child, Pushkin's poetry, Soviet humour and Aleksandr Galich's songs form a coherent whole that has the family as its centre and its producer of meaning. Had Natasha's childhood taken place

¹⁷¹ 'Reprezentatsiia obraza "Ia" v khudozhestvennoi avtobiografii o detstve, p. 80.

¹⁷² *Prikliucheniia Dzherika*, p. 51.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

isolated from society, Natal'ia, as an adult, would not be able to convey the sense of the Soviet experience to new generations, nor could she be, in the initial introduction, the addressee of the question: 'Why did you allow all this to happen?'. This childhood memoir can act as a bridge between the Soviet and the non-Soviet societies by virtue of Natasha's invulnerability. She has personally experienced events which could have damaged her, but did not. The book, indeed, attributes an almost prophylactic function to family bonds. Thanks to these bonds, Natalia/Natasha is the best possible witness: she is able to narrate 'the Soviet epoch' having spent her childhood deeply in, and yet outside of, that society at the same time. In the narrative, intersections between private and public life occur continuously, also because Natasha uses the Soviet lexicon in her private daily life. She describes how her parents refuse to 'align themselves' when they don't buy some pets for her and Tania like other parents do for their children, and she is so happy to be part of choir and sing a 'serious patriotic repertoire'.¹⁷⁴

The private and the public spheres are also interwoven in the visual aspects of the book. The family pictures that constitute most of the illustrative apparatus strengthen the private character of Natal'ia's narrative and its value as a personal testimony. These pictures, however, are accompanied by few others with a documentary value (such as parades, flags, or a map of the Soviet Union) and by some pictures of objects (a tape recorder, a Singer sewing machine, a postcard and so on). Photographs merge with professionally realized illustrations and drawings which imitate children's scribbles. The personal level (personal pictures and children's drawings), the purely narrative

¹⁷⁴ *Prikliucheniia Dzherika*, pp. 13; 34.

one (professional illustrations), and the historical (documents) merge with each other harmoniously.

In Nusinova's book, the private sphere is not a refuge. Rather, it enables Natasha to overcome the voids of sense that she comes across every day, and enables her to have a social life. When she finds out that her paternal grandfather died in prison, her maternal grandmother limits her explanation to the fact that he was Jewish and a professor. To these words Natasha is bewildered, and even more so when her Bolshevik grandfather 'CLARIFIES THE SITUATION' (the capital letters makes the expression ironical): Isaak Nusinov, as the author of *Pushkin and Worldwide Literature*, was imprisoned and never released, accused of internationalism. His wife, Hana, died from sorrow. And yet, this fracture in the child's consciousness is healed by the last dialogue:

«Бабушка, [...] а как ты думаешь, если бы дедушка Исаак и бабушка Хана не умерли, они бы нас с Танькой любили?» – «Ну о чем ты говоришь, – удивилась бабушка. – Конечно, любили бы! Еще как бы любили! Заботились бы о вас, беспокоились, учили бы вас, гордились бы вами, книжки бы вам читали!»
«Ну, тогда я их тоже люблю, – сказала я. – И я буду их защищать!»¹⁷⁵

In this dialogue, private stories and private feelings reveal themselves to be more powerful than history. The latter remains painful and incomprehensible, but can still find place in one's biography. The above-mentioned episode could have been the ideal moment for the emergence of the alternative 'I': Natasha could have had a relationship with her paternal grandparents if Stalin had not

¹⁷⁵ – Granny, [...] do you think that grandpa Isaak and grandma Hana would have loved us if they hadn't died?

–Why, of course! – granny was surprised – Of course they would have loved you! They would have loved you so much! They would have taken care of you, they would have been worried for you, they would have taught you many things, they would have been proud of you, they would have read books for you!

– Right. Then I love them too. – I said – And I will defend them!

Priklucheniia Dzherika, pp. 61–2.

killed them. However, Natasha's words, 'Then I love them too. And I will defend them', have the power to re-absorb that alternative 'I' into her actual life. Natasha is saying that from now on she will have a relationship with grandpa Isaac and granny Hana: the 'alternative I' has been turned into a 'potential I', to which Natasha gives a chance for fulfilment.

