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On the Evasive Effectiveness of the Literary Novel

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> *"Nothing endures, except for disgrace." — Venedikt Yerofeyev*
> The fundamental tension in contemporary literature lies not between subject matters or styles, but in how a novel functions in relation to reality. What makes a novel effective is not what it describes but what it performs. Those novels that merely comment on our zeitgeist remain ultimately inert and represent nothing but creative nonfiction masquerading as literature. They may skilfully and engagingly describe our social conditions, relationships, or cultural anxieties, etm. but fail to create new realities or break open existing ones. Any story that can be reduced to a formula is ultimately a failure—it is digestible, reducible, safe; if you can summarise a literary novel as "In the very nostalgia-inducing decade (10 years ago), X and Y navigate their relationship while dealing with Z," it has already failed its purpose.

There is a crucial difference between urgency and importance in literature. I thought, perhaps wrongly, that literature's task is to transcend topicality and create something timeless, while pure topicality

remains a domain of journalism, news, or social media. Don't most of the great works of literature explore "timeless" themes, perhaps through the lens of topicality using it as an entry point, a gateway, rather than chasing topicality for the sake of it? When we examine those literary works that have endured through centuries, be it "Odyssey" or "Crime and Punishment", we find not "meticulous documentation of contemporary issues" (ewwww), but performances of universal experiences that transcend their historical cages.

The accelerating pace of technological change complicates this tension further because "cutting-edge" turns into merely an aesthetic. By the time a novel addressing "cutting-edge" technology reaches readers, that technology has often already been superseded, rendering the work instantly dated and only tapping into nostalgia unless it has tapped into more timeless concerns. The great literary novels that were primarily topical in their time. Those that were and survived are often just lucky ones among thousands that were forgotten because they couldn't transcend that very topicality.

This doesn't mean novels should avoid "contemporary themes", not at all, rather, the opposite—they must transform them on the page. If I need a good piece on whatever's wrong with the world right now, I'll look for high-quality journalism, an essay, a non-fiction book, a documentary, Substack "Home" feed, or other sources. What matters is not the subject but whether it creates something unique or merely signals literary respectability.

I don't see "lost literary effectiveness", "dry masturbation to 19th century novel", or "male novelists dissolving in acid in dark basements" in Russian context, none of it—they simple don't exist there. These questions aren't appealing to me and always cause frustration, not even because of the nature of my own opinion on the premise but because it feels so alien and unnecessary to me so I genuinely don't understand why they get so much attention. In modern Russia itself, the literary scene is different, due to state oppression, lack of time to turn literature in the industry, "literary tradition" itself, or perhaps other factors. I bring up Russia here now not because I'm Russian but because often in the aforementioned discourses it's also brought up, not the real, present Russia, but an image of Russia 120-150 years ago, Russian Empire, in fact, when it wasn't so much different from the rest of the West, and where some of the best novels were created.

Russian 19th century novel is often used as a reference point to how literature should be done, which is paradoxical and juicily ironic, because Russian literary tradition itself doesn't agree with such notion.

First question is, why is only Russian social realism novel of the late 19th century so popular in the West among so vast and bewildering pantheon of Russian literature? Brodsky in his Nobel lecture answered the question eloquently:

> I would like to add that it would make sense to regard the Russian experience as a warning, if for no other reason than that the social structure of the West up to now is, on the whole,

> analogous to what existed in Russia prior to 1917. (This, by the way, is what explains the popularity in the West of the Nineteenth-Century Russian psychological novel, and the relative lack of success of contemporary Russian prose. The social relations that emerged in Russia in the Twentieth Century presumably seem no less exotic to the reader than do the names of the characters, which prevent him from identifying with them.) For example, the number of political parties, on the eve of the October coup in 1917, was no fewer than what we find today in the United States or Britain. In other words, a dispassionate observer might remark that in a certain sense the Nineteenth Century is still going on in the West, while in Russia it came to an end; and if I say it ended in tragedy, this is, in the first place, because of the size of the human toll taken in course of that social – or chronological – change. For in a real tragedy, it is not the hero who perishes; it is the chorus." The second question is, is contemporary Russian literature, and a novel in particular, still "effective", at least in its cultural impact, at least within the country?

