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The post-Soviet Bildungsroman

How is a post-Soviet young adult's development portrayed
in fictional novels?

MA Russian and Eurasian Studies

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Research Question: How is a post-Soviet young adult's development portrayed in fictional novels?

1. Introduction

Young adult fiction in the form of the “coming-of-age” novel or Bildungsroman offers a prototype of a “stereotypical” journey to adulthood and maturity. Youth novels typically offer a blueprint for a possible way to resolve conflict within oneself, society or family and to leave on a voyage of discovery, before returning to one’s homeland to accept assimilation to society. The Bildungsroman has roots in Western and Soviet literature, highlighting why both must first be explored before assessing how a post-Soviet adult’s life began to be portrayed by authors following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Professor of culture Anastasia Sadrieva argues that a Bildungsroman acts as an educational novel, emitting certain cultural values and is traditionally read by the younger generation, having a formative impact upon them.¹ A youth novel provides representations of cultural norms, social norms and common practices of the particular era it depicts. The Soviet Union deployed historical narratives that were central to creating and manipulating the identities of Soviet civilians,² promoting the Party and Soviet ideals even in Bildungsroman. This was reflected in socialist realist novels and literature: highly rigid texts that included the necessary cultural symbols to instill a particular ideology in the nation.³ The Socialist Bildungsroman was often used by authors in order to come to terms with ideological struggles.⁴ However, ideological changes to adapt to the socialist regime are contrasted with the loss of ideology and grounding in a country that young people faced following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991, state ideology and norms began to unravel, disorienting changes which undoubtedly caused Russians to question who they were and in which direction they were heading.⁵ Thus, both collective and individual identities needed to develop in the 1990s and

¹ Sadrieva, ‘Transformataniia Zapadnoevropeiskogo Romana Vospitaniia v Kul’turnom Kontekste Sovremennosti’ (Ekaterinberg, Ural’skii gosudarstvennyi universitet im. A. M. Gor’kogo, 2007), <https://elar.urfu.ru/bitstream/10995/1669/1/urgu0523s.pdf>.

² Viktor Solonari, ‘Creating a “People”: A Case Study in Post-Soviet History-Writing’, ..” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 2 (2003): 411–420.

³ Ibid, 411

⁴ Benjamin Kohlmann, ‘Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist Bildungsroman’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* Vol.48, no. 2 (2015): p.167-189.

⁵ Irina Souch, ‘Tales of Russianness: Post-Soviet Identity Formation in Popular Film and Television.’ (University of Amsterdam, 2015), <https://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.476138>. 3.

early 2000s. As doctor of Slavic literature Sander Brouwer notes, an acute sense of cultural and political transformation prevailed in the 1990s.⁶ Following a feeling of national humiliation and dislocation, often fascinations with Russian empire and might prevail even in fictional literature.⁷ The post-Soviet Bildungsroman would struggle to establish identities and characters in a place that has experienced so much cultural and political transformation.⁸ According to Professor of Russian literature, Maria Alekseeva, in post-Soviet Russia, the modern world is depicted as a world for adults, in which a lost child desperately seeks moral support.⁹ Therefore, the relevance of the post-Soviet Bildungsroman is clear due to the profound changes that have occurred in Russia in recent years, conveying a loss of a sense of deep rootedness in culture,¹⁰ which may be reflected in youth novels.

The following literature review will examine the Western and Soviet tradition of the Bildungsroman, recycling Soviet symbols in the modern-day youth novel and the current ideological void in post-Soviet Russia. The following chapters will examine four post-Soviet Bildungsroman in chronological order, starting with Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra* (1991), Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* (2000), Zakhar Prilepin's *Sankya* (2006) and Sergey Lebedev's *The Year of the Comet* (2014). The first two texts contain features of the postmodernist literary trend, whilst the two latter are neo-realist, genres this literature review shall go into more detail on. In each chapter, the texts' plots and classical Bildungsroman features shall be examined. Following on from this, the re-use of Soviet symbols and assigning of their new meanings in the texts shall be examined, as shall the ideological void or metanarrative presented. A conclusion comparing the texts' protagonists, settings and character's ideologies is contained at the end of this thesis, to hopefully offer an answer to how a post-Soviet young adult's development can look in fictional Russian literature.

⁶ Sander Brouwer, 'Re-entering Memory: Viktor Erofeev's *The Good Stalin*', *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* Sonderband 78 (2010): 409–20.

⁷ Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-59363-4. 2-5.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Maria .A Alekseeva, 'Roman Vospitaniia v Sovremennoĭ Proze', 2012, <https://elar.urfu.ru/bitstream/10995/20376/1/dc2-2011-03.pdf>.

¹⁰ Sadrieva, 'Transformatsiia Zapadnoevropeiskogo Romana Vospitaniia v Kul'turnom Kontekste Sovremennosti'.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Western tradition and history of Bildungsroman

In order to examine a post-Soviet young adult's development in a coming-of-age novel, the tradition and trajectory of the Bildungsroman must first be examined. Different terms are often applied to a coming-of-age novel, such as Bildungsroman, a novel of formation or a novel of initiation and education.¹¹ Moretti offers an in-depth analysis of the Western Bildungsroman, seen as a response to modernity where youth was traditionally seen as the most meaningful part of life.¹² The concept of Bildung traditionally focuses on the idea of man having the image (Bild) of God in his soul, who he is made in the image of, and he must thus nurture this sense of his identity.¹³ A Bildungsroman thus offers a role model to follow, depicts a particular hero, has a certain structure and portrays particular motifs. Moretti focuses on European culture and the tradition of the Bildungsroman as "birthed" by von Goethe in Wilhelm's Meister in 1795-6.¹⁴ This literary trend portrays a protagonist's place of origin, with them travelling on a necessary discovery of exploration to give rise to new hopes and spiritual enlightenment. Moretti argues that typically a Western Bildungsroman's historical meaning implies finding comfort in civilization.¹⁵ Whilst Bildungsroman can take many forms, Moretti focuses on plot differences, which embody the different ways plots generate meaning. Within the European Bildungsroman, events acquire meaning only if they lead to one marked ending or if a story acquires meaning through its narration and open-endedness. Bildungsromans follow the classic logic that life is meaningful only if it has expanding connections with the outside world and with humans. Thus, man is only himself if he exists for the whole.¹⁶ Time has to be used resourcefully to find a homeland in these novels, and if this is not done, time has been wasted.¹⁷ The typical plot of a Western Bildungsroman would follow a young

¹¹ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987). 15.