4.4.3. Smoothing Over Incongruities and Disruptions Thanks to Humour

The absence of an alternative 'I' is also made possible by humour. Vadim Rudnev maintains that the function of the *anekdot* in everyday speech is to overcome 'a moment of discomfort, when no logical argument is able to solve the situation'. On these occasions, the joke acts as a 'breakwater'.¹⁷⁶ The position of some *anekdoty* and other pieces of humour in the narrative of *The Adventure of Dzherik* supports Rudnev's argument. In one initial episode of the book, Natasha's parents would like to go to Yugoslavia for a short holiday, although their financial conditions are not ideal because of the censorship of her father's scripts. Natasha's grandfather, an old bolshevik, vehemently protests: how can they talk about this *meshchanstvo* when they want to go to a Capitalist, or rather – even worse – a semi-capitalist country, with strong 'bourgeois propaganda!' At this point Natal'ia's father

схватился за голову и застонал: «Петр Иванович! Но ведь Ленин был в Цюрихе!» И тут дедушка просиял и сказал, гордясь за Ленина: «А что ты думал! Подумаешь – в Цюрихе! Ты еще Польшу вспомни! Он и в Париже бывал! На улице Мари Роз!»¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Vadim Rudnev, 'Pragmatika anekdota', *Daugava*, 6 (June 1990), 99–102, p. 100.

¹⁷⁷ 'Grasped clutched his head and cried out: 'Petr Ivanovich! Even Lenin went to Zurich!'

To which grandpa lit up and said, full of pride for Lenin: 'Yes, only think, to Zurich! And don't forget Poland! He also lived in Paris, in Marie Rose Street!' *Priklucheniia Dzherika*, p. 26.

The themes of censorship, absence of freedom and lack of money are addressed, but their capacity to represent a disruption in Natasha's wholeness as a person and in the harmonious atmosphere of her family is neutralized by the *anekdot*, the breakwater.

The similarity of this function of humour and of sentimental bonds in the narrative is best demonstrated by two of the potentially most disturbing episodes of the book, which occur during the same day, within a very short stretch of time. In the courtyard, two women offend Natasha because she is Jewish. She goes back home, where she is told about her paternal grandparents and their tragic destiny. However, before this conversation with her maternal grandparents takes place, she notices the presence of some guests. These are Communists from Tashkent, visiting Natasha's grandfather. The old Bolshevik is worried. Using what he considers commonly known terms, he explains he has heard that in Uzbekistan one can still find 'single cases of *peregiby na mestakh*'. Eventually he asks his guest how things are going in their *partiacheika*, and whether there still are *perezhitki* out there.¹⁷⁸ In reply, one of the two guests smiles and merrily exclaims:

«Конечно есть, как можно, чтоб не было! [...] У нас в Узбекистане все есть». «Что вы говорите? – оживился дедушка, золожив одну руку за спину и прохаживаясь по комнате взад-вперед. – И какие же именно?» – «Спелые, сочные...» начал перечислять коммунист.¹⁷⁹

The joke is an evident reworking of the cycle on the Chukchi, the idiot simpletons of the extreme north-east. When Natasha overhears this comic dialogue, she is still deeply hurt because two women have just accused her of

¹⁷⁸ The three terms mean, respectively: "excesses of zeal", "party cell" and "remnants of capitalism".

¹⁷⁹ 'Of course there are, how couldn't there be! [...] In Uzbekistan we've got everything!'

'What are you saying?' Grandpa was alarmed, and with an arm behind his back started walking back and forth across the room. 'And of what kind in particular?'

'Ripe, juicy...' the communist listed.

Priklucheniia Dzherika, p. 58.

belonging to another 'Nation'. She was not even aware of being Jewish, and cannot find an explanation for what has happened to her. The *anekdot* smoothes the tension provoked by this episode. Soon after, however, tensions rise again because Natasha cries in her room. Her grandmother, who has heard of the episode of racism, tells the child about the way Stalin's repression and antisemitism hit her family, and here, as discussed above, the power of affection intervenes to heal the wounds provoked by history.