I'd argue that in Russia itself, despite (or perhaps because of) state oppression and censorship, over the years and now, literature maintains its effectiveness as a cultural (and political) force.

There are many literary writers in Russia who are "celebrities" and "thought leaders" whom people expect to provide explanations for

complex social and political realities. It's true both for the authors from the past, from whom we still continue learning, and our contemporaries. To be clear, when I say "contemporary Russian literature" I only refer to the opposition literature because that's the only literature that matters—literature of compliance to whatever might demand that compliance it isn't literature but a pile of stinking shite.

The anti-war movement particularly looks to writers from all epochs to answer the eternal Russian questions: "Who's to blame? What has to be done?" Like other dissidents, modern Russian writers, including Sorokin, Glukhovsky, Ulitskaya, Shishkin and others, mostly those who left Russia for obvious reasons, are invited to interviews and hold lectures and events about their work and the situation in Russia.

Putin's government still considers writers dangerous enough to cover many names and titles with black paper in bookshops and libraries, or to ban works outright. This censorship, paradoxically, confirms the continued effectiveness of the novel in this cultural context—books that have lost their power to affect reality are rarely banned. So, both the public and the government see the novel as either a source of hope and understanding or source of fear and danger.

This contrast shows how the novel's effectiveness depends partly on its social function. The socially-significant novels of the 19th century, whether by Dostoevsky or Dickens, were significant because there was no other way to learn about the subjects or particular opinions on those subjects discussed in those books. Before that time, nobody was writing

about killers, prostitutes, nihilists, or poor children—what we might broadly call social realism. These topics weren't covered by the press for at least two reasons: censorship and taboo. Many writers, in Russia especially, including famous philosophers of that time, turned to fiction to discuss socially significant topics they weren't allowed to address directly. When certain ideas or perspectives become difficult to express directly, fiction provides a safer space for exploration. As someone acutely noted, this explains why there are more famous Russian writers than Russian philosophers.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, many taboos have lifted, and state and media censorship has changed along with media itself. Now, you can read, watch, or find information on almost any socially significant topic. You're also free to write about it—of course, not on any platform or in any country, but you can still find underground outlets, especially in the internet age. Non-fiction, both professional and amateur, now covers many socially significant topics. Writing a fiction novel about these issues won't surprise an average person as it once did. The novel no longer holds a monopoly on social exposure, which fundamentally changes its relationship to social significance.

Russian literature maintained its effectiveness because a Russian writer—and I'd argue a writer from any, either chronically or temporarily, oppressed society—understands what the Trü[1] literature is for. Historically, Russian literary tradition developed as negation of itself, and those who tried to "continue" that tradition often had no relation to it whatsoever. The greatness of the Russian 19th century

novel emerged not from following tradition but from transforming it with a repeating pattern of some sort of a self-negation both as the reaction to the past forms of predecessors and to the present forms of contemporaries, be it Tolstoy vs Chekhov, Dostoevsky vs. Turgenev, or later Futurists vs Classics, Soviet Realism vs Dissident Literature and so on, be it aesthetic or ideological opposition. There's no and never been any methodological continuity in literature; thinking otherwise is the greatest delusion a writer can fall into.

As Mikhail Shishkin, a contemporary Russian novelist, an active opponent of Putin's regime, said (his quote I keep quoting), "Russian literature is not merely a form of language's existence, but a means for non-totalitarian consciousness to persist in Russia. It has wedged itself into the fissure between a bark of command and a groan of suffering. Its language is a defence, an islet of words upon which human dignity must be preserved. This is my struggle, my war." Thus is always has been over the years, regardless of the degree of censorship employed at any given moment in the country. That doesn't all literature must be political to be effective, not at all; for me, broadly, it means that all literature is a form of free, unshackled consciousness, free, unabridged expression that, to stay effective, must look not for continuation or imitation of the past forms but to creation of new forms to say something that cannot be said any other way, either because the ways are closed or no such ways exist yet. The only realism I demand from literature is realism of emotional Trüth.