¹² Ibid, 3.

¹³ Pieret Peiker, 'Entangled Discourses in a Bildungsroman of Soviet Estonian Modernity: From an Ugly Duckling to Gagarin's Space Princess?', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 51:3 (2020): 392, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1080/01629778.2020.1779095>.

¹⁴ Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*.

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. 17.

¹⁷ Ibid, 19.

protagonist leaving home and feature conflict between generations, yet after travel and experience, he reconciles with society.¹⁸

Prior to Moretti on the Western Bildungsroman and Clarke writing on the Soviet youth novel, Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin also spoke extensively on the novel of development and education, with reference also to Western Bildungsroman¹⁹. Bakhtin describes various possible types of Bildungsroman, with the first depicting a typical journey through life in a biographical sense, transitioning through love, marriage, children and death all in the protagonist's birthplace or homeland.²⁰ Other types of Bildungsroman include life acting as a school or educational process, the theme of a protagonist going through a series of trials and tribulations to adulthood (common in the West) or a novel of wanderings, where a protagonist's journeys lead him enlightenment²¹. Bakhtin will not feature too heavily in this literature review, as my main focus will be to establish how the post-Soviet Bildungsroman differs or emulates its Soviet counterpart, yet he will be useful in categorizing post-Soviet young adults' novels in the following case study chapters. Together, Moretti and Bakhtin offer an overview of typical patterns in the coming-of-age novel.

1.1.2. Symbolism in Western Bildungsroman

Within the Western Bildungsroman, certain symbols are central and repeated. In the Western trajectory, symbolism in Bildungsroman grew out of allegory in the eighteenth century, with all symbolism being seen to point to God in literature.²² This makes the "Bildung" process religious, in which all humans are seen to grow in the image of God as they transition to adulthood. Moretti stresses that in Europe, symbolism of youth was the most important feature of the Bildungsroman, as youth symbolized education and modernity.²³ With people

¹⁸ Peiker, 'Entangled Discourses in a Bildungsroman of Soviet Estonian Modernity: From an Ugly Duckling to Gagarin's Space Princess?', 392.

¹⁹ Mikail Bakhtin, *Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma* (Эстетика словесного творчества, 1979).

²⁰ T. N. Tokareva, 'TRADITSII ROMANA VOSPITANIIA V SOVETSKOĬ LITERATURE' (Voronezhskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2011).

²¹ Bakhtin, *Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma*.

²² Gordon E Bigelow, *The Poet's Third Eye* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1976).

²³ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987). 15.

beginning to leave the countryside and move to cities in the early nineteenth century, justifying the world of work and assimilation to city society could be done through the Bildungsroman. The process of moving to the city is legitimized by conveying a quest for answers which results in growth and enlightenment.²⁴ The European Bildungsroman also emphasizes the growing influence of education, in which different generations are strengthened through a mentoring relationship. Thus, a protagonist's youth and education as major symbols were combined with the successful "Bildung" in which a character at the end of the novel is less at odds with the world and blends harmoniously into society.²⁵ Symbolism such as youth will be important when examining the post-Soviet Bildungsroman case studies, as more Western symbolism such as growing in the image of God may be conveyed after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

1.2. The Soviet Bildungsroman: roots and development

In addition to Bakhtin and Moretti, Professor of Slavic literature Katerina Clark notes that the youth novel appeared formally in 1956 in Soviet Russia, yet it also had origins in earlier socialist realism.²⁶ Certain elements of earlier socialist realism were reflected in the Soviet youth novel of the 1950s, such as achieving social integration remaining a huge part of the plot. Other elements of the youth novel were also prevalent in high Stalinist literature, such as a rite of passage and initiation to society and a resolving of tension of spontaneity to consciousness.²⁷ However, the youth novel remained different to classic socialist realism, as novels featured an extremely young protagonist.²⁸ Kohlmann echoes this sentiment, noting that the Bildungsroman has roots from 1925 socialist literature (such as in *Cement* by Fyodor Gladkov, 1925) and is evident until the 1980s in Socialist literature, despite its official formation being in the 1950s.²⁹ He notes that the socialist Bildungsroman has remained hidden from view until the 1950s, largely as the master narrative of communism was so well intertwined with the overall aesthetic of socialist

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel* (Chicago 60637: University of Chicago Press, 1981). 226.

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Otto Boele, "'The Soviet Abroad (That We Lost)': The Fate of Vasilii Aksenov's Cult Novel A Starry Ticket on Paper and on Screen', in *Border Crossing, Russian Literature into Film*, Edited by Alexander Burry and Frederick H. White (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 223–37.

²⁹ Kohlmann, 'Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist Bildungsroman'.

realism,³⁰ making a journey to maturity difficult to separate from general Party rhetoric. This background conveys that both Soviet and Western Bildungsroman employed the narrative of finding comfort in civilization, despite the Western narrative developing to endorse modernity and capitalism and the other to consolidate the Party's regime.