The third passage in which humour works as a narrative device that smoothes the tensions provoked by the shadow of history is set at school. Natasha's beloved teacher is grieved by her neighbour's escape from the Soviet Union. She and the other tenants of the *kommunalka* had written to the authorities denouncing his case: after all, he listened to 'enemy voices' on the radio. However, their zeal had not received due attention. Natasha empathizes with her teacher, and, back home, tells the 'scandalous story' of this 'enemy of the people' to her parents.¹⁸⁰ Their attempts to explain the child that 'things are not so simple' annoy Natasha, until her father blurts out: 'We should not even send them to school now!'. Natasha promptly takes advantage of the situation: 'And who asked you to? I have already made my offer: I can go and take Dzherik to the set of the film, otherwise he will lose the role'.¹⁸¹

Rather than an *anekdot*, Natasha's reply is a witticism. *Anekdoty*, other pieces of Soviet humour and common quips constitute a net that traverses and sustains the whole narrative, filling all the possible gaps, which in memoirs of the 1980s and 1990s conveyed the sense of a 'quilted identity'.¹⁸² Humour has the power to make explicit incongruities and the artificial nature of what is

¹⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*. When this episode occurs, the family does not know how to get the dog to the film set in the morning.

¹⁸² 'The Tale of Bygone Years', p. 21.

commonly believed to be natural, while, at the same time, smoothing or neutralizing incongruities and disruptions.

The fact that one of Natasha's grandfathers is an old Bolshevik, and an enthusiastic supporter of the Soviet state, while the other is a Jewish intellectual victim of Stalin's repression is an opposition that the book smoothes over. The frequent teasing of her nonetheless beloved maternal grandfather – the member of Natasha's family who appears most often in the family pictures that accompany the narrative – seems to be part of a structure aimed at joining oppositions together.

If the joke is a breakwater, the joke-teller enables the joke to fulfil its function, and is therefore the actual agent of mediation. Rudnev was among the first scholars to define the joke-teller as a trickster.¹⁸³ Natasha does not transgress any rule; she is a good girl, respectful and good-hearted – she has nothing in common with Kolia, Iura and the other little Titans of Givargizov's books. Some of the features of the narrative voice, however, allow a comparison with the ambiguous narrative voice of some of Givargizov's books.

Once past the introduction, the point of view of the narrative of *The Adventures of Dzherik* is almost entirely Natasha's, with rare intrusions of the adult 'I' who adds details (for example a comment such as 'At that time I didn't know that...').¹⁸⁴ As Shipova observes, some parts of the narrative may be interpreted as expressing the perspective of the adult 'I', for example the episode in which Natasha finally realizes her dream to sing patriotic songs in a choir. As the reader understands from other characters' reactions, she is tone-deaf, although the child does not seem to be aware of this. During rehearsals,

¹⁸³ 'Pragmatika anekdota', p.101.

¹⁸⁴ *Prikliuchenia Dzherika*, p. 88. This episode is one of the few in which Natasha misunderstands a Soviet term, Fin, which is the short version of *Finansovoi inspektor*. She thinks it is an inhabitant of Finland (*finn*, in Russian).

the teacher wonders 'who is spoiling the whole choir', and passes by the rows of children to find out:

Мне казалось, что она не должна так говорить, и вообще это было неприятно и неприлично и уж конечно, относилось не ко мне, потому что я пела ГРОМКО, но на всякий случай, когда она проходила мимо, я замолкала. «Наташенка робкая», умиленно говорила учительница, а я скромно опускала глаза.

Так мне удалось продержаться довольно долго.¹⁸⁵

The last words appear as the comments of the adult 'I', revealing a different awareness of the scene ('*proderzhat'sia*', 'to resist'). Shipova interprets the intrusions of an adult perspective as introducing a 'present tense' point of view, telling the story in retrospect. These shifts from the past of Natasha's focalization to the present of Natal'ia's awareness are often responsible for some of the comic effects of the narrative,¹⁸⁶ as are the frequent paralipses, in which the narrative voice limits herself to the information held by Natasha.¹⁸⁷

The child's transferred point of view is often rendered through the reproduction of the child's speech.¹⁸⁸ In the following example, Natasha has had a fight with a little boy in the courtyard. The repetition of the word 'babushka' ('granny') belongs to a child register:

Да ещё и бабушке своей наябедничал, что я его побила. А его бабушка пожаловалась моей бабушке, а моя бабушка была очень

¹⁸⁵ 'I thought she shouldn't have talked in this way, that was just unpleasant and inconvenient, well, yes, it had nothing to do with me, because I was singing LOUD, but any rate, when she passed by, I kept silent. 'Natasha is shy', the teacher said tenderly, and I humbly lowered my eyes.