We should remember that a novel, and literature overall, is a living and

breathing entity that has been changing over time since it was invented. What appears traditional to us now was innovative and revolutionary in its time, even things we considered unattainable attributes of a good novel like psychological depth. We should seek for inspiration in the great works of the past and don't mistake them for a template. Such that a true heir to, for example, Tolstoy or Austen wouldn't write like Tolstoy or Austen—he or she would risk like them, innovate like them. The reverence for past forms mistakes the vessel for the spirit, marbleising what was once alive.

To address the new challenges individual or society are facing and to stay effective, a novel cannot rely only on conventional forms that once worked well for a good dozen of books a century ago. You can't remain formally conservative attempting to be topically cutting-edge. While describing a supersonic jet using a horse as a metaphor might be an interesting exercise, it fundamentally mismatches form and content in a way that undermines that desirable effectiveness. In fact, we should get rid of the term avant-garde and take what it encompasses as default and standard; then we can start calling everything else the arrière-garde it is.

The opposing view typically argues that experimental literature sacrifices emotional resonance and accessibility for technical innovation, which is reductive and historically incorrect. The most powerful works of literature often emerge precisely from formal risk-taking, not despite it. This doesn't mean every experimental work succeeds by definition; most fail spectacularly (as they should), but the conventional "well-crafted" novel rarely fails interestingly enough to advance

literature itself and keep it living rather than merely persisting. The emotional resonance that emerges from new structures is ultimately more powerful, more genuine, and grants readers that new experience they long for.

If we take the avant-garde approach as standard rather than exceptional, much of what passes for contemporary "literary fiction" reveals itself as backward-looking in its adherence to conventional forms and structures. Trü literary innovation requires risk on many levels, from linguistic experimentation to narrative structure to the fundamental relationship between text and reader. Trü literature is about taking risks, Trü literature is about being comfortable with never becoming topical, absurdly comfortable. Trü literature is to have the courage to do something useless, useless in its uselessness, not just to do something while doing nothing, thereby wasting time without expecting usefulness for yourself, for your family, for society, for the "economy," for anything, but to spend this time obsessively, religiously, with effort doing something that might be the only thing you will ever be able to bring into the world, while acknowledging that nobody might even look at it. The willingness to create without guarantees of reception or utility distinguishes literature from other forms of writing. Only thus it can be effective.

However, for the sake of being pragmatic, I won't advocate for the most unhinged and unconventional stylistic techniques and ascend into pure avant-garde madness, I would, for myself, in certain cases, but normally everyone should decide on their own degree of unhingedness, the degree

demanded by the literary piece itself to succeed on its own terms.

I could advocate for accessibility, commercial viability, craft, tradition, etm. but it would be a mistake and misunderstand of what literature is for. If literature's purpose were mass communication, journalism would do it better. If its purpose were entertainment, TikTok would beat it. If its purpose were documenting contemporary life, we could replace it with photography or film. Literature persists because it does what no other medium can: it performs consciousness itself on the page, creates a new version of subjective reality in addition or instead of simply reflecting it like a mirror.

The future of the novel may lie not in its ability to keep pace with technological change or compete with other media forms for topical relevance, but in its unique capacity to perform something that cannot be performed elsewhere, to create spaces where the otherwise unspeakable can be articulated, where reality can be broken open and reassembled, and where complex reality and human experience resist reduction to a simple formula.

Notes

1. Russian spelling of English-borrowed "true" is "труъ". Although that last letter isn't necessary, the hard sign (ъ) in "труъ" is a distinctive feature of Russian internet slang where adding this letter gives borrowed words like "true" an exaggerated intensity and authenticity. Originating primarily in metal music subcultures, especially among black metal enthusiasts ("True Norwegian Black Metal"), the ъ-suffix evolved to signify something as absolutely

authentic, canonical, or hardcore. Thus the word “труъ” aims to designate elitism and canonicity—not just precision of forms, but also… the authentic essence of any object, phenomenon or creative act. Though initially earnest in black metal circles where fans distinguished between “true” black metal and “posers,” it has now spread throughout Russian internet culture, often used ironically to highlight excessive pretentiousness while simultaneously signifying something as intensely authentic or extreme. I suggest to spell English “true” and “truth” with an umlaut to achieve the same effect.

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