Clark reflects Moretti's statement that integration with society is sought in a typical Soviet coming-of-age novel, noting that in Stalinist literature a mentor figure (typically a Party member) was commonly associated with this and seen to guide youth to maturity.³¹ A hero would then set off on his quest, searching for consciousness and achieving his goal. Social integration was depicted in high Stalinist literature as a tribal initiation, in which an older and more conscious figure would guide a youth through trials before being initiated into manhood status and becoming a member of the tribe.³² This hero typically leaves his hometown or featured separation from the environment he knows best, before undergoing the testing ground of the new location and the rite of incorporation to the tribe is shown at the end of the novel. This plot continued in typical youth novels of the 1950s, in which a rite of passage and social integration were achieved.³³ The hero of these Soviet youth novels is typically a teenager who has just left high school, who is troubled by the world around him and his integration into society. Thus, his trip away from home allows his progression to be triggered whilst he is guided by an older figure. This is somewhat prevalent in parody of the Soviet youth novel, Aksenov's *Ticket to the Stars* (1962) when our protagonist leaves Moscow and is guided by his older brother through life. However, with the protagonist's mentor figure dying and our protagonist moving further West to Estonia rather than further into Russia, he overall fails to achieve political consciousness and ignites a further generational divide.³⁴ This conveys a failed Bildung, a theme returned to at the end of this literature review and prevalent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in texts.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 161.

³² Ibid, 167.

³³ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 226

³⁴ Boele, "'The Soviet Abroad (That We Lost)': The Fate of Vasilii Aksenov's Cult Novel A Starry Ticket on Paper and on Screen'.

1.2.1. Symbolism in Soviet Bildungsroman

An important feature in the Soviet youth novel was symbolism, with novels after 1917 depicting action-oriented heroes, who remained key figures for many years in Soviet literature. This developed into a protagonist likened to the mythical man of moral epics, the bogatyr.³⁵ This bogatyr was a warrior-like person, captivating local workers and having inexhaustible revolutionary fervor. In addition to figures such as the bogatyr, authors had to translate history into symbolism in the 1930s, including the myth of the great family and a Marxist-Leninist account of history.³⁶ Thus, we would expect to see cohesion to society as the “great family” and an adherence to Marxist-Leninist symbols. Following on from strong Party symbols, in the 1950s a more unique approach to people as individuals began to emerge, taking some emphasis from the Party.³⁷ In 1957, as Sputnik was launched, there was a surge in national pride in the Soviet Union. In relation to Sputnik, symbols such as the heights of skies and stars as motifs emerged,³⁸ evident in some ways in the fitting title a *Ticket to the Stars*³⁹ in 1962. Gagarin and astronauts remained a primary symbol and role model for youth in literature, with the development of planes and spacecrafts emerging as other prominent themes in Bildungsroman.⁴⁰ Symbols such as the bogatyr and space can be re-examined in post-Soviet novels to see if there is any recycling of these typically Soviet symbols or move of a move to Western allegory, in which protagonists are likened to God. The meaning of Soviet symbols shall be examined in post-Soviet texts to see if there has been any shift in the symbols’ meaning, as shall next be discussed.

³⁵ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 73

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 226

³⁸ Clark. 74

³⁹ Vasili Aksenov, *A Starry Ticket* (London: Putnam & Co. Ltd., 1962).

⁴⁰ Peiker, ‘Entangled Discourses in a Bildungsroman of Soviet Estonian Modernity: From an Ugly Duckling to Gagarin’s Space Princess?’

1.3. Re-using Soviet and Western Symbols

In order to analyse and revisit Soviet symbols in post-Soviet Russian Bildungsroman, I will use Oushakine's theory on "retrofitting the Soviet past"⁴¹ to assess if Soviet symbols are given new meanings. Oushakine offers a theory on symbols that argues that we know certain Soviet existing terminology, such as "bogatyр", but words such as these have lost their meaning in our modern world and we do not understand them as we did before⁴². However, in order to explain our reality around us, we have to limit ourselves to existing words that feel familiar to us. Within these words and terminology, nostalgia begins to become prominent in making clear the legacy of the previous period, such as Soviet Russia today. Thus, in post-Soviet Russia, a rehabilitation of the Soviet aesthetic has begun. The familiarity of the old Soviet form or symbol being used here is crucial, whilst it is supported or connected to new concepts. Nostalgic borrowing matches a meaning (signified) with a new form (signifier).⁴³ This is due to the lack of post-Soviet signs to explain new situations, thus old Soviet signs are re-used yet given new meanings, which we may expect to see in some post-Soviet Bildungsroman.

Oushakine expands this theory on borrowed signs and shifting signifiers to note that mimicking has become an act taken very seriously in post-Soviet Russia. Within mimicking, near identical symbols and visual doubling obscures the messages of former Soviet symbols.⁴⁴ An example in post-Soviet Russia would be the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, where copies of various Western art and statues sit, such as the exact plaster cast replica of Michelangelo's *David*.⁴⁵ The attention to detail in replicating these results in an "appropriation of a historical symbol."⁴⁶ Thus, borrowed signs from the past, whether Western or Soviet, become the main means of communication in post-Soviet Russia, offering both familiarity and conveying a lack of language to explain current, modern

⁴¹ Serguei Alex Oushakine, "We're Nostalgic but We're Not Crazy": Retrofitting the Past in Russia., *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 66, no. 3 (2007): 451–82.

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ Oushakine, "We're Nostalgic but We're Not Crazy": Retrofitting the Past in Russia.' 457

⁴⁴ Oushakine. 483.

⁴⁵ Pushkin Museum, 'TSVETAEV COLLECTION OF PLASTER CAST REPRODUCTIONS', 2021, https://pushkinmuseum.art/exposition_collection/collections/casts/index.php?lang=en.