In this way I managed to resist for a while'.

Prikliucheniia Dzherika, p. 36.

¹⁸⁶ 'Reprezentatsiia obraza "Ia"', p. 79.

¹⁸⁷ For the notion of paralipsis and paralepsis, see *Narrative Discourse*, p. 195.

¹⁸⁸ The transferred point of view is the one reproducing 'the child's understanding of what she sees, the child's thoughts and opinions'. Maria Nikolajeva, 'Beyond the grammar of story', p. 11. Seymour Chatman defines the transferred point of view as the one which characterizes a character's 'general interest, profit, welfare, well-being etc.' He calls 'figurative' or 'conceptual' the point of view that reproduces 'someone's world view'. See *Story and Discourse*, pp. 151–2.

довольна и сказала той бабушке: «Да вы что говорите! Не может быть!»¹⁸⁹

The following excerpt, in which the teacher of music has finally realized that it is Natasha the one who 'spoils the whole choir', shows an adult level of syntax:

[...] сказала она, широко раскрывая передо мной двери АКТОВОГО ЗАЛА, чтобы мне было удобно выйти из него навсегда [...]¹⁹⁰

The changes in focalization are a very common device in literature.¹⁹¹

However, I suggest that in Nusinova's book they acquire a specific value: Natasha and Natal'ia, the child 'I' and the adult 'I', continuously interchange with each other. If readers were to imagine the narrator which verbalizes these shifts in the point of view and stylization, they would have to imagine a face in constant transformation, sometimes having the features of a child and sometimes those of an adult. In other words, I suggest that the narrative voice of *The Adventures of Dzherik* is another hybrid figure, another trickster constantly crossing the boundaries between then and now, childhood and adulthood, and telling jokes bringing together and separating these two dimensions.

4.4.4. The 'List of Soviet and Difficult Words': The Return of the Adult

The semi-serious list of 'Soviet and difficult words', allegedly written by Natasha and enriched by Natal'ia's comments, brings to an end the ongoing shifts in focalization that occur throughout the book. In this humorous appendix, the child 'I' and the adult 'I' have undergone a distinct separation, because the comments

¹⁸⁹ 'And he even told his granny I hit him. And his granny complained with my granny, and my granny was very pleased and told that granny: "What are you saying! This can't be true!"'. *Prikliucheniia Dzherika*, p. 15.

¹⁹⁰ 'She said, opening wide the door of the AUDITORIUM in front of me, so that I could comfortably leave it forever'. *Prikliucheniia Dzherika*, p. 36.

¹⁹¹ See *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 194–8.

of the adult are graphically marked by italics. The child and the adult, in other words, have split into two separate voices:

Расовая дискриминация – это когда с людьми или с собаками поступают несправедливо только из-за того, что они другой национальности или породы, или они полукровки, или метисы. *Это очень нехорошо, это позор для того, кто так делает, и вовсе не для тех, кого так называют.*¹⁹²

Many of these explanations resemble *anekdoty*, and it is the child voice which usually pronounces them:

Совхоз – Это когда все хозяйство в поселке общее и никто ни за чем не следит, потому что каждый думает, что это сделает кто-нибудь ещё.¹⁹³

Not all of the Soviet terms readers have encountered in the text are given an explanation in this list. However, the main components of Natasha's Soviet experience are here tidily categorized and clearly explained by an adult speaker, regularly signalled by italics: Stalin's repression, including the doctors' plot, the invasion of Prague in 1968 and Natasha's father signing a petition against it – after which he went through a long time of unemployment. Also the objects of her childhood, such as the primus, as well as her grandmother's folk expressions, or the great festivities, such as the First of May, are here playfully described, but the separation of roles is rather neat: the child is the joke teller, or that who makes the reader laugh, for example by showing she does not know the actual meaning of a word, while the adult explains. The latter does not address her child reader authoritatively, but appears confident and serene.