⁴⁶ Oushakine, "We're Nostalgic but We're Not Crazy": Retrofitting the Past in Russia.' 467

situations.⁴⁷ In the post-Soviet Bildungsroman, it will thus be interesting to assess if Soviet symbols typical of the Soviet youth novel such as the bogatyr and spacemen are “mimicked” and if so, what new meaning they may possibly have been given. This will be examined in my four chosen case studies in more detail, as symbols were such a key part of the Soviet youth novel to see what shifting symbols appear after the collapse of the Soviet Union and how a young adult’s development can now be symbolized.

1.4. History of ideological void: background

With a lack of new post-Soviet symbols being apparent in post-Soviet Russia, the lack of the communist metanarrative is also prevalent there and will be examined in the following case studies, as it was previously central to the Soviet youth novel. According to Lyotard, metanarratives are used to legitimize knowledge.⁴⁸ Metanarratives are a mode of storytelling, almost allegorical in giving us a theoretical framework for the world.⁴⁹ Decision makers, such as government bodies, decide these narratives and allocate them to our lives to grow power.⁵⁰ Metanarratives are narratives that offer historical meanings and urge us to complete an overall master idea. Christianity is a Lyotardian metanarrative, prevalent in European Bildungsroman in explaining why we do what we do, for example, our development is rationalized as we grow in the image of God. Within the Soviet Union, the clearest metanarrative used would be communism. Within the Soviet youth novel, communism and anti-capitalism were justified through the promotion of the greater family and family of nations; in which protagonists would compromise their own happiness and success for that of a nation⁵¹. Budryte argues that nearly all metanarratives have their roots in traumatic events and involve large scale force, such as wars⁵². During the Soviet Union, communism was initially legitimized using the 1917 revolution and civil

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Volume IO, vol. Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ Chen Houliang, ‘Constructing Postmodernism with Incredulity to Metanarrative: A Comparative Perspective on McHale’s and Hutcheon’s Postmodern Poetics’, *Neohelicon* 42 (2015): 283–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-014-0252-y>.

⁵⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

⁵¹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*.

⁵² Dovile Budryte, ‘Experiences of Collective Trauma and Political Activism: A Study of Women “Agents of Memory” in Post-Soviet Lithuania’, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2010): 331–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2010.498191>.

war, before replacing this with the Great Patriotic war to legitimize communism under Stalin.⁵³ The main aim of metanarratives as such is to establish a clear historical narrative and identify victims and villains.⁵⁴ Lyotard argues that some people criticize the breaking up of metanarratives, as it makes everyone individual.⁵⁵ Thus, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the legitimizing function of the Soviet Union was lost, leaving everyone with the potential to identify for themselves the victims and villains of the regime.

1.4.1. Breakdown of Soviet metanarrative

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the explanation of the world as every Russian knew it collapsed. As narratives are typically handed down through generations, the destruction or dissolution of a metanarrative leaves people at a loss of how to define or explain their lives. Gill, in writing on the Soviet and post-Soviet metanarrative's importance, notes how the collapse of the USSR left an ideological vacuum.⁵⁶ The image of the USSR as a superpower after its dissolution was tarnished and any attempts to move closer to the West were seen as signs of weakness in the 1990s (bar in liberal thought). Initially, no main metanarrative gained dominance in post-Soviet Russia, before in later years nationalism began to be promoted under Putin's Kremlin.⁵⁷ The Soviet youth novel was a tool to legitimize communism and the Soviet regime, for example in plots conveying moving to Siberia to work on a construction site as a form of acceptance to society and fulfilment.⁵⁸ Once the USSR collapsed, it is debatable if any metanarrative or knowledge would attempt to be legitimized in the post-Soviet Bildungsroman. This thesis shall examine this ideological void in my chosen case studies to see if this is a problem that occurs for young adults in post-Soviet Russia.

⁵³ Graeme Gill, *Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.1017/CBO9781139381673>.

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

⁵⁶ Gill, *Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia*.

⁵⁷ Astrid Tuminez, 'Russian Nationalism and Vladimir Putin's Russia' (PONARS Policy Memo 151, American International Group, Inc. and Council on Foreign Relations, 2000), https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/pm_0151.pdf.

⁵⁸ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 228.

1.4.2. Ideological void reflected in post-Soviet literary trends

Following this collapse of the communist metanarrative, literary trends initially reflected this ideological void in postmodernist texts with a heavy rejection of metanarratives. Marsh argues that this is a rejection of Soviet ideology and socialist realism prevalent in literature in the aftermath of the breakup of the USSR,⁵⁹ which we would expect to see reflected in the post-Soviet coming-of-age novel. In this sense, post-Soviet literature initially rejects realistic modes of writing in postmodernism, dismissing conventional narrative types and presenting the consciousness of Russian citizens as confused and spiritually empty.⁶⁰ A feeling of national humiliation and dislocation prevailed in the aftermath of the Soviet Union.⁶¹ A way to cope with this for young adults presented in literary trends was the pessimistic postmodernist Bildungsroman, which may feature a rejection or ridicule of a communist metanarrative and Soviet ideals. In this sense, post-Soviet literature initially rejects realistic modes of writing in postmodernism, dismissing conventional narrative types and presenting the consciousness of Russian citizens as confused and spiritually empty.⁶² Literary critic and postmodern expert Mark Lipovetsky notes that two of the most prominent Russian postmodern authors and texts in the 1990s include Viktor Pelevin with *Omon Ra* (1992) and *Generation P* (1999) and Vladimir Sorokin with *Blue Lard* (1990).⁶³

Despite postmodernist youth novels' popularity in the early 1990s, they began to disappoint many Russian readers in the later 2000s due to the narration's lack of interest in reality and its lack of credible characters.⁶⁴ Following years of postmodernism, rejection of metanarratives was followed with a new "sincerity" as a way to cope with the collapse of the USSR.⁶⁵ Instead, a new humanism became popular in Russian literature, in which we would expect to see a return to embracing an overarching metanarrative and sense of

⁵⁹ Rosalind Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007).

⁶⁰ Marsh.

⁶¹ Noordenbos, *POST-SOVIET LITERATURE AND THE SEARCH FOR A RUSSIAN IDENTITY*.

⁶² Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*.

⁶³ Mark Lipovetsky, 'Russian Literary Postmodernism in the 1990s' *The Slavonic and East European Review*, no. Vol. 79, No. 1 (2001): 31–50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 93.

⁶⁵ Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History* (NEW HAVEN; LONDON: Yale University Press, 2017).

identity in the Bildungsroman. Traditional writers instead began to gain more confidence and a focus on reality was formed in neo-realism.⁶⁶ Postmodern styles have been discarded following the turn of the century in favour of more traditional writing conventions, with literary critics at Druzhba Narodov noting authors such as Zakhar Prilepin (with *Sankya*), Mikhail Elizarov and German Sadulaev⁶⁷ at the fore of neo-realism, whose works convey that postmodernism more accurately depicted the initial chaos of post-Soviet times.⁶⁸ Realism thus survived the attack of post-modernism and experienced a resurgence in the 2000s.⁶⁹ The shift from postmodernist Bildungsroman to neo-realism occurred as authors tried to form their own mythology and reconcile both the Soviet and anti-Soviet discourse.⁷⁰ Postmodernism was thus replaced by nostalgia for the genuine and appeals to traditional values, featuring a resurgence of well-known themes and images. Bearing this in mind, we would expect to see a resurgence of a more traditional adherence to Bildungsroman conventions in post-Soviet literature. This may mean more of a focus on the “soul” of Russia, the natural world and a revival of the Russian character in texts and actions and events are conveyed in a linear fashion, reflecting an easy transition from stage of character development to another.⁷¹ Texts may have a didactic quality in teaching a lesson throughout the novel.

1.5. Conclusion

Overall, this literature review and theoretical framework provides some background on the Western and Soviet Bildungsroman, the potential reuse of Soviet symbols and the ideological void in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. All of these developments are reflected in various literary trends, such as postmodernism and neo-realism. Ideological void and re-attributing meaning to Soviet symbols shall be examined in the

⁶⁶ Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006*.

⁶⁷ Druzhba Narodov, ‘The Literary Naughts, a Place of Residence and Employment’, *Russian Social Science Review* 53, no. 2 (2012).

⁶⁸ Noordenbos, *POST-SOVIET LITERATURE AND THE SEARCH FOR A RUSSIAN IDENTITY*. 7-11

⁶⁹ Mark Lipovetsky, ‘Literature on the Margins: Russian Fiction in the Nineties’, *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 24, no. Iss. 1, Article 7 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1478>.

⁷⁰ Natalia Kovtun, Klimovich Natalya, ‘THE TRADITIONALIST DISCOURSE OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN LITERATURE: FROM NEO-TRADITIONALISM TO “NEW REALISM”’ (Zagreb, 2018).

⁷¹ Sadrieva, ‘Transformataniia Zapadnoevropejskogo Romana Vospitaniia v Kul’turnom Kontekste Sovremennosti’.

next four case studies, with the first two representing the postmodernist genre and the latter two neo-realism to examine how a young adult's development can look in post-Soviet Russia. Each novel shall have its own chapter to discuss the plot and its similarities or differences to the Soviet and Western prototypical Bildungsroman, the re-use of symbols and also how the ideological void is represented. The case studies shall be ordered chronologically, to start with the book nearest to the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union before moving closer to present times. The same structure shall be used in each chapter to give a close comparison between each novel and really assess what forms a youth novel can take in post-Soviet Russia.

2. Pelevin's postmodernism and disillusioned youths in 1992

2.1. Introduction: postmodernist origins and Pelevin's background

In chronological order, the first post-Soviet Bildungsroman to be examined is Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, published in 1992, just one year after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Pelevin himself was born in 1962, experiencing almost 30 years of Soviet rule⁷². Pelevin remains a prominent postmodern author today whilst the origins of Russian postmodernism are still avidly discussed. As Russian literary expert Dalton-Brown argues, Russian postmodernism had roots in the 1970s in the avant-gardism of Vasily Aksenov and Venedikt Erofeev as these authors exhibited an anti-ideological stance and produced somewhat self-reflexive texts, common attributes of postmodernism today.⁷³ Doctor of global literature Sally Dalton-Brown also notes that Russian postmodernist texts are often fragmented, self-referential and endlessly sceptical, offering little catharsis for readers⁷⁴. Due to these features, professor of Slavic literature Rebecca Stakun debates the quality of Pelevin's postmodernist prose, arguing that it is hard to gauge if Pelevin's target audience is serious literature aimed at the few or *popsa* (mass culture).⁷⁵ Professor of

⁷² Rebecca Stakun, 'Terror and Transcendence in the Void: Viktor Pelevin's Philosophy of Emptiness' (University of Kansas, 2017), https://kusolarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/27006/Stakun_ku_0099D_15558_DATA_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁷³ Sally Dalton-Brown, 'Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose' 75, no. 2 (1997): 216–33.

⁷⁴ *ibid*

⁷⁵ Stakun, 'Terror and Transcendence in the Void: Viktor Pelevin's Philosophy of Emptiness'.

Russian literature Yulia Palchik describes Pelevin's *Omon Ra* as more style than substance, stressing that Pelevin is a genre within himself and that he writes purely dystopian novels with little plot or resonance to reality.⁷⁶ However, Pelevin joins a firm tradition of postmodernism and adheres to certain stylistic tendencies of Western postmodernism, which dates back to the 1960s in the US yet emerged again with force in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷⁷ According to literary professor Elana Gomel, Russian postmodernism may be described as a perfect expression of national sentiment in the void following the collapse of the USSR⁷⁸. As Soviet censorship ceased to exist, postmodernism became a hugely prominent and popular genre in Russia,⁷⁹ exploring criticisms of the Soviet regime previously forbidden. This chapter shall first examine the plot of *Omon Ra* in comparison to typical Soviet and Western Bildungsroman plots, assessing in what sense the novel comprises a typical Bildungsroman, before looking at the shifting symbols present and how the ideological void in Russia is first presented by Pelevin in 1992. Examining this novel shall offer us our first postmodern example of how young post-Soviet adult's life and feelings growing up in the immediate aftermath of such ideological loss are portrayed in fiction.