I propose a reading of *The Adventures of Dzherik* as a childhood memoir sharing some features of the ritualized narrative structure of *On a Bike with a*

¹⁹² 'Racial discrimination: it is when people or dogs are offended just because they are of another nation or another race, or because they are mongrel, or half-caste. *This is a very bad thing, those who use these terms should be ashamed, and not those who are called in this way*'. *Priklucheniia Dzherika*, p. 123.

¹⁹³ 'State farm – it's when goods and duties in a country village are communal, and nobody does anything because each thinks that somebody else will do it'. *Ibidem*, p. 109.

Wardrobe. The introduction, the stories gathered together and the final semi-serious list of Soviet terms form a macrotext. In Nusinova's book, an adult 'I' addresses other adults, the other members of her community, and raises the question that has appeared as tormenting in many childhood and mainstream narratives for more than twenty years: 'Why did you allow all this to happen?' As in the other cases, from the *Chernukha* films to Oster's *Bad Advice*, it is the child other who is asking this question. The author then immerses herself in childhood allowing her child self to speak again and merge with her adult self, producing a narrative with continuous shift in the focalization. At the end of this process, the adult is reborn, able to provide explanations and guide the child reader.

Nusinova's memoir hides a ritualized narrative which establishes a defined relationship between the adult and the child in the book. Child and adult readers are invited to laugh while addressing complex issues, but the adult narrative voice is able to provide child readers with guidance, and addresses an adult readership (the adults who understand everything', mentioned in the introduction) that is equally able to undertake an effective pedagogical role. The jokes that can be understood only by adults are a way of cementing a feeling of social and cultural belonging as a precondition for the integration of adults with a Soviet background into society. In other words, Nusinova encourages adult readers to approach contemporary children by giving value to their Soviet background and the experience of Soviet life.

Many terms that are mentioned in the book cannot be understood by a child reader, and even an adult may be in doubt as to what some of them mean, as the introduction admits. Many of these expressions belong to the Soviet lexicon, words such as *burzhui* (bourgeois), *ravniat'sia* (to align oneself),

vremennoe pravitel'stvo (Provisional Government), *polukapitalisticheskaia strana* (half-capitalist country), *perezhitok kapitalizma* (remnant of capitalism) or *peregiby na mestakh* (local extremes, or 'excesses of zeal'). Graphically, these expressions are emphasised by capital letters, which inevitably attracts readers' attention to them. These words often seem to hold an amusing element in their being non-understandable, a device similar to one that Barbara Wall observes in Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*. Wall notes that in Kipling's book there are many

grown-up words, and they are used not for their sense but to form patterns which are not far removed from nonsense verse [...]. So Kipling can make jokes that not even all his adults readers will take, and at the same time hold the child's interest by the presentation of his jokes as part of the nonsense, and by the narrator's constant inclusion of his narratee in the fun.¹⁹⁴

Many passages of *The Adventures of Dzherik* can be seen in the same way, for example the one in which Natasha's maternal grandfather enters the scene for the first time. He is described as:

СТАРЫЙ БОЛЬШЕВИК с неподходящей для КОММУНИСТА фамилией Милюков – так звали одного МИНИСТРА-КАПИТАЛИСТА, члена ВРЕМЕННОГО ПРАВИТЕЛЬСТВА и довольно-таки порядочного БУРЖУА.¹⁹⁵

An episode in which a hen is threatened by Dzherik and found guilty by Natasha's father 'from a victimological point of view', is another example of the use of a Sovietism as a comic device.¹⁹⁶ Ultimately, *The Adventures of Dzherik* addresses a dual audience, and each reader can enjoy the book albeit in different ways. At the same time, in the copyright page the book is labelled as appropriate for a 'family reading'. Adults are therefore encouraged to fulfil the function of the book ('the bridge') by sharing with children the act of reading.

¹⁹⁴ *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*, p. 130.

¹⁹⁵ 'An OLD BOLSHEVIK, with a surname which was not appropriate for a COMMUNIST, Miliukov. It was the surname of a CAPITALIST-MINISTER, a member of the PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT and a first-rate BOURGEOIS'. *Priklucheniia Dzherika*, p. 16.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 16; 80.

Supposedly, what remains unexplained or unsaid in the book triggers a dialogue between members of a family of intellectuals, rather than excluding child readers from a full understanding of the narrative.