2.2. *Omon Ra* as Bildungsroman

2.2.1. Plot in *Omon Ra*

Omon Ra follows the journey of a young adult named Omon, who grows up with the typically Soviet dream of becoming an astronaut. His name is an acronym for the Russian special purpose branch of police, involved in violent incidents connected to the breaking up of the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ Pelevin's use of this name, described as lovingly given to Omon by his father, conveys the romanticising of violence in Russia and the seeping of the Soviet state into everyday life. The plot centers around young Omon growing up, dreaming of

⁷⁶ Yulia Viktorovna Palchik, 'Vzaimodeĭstvie Ėpicheskikh Zhanrov v Proze Viktora Pelevina' (Samara, Samara State University, 2003).

⁷⁷ Elana Gomel, 'Viktor Pelevin and Literary Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia' 21, No.3, no. SPECIAL ISSUE: POSTMODERNIST FICTION: EAST AND WEST (2-13): 309–21.

⁷⁸ *ibid*

⁷⁹ Gomel, 'Viktor Pelevin and Literary Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia'.

⁸⁰ Swarthmore, 'Omon Ra', *Russian and East European Science Fiction*, 2021, <https://www.swarthmore.edu/russian-and-east-european-science-fiction/omon-ra>.

becoming an astronaut and attending KGB flight school with his best friend Mitiok.⁸¹ At flight school, both friends train for a suicide mission to the moon, in which they will transmit radio signals there to encode the words LENIN, PEACE, USSR to the whole universe⁸². On the journey to the moon, the rocket apparently ascends in stages, with each stage killing one of Omon's proteges in their suicide missions. As Omon finally reaches the moon (after days of sitting in a "moon walker"), he attempts to commit suicide with a gun provided by the supervisors of the space mission.⁸³ However, the gun backfires, Omon lives and begins to walk around the moon, realising he is not in fact in space, but on a television set. A struggle with other "astronauts" ensues and an escape scene, in which Omon manages to escape to the Moscow metro's red line, where he has in fact been all along. Pelevin's bizarre use of a space simulation as the central setting for the plot highlights the disillusion and lies of many Soviet dreams to the Russian youth. Omon's failed suicide does not let him achieve his supposed purpose, as the aim of his "Bildung" process at space school was this suicide mission. However, as Omon learns that he will not survive this mission and later learns that the mission is fake, this highlights the illusionary nature of the Soviet space program. Despite being an unusual and difficult to follow plot, Pelevin refers to some key features of traditional Bildungsroman, many Soviet symbols and the metanarrative of communism, which shall next be examined.

2.2.2. Omon Ra as a typical Bildungsroman: Soviet mentor figure and rite of passage
Despite Omon's pointless life and space mission offering a lack of catharsis for readers in a typically postmodern sense, certain classical features of Bildungsroman pertain in this novel. In particular, a guiding mentor figure still exists in the form of Omon's best friend, Mitiok. Omon and Mitiok both attend a summer camp dubbed "Rocket Camp" together as children and Mitiok is the first person to introduce Omon to alcohol in his teenage years.⁸⁴ Both adolescents enroll in military college and register for the KGB secret space training school together. Mitiok is initially regarded as a perfect candidate for space and as an astronaut by KGB officials, as he "agrees straightaway" to a suicide mission in

⁸¹ Viktor Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, Trans. Andrew Bromfield (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ *ibid*

⁸⁴ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 11, 22.

space,⁸⁵ with compliance in the Soviet state immediately being linked to perfection. In this sense, Pelevin emulates some elements of Soviet youth novels set out by Clark in the previous chapter, such as a guiding mentor figure who is older and more conscientious,⁸⁶ as Mitiok is slightly older than Omon and guides his traditionally “Soviet” decision to become an astronaut and offer one’s life for the state. Omon’s tribal initiation to society also emulates this structure, as his rite of passage to Soviet manhood involves the public task of suicide for Russia.⁸⁷ However, as a postmodern author, Pelevin does not offer comfort for readers by portraying the characters’ cohesion and acceptance to society. Instead, Pelevin describes how Omon’s mentor figure, Mitiok, is later drugged by the KGB and interviewed by officials, and as Omon is set the task of transcribing the interview, he is made aware that Mitiok is no longer a perfect candidate to guide him and complete the suicide mission, but a traitor to the state. Pelevin makes it clear that Omon did not have “any childhood friends except for the bastard we shot,”⁸⁸ which reveals to readers that mentor-figure Mitiok was murdered due to his alleged treachery. The failing of Omon’s mentor figure again conveys the pointlessness of post-Soviet Russia and exposes the lies of the previous regime, somewhat mocking the Soviet youth novel genre’s mentor figure and tribal initiation to society as outlined by Clark.⁸⁹ In this sense, Pelevin conveys young post-Soviet adults as jaded and exhausted of lies, with Omon’s failed suicide mission not even giving him the option to exit this life. Thus, Pelevin uses certain structures of the Soviet youth novel to convey the jargon of the regime that some young adults may have experienced in post-Soviet Russia.

2.2.3. Bakhtin’s Bildungsroman: internal sense of time

Whilst retaining some paradoxical elements of the Soviet Bildungsroman, Pelevin also particularly embodies Bakhtin’s sense of internal time depicted in the Bildungsroman of trials and tribulations.⁹⁰ Bakhtin notes that within this, a protagonist undergoes a series of trials and his qualities are all put to the test, a prototypical plot most common in

⁸⁵ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, 48.

⁸⁶ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 167.

⁸⁷ Clark. *The Soviet Novel*. 170-171.

⁸⁸ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 137.

⁸⁹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*.

⁹⁰ Bakhtin, *Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma*.

European Bildungsroman.⁹¹ Despite Omon not necessarily being presented as a saint tested by suffering, a key element of this genre that Pelevin deploys is that time is psychological and dependent on the subject, which, according to Bakhtin, is a prominent feature in the novel of trials and tests. Time in *Omon Ra* is presented as cyclical, as at the end of the novel we transpire on the familiar metro route of the Moscow red line, ready to start the journey over, back and forth as many times as is necessary.⁹² As Dalton-Brown notes, *Omon Ra* is typically postmodern as it is a locked, closed text, with an inescapable return to one's start point that life and death seem to provide.⁹³ Bakhtin stresses that outside of the novel and plot, social life and time remain unchanged, making time infinite, with the external world devoid of major significance.⁹⁴

Pelevin embodies this as no particular timescale is given to help readers navigate the novel, with no specific mentioning of days, months or years passing. Instead, the reader must gauge how much time Omon and Mitiok have spent at flight school and as no age is given to Omon, guess his alleged youth and transition away from this. Our sense of time as readers stems straight from protagonist Omon's peripheral vision, as he describes time at the beginning of the novel as "I look out from inside myself, like looking out of a plane."⁹⁵ At space school, Omon faces a fake "gas mask" punishment in which he must crawl through fake gas, describing the corridor of flight school as the "very centre of the world."⁹⁶ In this sense, time is always centralised in Omon himself, as we see the world straight from his eyes as if looking out of a window on a spaceship. As post-Soviet memory expert Kabanova Sergueyevna notes, time outside of Russia and in history is presented as suspended by Pelevin, suggesting that post-Soviet Russia has entered a state of trauma,⁹⁷ unable to process time and suspended in internalising events.

⁹¹ Bakhtin. *Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma. Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma.*

⁹² Pelevin, *Omon Ra*.

⁹³ Dalton-Brown, 'Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose'.

⁹⁴ Bakhtin, *Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma. Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma.*

⁹⁵ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

⁹⁷ Daria Kabanova Sergueyevna, 'SITES OF MEMORY: SOVIET MYTHS IN POST-SOVIET CULTURE' (University of Illinois, 2011).

Pelevin in this sense actively embodies Bakhtin's definition of time in some Western Bildungsroman as internalised and central to the protagonist. In addition to the suspension of time, real locations are rarely given to guide the reader and space is somewhat also suspended. Besides the fake "moon", the only other real location offered to guide us in reading the novel is Moscow. All events at the KGB space school and on the "moon" happen just below the city of Moscow. Before the space launch to the moon, Omon ascends to Red Square from flight school to spend time at Lenin's mausoleum.⁹⁸ The lack of key location markers and time make space and time central to Omon himself, conveying Moscow as above and below his feet and Omon as the epicentre of time and space. Pelevin thus presents Omon as permanently traumatised and unable to process his surroundings, conveying that our first Bildungsroman portrays a dysphoria after the initial break-up of the USSR. Thus, in terms of traditional Bildungsroman, Pelevin offers mocking features of the Soviet youth novel and a Western internal sense of time to portray trauma and confusion that some young adults may be feeling in the aftermath of the Soviet Union.

2.3. Retrofitting Soviet symbols

2.3.1. Pelevin's use of shifting signifiers: space

In relation to Oushakine's earlier described theory of empty signifiers, Soviet or Western symbols typical to Bildungsroman shall be examined within *Omon Ra* to see if they have been given new meanings or what these symbols may represent in a post-Soviet period. As Stakun notes, Pelevin uses language in a unique way to convey how in post-Soviet Russia, language has lost its ability to convey meaning.⁹⁹ Thus, despite certain words and symbols existing, they have lost their initial meaning and we do not understand them as we did before,¹⁰⁰ such as Omon's name referring to the police service, which is presented as widely accepted by other characters. As Clark notes, the launch of Sputnik in 1957 gave way to new national pride, with astronauts and Gagarin remaining role models and key symbols for much of the Soviet youth.¹⁰¹ Pelevin re-uses the symbol of space, linking it to

⁹⁸ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 84.

⁹⁹ Stakun, 'Terror and Transcendence in the Void: Viktor Pelevin's Philosophy of Emptiness'.

¹⁰⁰ Oushakine, "'We're Nostalgic but We're Not Crazy": Retrofitting the Past in Russia.'

¹⁰¹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 74.

Omon's entire childhood as "everything I remember from my childhood is linked in one way or another with a dream of the sky."¹⁰² Throughout the novel, branding and advertising are linked to space, as at the "Cosmos" cinema or the regularly eaten food product "thin soup with macaroni stars."¹⁰³ In this sense, Pelevin uses these previously inspiring symbols of the cosmos and stars key to Soviet pride and aesthetic, yet links them with mundane, everyday activities such as eating and going to the cinema. Soviet symbols are represented as inherent in Omon's life, but whilst the symbols were inherited, the meanings behind them were not, matching Oushakine's definition of us only using words and symbols available to us, re-using the same form but without post-Soviet Russians being able to replicate the same meaning and feeling.¹⁰⁴ The previously Soviet ambition of flying to space has been replaced with capitalism and used as a promotion technique for dull brands. Pelevin's replica of the Soviet pride of the skies mixed with branding on tinned soup somewhat blends high and low culture, which Oushakine depicts as a common trend in post-Soviet Russia.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Pelevin represents young post-Soviet adults as being present in a world full of signs and signifiers without actually understanding what they mean, simply accepting their omnipresence.