Conclusions

Nusinova's memoir and Givargizov's work demonstrate that humour and *anekdot* culture within Russian children's literature are now a narrative tool by means of which the adults who came of age during the Soviet era are searching for new definitions of their own selves. This definition involves an independent pedagogical agency, which overcomes the obstacles that emerged during perestroika.

In search for a new definition of adulthood, *On a Bike with a Wardrobe*, *Notes of a Renowned Dunce*, *The Adventures of Dzherik* or *Encyclopaedia* try to negotiate cultural difference and cultural inclusion. On the one hand, these books express adults', and especially intellectuals', need to assert their own biography, different from the one that is sanctioned by the State, and that leaves no space for incongruities, doubt and fragilities. On the other, they express adults' wish for integration into today's society, a way to make their own culture fruitful, but this implies the overcoming of self-doubt. The possibility of sharing experiences and offering guidance to younger generations seems to depend on the difficult balance between the statement of difference and social inclusion. The *anekdot*, with other forms of the Soviet humorous repertoire, has been called upon to realize this difficult task. *The Adventures of Dzherik* and many works written by Givargizov express a sense of belonging to an out-group, and have found in the *anekdot* a narrative strategy for dealing with this condition.

The books I have discussed in this chapter have adopted different strategies for realizing what I have defined a utopia of integration and harmonization. Givargizov mocks his own generation and his own social group: teachers. However, by assimilating the child into this humorous portrayal, he ends up abolishing any distinction between adulthood and childhood, and between Soviet and post-Soviet societies. The mixture of attraction towards and fear of the other, which lies at the heart of self-reflexive jokes, ends up assimilating the child characters, and implicitly, child readers, into a world of tricksters, deprived of any moral law and time. All the previous definitions of the two members of this relationship – the adult and the child – are cancelled, opening the way to their reformulation. We have seen how humour plays a key role in Nusinova's memoir, *The Adventures of Dzherik*, by aiding family bonds to join together chronological dimensions, healing fractures, and smoothing tensions. Its narrative voice hosts a dialogue between the child 'I' and the adult 'I', in which one point of focalization follows the other in a continuous flow. It is the final humorous list of Soviet words which clearly separates the child from the adult, and the past from the present, allowing Natal'ia, the adult 'I', to establish a serene dialogue with other adults of her social and cultural group, and with their children.

These books ultimately express the search for a new reformulation of the relationship between an adult and a child in Russia, a relationship different from aetnormativity, but still capable of protecting adults from the detrimental effects of perpetual self-doubt.

Conclusion

This thesis examines children's texts, published in Russia between 1990 and 2010, which share the presence of narrative features associated with the notions of play and playfulness. Drawing on the works of Bateson, Stewart and, partly, Sutton-Smith, I defined playfulness as a reframing of language which puts the subject and the object of play in a liminal condition, an 'is/is not status'. This reframing bears the message 'this is play' and suggests the existence of new rules of interpretation, revealing the arbitrary and temporary nature of any cultural signal. In this sense, the texts here discussed 'played' with the notion of common sense, and many of them represented a reworking of forms of underground humour (*steb*) which were extremely popular and productive in late Socialist culture, and which were mostly associated with the creative intelligentsia.

Once they entered children's literature, these forms of underground culture became a way to strengthen the intellectual and pedagogical profile of adults who addressed children in a difficult time of transition. At the same time, this playful approach to common sense and to Soviet discourse allowed authorial voices to explore adult culture and expose anxieties experienced by a generation of intellectuals who came of age in the Soviet cultural system. In other words, the exploration of the self went hand in hand with the construction of the self. The reframing of language, which is implied in playfulness, enabled this double action of exploration and construction. In this sense, the texts here discussed reveal forms of liminality similar to those described by Turner with reference to rites of passage. Because of the centrality of the question

concerning adults' capacity to provide guidance to the younger generations, the construction of an adult authorial identity had in the child reader a vital point of reference. The approach to the child reader is informed by conceptualisations of play as development, which imply that adulthood is the most complete state of human existence. However, opposite idealisations, which associate play with the bliss of childhood, are equally relevant. The presence of these conceptualisations of play testifies to the contradictory nature of adult identity as expressed by the texts under discussion.

One of the main findings of this thesis is that both the exploration and the construction of an authorial persona found a means of expression in variants of *durachestvo*, that is to say in profoundly rooted cultural models which represent the heart of Russian culture of laughter. I put special emphasis on the figures of the *chudak*, of the *iurodivyi*, and of the rogue-trickster. These are, by definition, outsiders, in the sense that even when they are settled in a community they do not belong to it entirely. Rather, with their presence they remind of a possible alternative world. By employing elements which typically belong to the languages of the *chudak*, of the *iurodivyi* and of the trickster, authorial voices gave birth to themselves, in other words constructed their own adult authorial identity. These texts, through playfulness, constitute a discourse on adults and adulthood.

My reading of this process of construction of identity through references to *durachestvo* puts emphasis on socio-historical and cultural factors. After discussing the socio-cultural context that characterized Russia between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, I demonstrated that children's authors, including a group of young writers, poets, illustrators and journalists, felt strongly committed to improving children's conditions and constructing a new, non-authoritarian,

culture through literature. This, however, posed serious problems of identity for them, since it was necessary to deal with the fear of belonging to a culture of indifference and oppression.

I interpreted references to the figure of the *chudak* in children's texts written in the 1990s as a search for an authorial identity whose main features were innocence and sensibility, or, in other words, non-participation and commitment. These ideals defined a specific approach to the time these authors were living through, in terms of absence (innocence, non-participation in social evil) and presence (commitment and sensibility).

I detected in Grigorii Oster's *Bad Advice* a carnivalistic representation in which the authorial voice defines himself as a capable pedagogue and a moral leader, able to convey new values, centred on ideals of inner freedom, both to adults and children. The authorial voice of this set of books employs the language of the *iurodivyi*. However, when, at the end of the third collection of verses, the authorial voice embraces the *podvig*, which is at the heart of the *iurodivyi*'s code, and confesses he is part of the violent world children should defend themselves against, the carnival comes to an end. I demonstrated how the later collections of *Bad Advice* are characterized by the same tension between the wish to subvert an oppressive cultural system and the fear of belonging to a generation who perpetuates violence. The belt, the most frequent image both in the texts and in the illustrations of *Bad Advice*, is the symbol of this tension.

In my analysis of the texts written in the 1990s, I confirm a view expressed by other scholars and critics, according to which by means of playfulness children's writers of the late perestroika period tried to cheer up children, who were experiencing dire conditions. However, the texts I have

discussed demonstrate that the child reader that these books construct possesses the means for restoring happiness within him- or herself. Authors' role is to stimulate children's innate tendency to jolliness. As the socio-economic conditions worsened, however, adults found themselves in an existential labyrinth which they tried to escape by relying on the imagined happy child, on children's supposed capacity to endure any violence by virtue of their inner invulnerability, expressed by their joyful nature. The texts discussed in the thesis reveal that, in the 1990s, the focus of playful children's texts shifted from the need to help children, once the myth of the happy childhood had been seriously challenged, to the need to rescue adults by means of the happy child, a myth which persisted, in spite of all. However, it should be noted that in both cases, through these texts adults explored and exposed their anxieties and weakness.

The texts published in the 2000s reveal the same search for an adult authorial identity able to assume an effective pedagogical function. A central passage of my discussion concerns the discourse on family values and on adults as providers of care. From the mid-1990s, this discourse became predominant in Russia. Drawing on Oushakine's view of the post-Soviet development of *steb*, I defined the discourse on kinship as the new sacred symbolic material which stimulates this form of humour. I read Artur Givargizov's short stories marketed for children as texts in which old and recent pieces of humour akin to *steb* merge together. This specific humorous aesthetics attributes a layer of vulgarity and harshness to sacred categories of the present and of the past, attacking the Soviet discourse, the reliability of adults and the innocence of children. The result is a world in which adults are

no longer adults and children no longer children, and in which the Soviet past and the present of Russia merge together.

The inhabitant of this liminal environment is the trickster. This figure is not only a boundary crosser, but also the creator of a new boundary. Through this figure, the authorial voices of the books under discussion (including Nusinova's *The Adventures of Dzherik*) place themselves in a liminal fictional world and re-process their identity, establishing a new boundary between adults and children, the Soviet and the post-Soviet worlds.

Ultimately, in Russian children's literature between 1990 and 2000 playfulness offered authorial voices an open field in which definitions of children and adults could be worked out over and over again. These books are spaces for a negotiation of agency; they are a 'territory of conflicts', personal, textual, and social.¹ Children's authors are always involved in this negotiation of agency both as adults and as intellectuals. Russia in the post-perestroika period, which put truth-telling at the centre of public debate and of artistic activity, is the context in which this two-fold commitment on the part of children's authors occurred at the highest degree.

Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin maintain that, with the collapse of the Soviet system, Russian intellectuals were confronted with a situation which can be summarised in the sentence: 'Hic Rhodus, hic salta'.² Prove what you can do, here and now. In other words, once they were free from ideological impositions, it was now time to demonstrate that they were able to represent a concrete source of guidance for the disoriented masses. This principle can be

¹ I borrowed the expression 'territory of conflicts' from the title of a forthcoming international conference on children's literature which will take place in Russia: 'Children's Literature as a Territory of Conflicts: Texts, Personalities and Institutions'. The conference will be held at the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) in St Petersburg, in June 2014.

² 'Bez napriazheniia...', p. 244.

applied to the condition of adults as providers of education and care for children, after decades in which the State had established the official guidelines, besides offering financial support. It was now time to demonstrate that adults were independent and capable educators.

The pedagogical instinct underpinning children's literature has induced a number of Russian authors whose work has been debated here to ask not whether literature is a way of representing a truth, but whether truth ultimately discredits the intellectual who professes it. The truth that the key texts discussed in this thesis addressed is, indeed, that both pedagogy and intellectual activity, the re-creation of culture following the collapse of outmoded cultural systems, can turn into painful processes for all the subjects involved, adults and children, teachers and learners. Stating this principle leads towards different blind alleys. The children's author may declare his harmful potential for the child reader, as in the case of *Bad Advice*, or may feel threatened by the deconstruction of his intellectual and pedagogical agency and turn to authoritarian approaches to the child reader. The reprocessing of the identities of the adult and of the child, which I see as the core of Givargizov's and, to some extent, Nusinova's works, stems from the need to leave this blind alley.

The exposure of the author's self in a playful mode, which can be observed in many of the primary sources debated here, appears to be part of a broad vocation for truth-telling, but also of a search for a new position of the authorial self. The burden of ideology, of collective values imposed for decades through, among other means, children's fiction, had accounted for strategies of 'masking', the so-called Aesopian codification, on the part of children's authors. The new times required the pursuit of new forms. Whilst doing this, some authors decided to appear in order to be able to disappear; to expose

themselves in order for the pact of trust between author and child reader to be renewed on a qualitatively higher level. Indeed, the choice of self-exposure seems to reinforce the authors' responsibility towards readers by making overt the personal, subjective point of view, and emphasising the here and now.

After exposing themselves and their inner conflicts, some of which were particularly tragic, these authors have carried on writing for children. In this thesis, I have maintained that playfulness had a role in this regeneration of the narrative agency. Playfulness served as a space in which authors had the possibility of exploring their role in a time of transition without getting completely lost before the collapse of outmoded systems of values. Play, as Sutton-Smith points out, often functions as a safe boundary allowing the exploration of disorder.

In the last decade, the position of children's authors towards their readership has been further complicated by the generational gap separating adults with a Soviet background from children. In the novel *Moon Tiger*, by British author Penelope Lively, Claudia, the main character, describes children as inhabitants of another world who are among us, 'like aborigines, like Minoans, people from elsewhere safe in their own time-capsule'.³ Some of the Russian texts discussed in this thesis, on the other hand, convey the sense of an authorial self who feels prisoner of a time-capsule, and is at pains to leave it, turning to narratives which cross the boundaries of time, age, and culture. These narratives ultimately aim to establish a dialogue with today's child readership, and with adults who came of age during the Soviet period.

As I hope this thesis has demonstrated, beyond their ludic surface, these works for children express tensions, doubts and anxieties experienced by

³ Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 43.

Russian children's authors since perestroika. These tensions, doubts and anxieties can be ascribed to the act itself of addressing a child, who represents the possibility for adults of affirming their power and worldview, and, at the same time, a mirror of their fragility.

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4. Interviews

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