The borrowed sign of space continues in this Bildungsroman to represent the void of Soviet propaganda and Pelevin also mimics some Western symbols yet gives them new meanings. Omon's mission to the moon involves him travelling to a point he codenames "Zabriskie Point"¹⁰⁶, which in reality is a location in Death Valley, California. This conveys how some Western symbols are creeping into post-Soviet reality, with "Zabriskie Point" referring to the place where Omon will commit suicide, thus still inferring death. When Omon awakes on the Moscow metro, the red line he follows on the moon to Zabriskie Point parallels the red line on the Moscow metro map. In this way, Pelevin conveys how the void Soviet space mission paralleled a simple metro trip in its significance. As the Space Race was a crucial method of conveying ideology during the Cold War and was intrinsically

¹⁰² Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 5.

¹⁰³ Pelevin. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Oushakine, "'We're Nostalgic but We're Not Crazy': Retrofitting the Past in Russia.'

¹⁰⁵ Oushakine.

¹⁰⁶ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 121.

part of the Soviet “success story,”¹⁰⁷ Pelevin conveying it as a scam is a huge criticism of the Soviet regime. The Soviet symbol of space and Gagarin are used repeatedly by Pelevin without the same meaning behind them: instead, a hollow, fake sense of deceit is portrayed by the same space and stars symbols previously associated with Soviet pride. Pelevin depicts how no planes or spaceships ever flew, as “the only space in which the starships of the communist future had flown was the Soviet psyche.”¹⁰⁸ Pelevin’s use of empty space symbols conveys how cheated and hopeless Omon feels due to his experience with the Soviet space program.

2.3.2. The Soviet Bogatyr

In addition to space and stars, Clark’s aforementioned typically Soviet symbol of the steely bogatyr¹⁰⁹ also figures within this novel. This warrior like man appears in the character of Ivan, his name typical of depicting the strong, silent Soviet male stereotype. Ivan is a character who Omon meets at space school, but Ivan is not a student. Ivan’s father is a war hero, and Ivan is involved in staging mock bear hunting events for political visitors to the space school. Ivan has a strong physique and is presented as regularly going into “battle”, replicating Clark’s definition of this martyr-like figure. As Oushakine notes, using the Soviet symbol of the bogatyr evokes a shared experience of the Soviet youth novel and points to a common vocabulary.¹¹⁰ This does not represent a longing for the past to be replicated, but a longing for the familiarity of it, understandable in the aftermath of the Soviet Union. The Soviet youth novel bogatyr symbol is used here to convey the farce of Soviet myth of a perfect man, as Ivan has a strange role at the Soviet space school of dressing up as a bear and allowing soldiers or politicians to shoot at him for staged sport.¹¹¹ Ivan is given “given a bulletproof waistcoat, a helmet and a boar skin” to wear and his job of dressing up as a bear is described as being “daily heroism.”¹¹² Ivan himself is depicted as “a real Russian Hercules” as he would be deliberately shot at and Russian

¹⁰⁷ Kabanova Sergueyevna, ‘SITES OF MEMORY: SOVIET MYTHS IN POST-SOVIET CULTURE’.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰⁹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 73.

¹¹⁰ Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia.’

¹¹¹ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 48.

¹¹² Ibid, 58

soldiers tried to aim for his bullet vest.¹¹³ As US diplomat Kissinger visits the KGB, he is taken hunting and Ivan lines up as usual to be shot at. Kissinger calls the bears “teddy bears” and is unable to shoot Ivan so instead, lunges and stabs him.¹¹⁴ As Ivan dies in the snow, the “golden hero of the Soviet Union star glittered on his fur.”¹¹⁵

Pelevin uses the symbol of the bogatyr to evoke the commonly associated feelings of pride and strength yet uses this symbol to expose the propaganda machine of the Soviet Union. As Stakun argues, Pelevin’s use of symbols severs word and meaning and conveys how the Soviet Union has become empty and meaningless,¹¹⁶ with the bogatyr now representing imitation and staged sport. A loss of shared identity and cultural markers is presented by Pelevin as the new norm, with there being no new heroes, just the destruction or expose of former heroes such as Ivan.¹¹⁷ Thus, emptiness and lies are represented here as the real meaning of the Soviet Union, deconstructing formally classic symbols and re-using them to create new meanings. These symbols ensure the presence of certain Soviet myths, such as heroes and the conquest of space, which have not yet been replaced with anything new.¹¹⁸

2.4. Emergence of the ideological void

2.4.1. Marxism Leninism

In addition to these re-used symbols, how Pelevin depicts ideological void that emerged in 1991’s effect on Omon will also be examined. Evidently, when Soviet state enforced ideology came to an end, a question arose of what narrative could replace communism.¹¹⁹ As Lyotard notes, metanarratives legitimize knowledge and are handed down through generations, determining what has the right to be said and to be done.¹²⁰ Stakun argues that Pelevin fails to suggest a new model for Russian national identity, as nothingness is

¹¹³ Ibid, 57

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 61

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 61

¹¹⁶ Stakun, ‘Terror and Transcendence in the Void: Viktor Pelevin’s Philosophy of Emptiness’.

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Kabanova Sergueyevna, ‘SITES OF MEMORY: SOVIET MYTHS IN POST-SOVIET CULTURE’.

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

the new answer.¹²¹ Pelevin does not suggest a new metanarrative, yet he does refer to communism, exclusively referring to Lenin and Marx, choosing to omit any reference to Stalin or any predecessors of the Soviet regime. Omon's suicide missions remains to broadcast radio waves into space encoding the words "PEACE, LENIN, USSR."¹²² Omon depicts that "Lenin had no back to his head" "like some incorporeal God."¹²³ Lenin's empty head and lack of body (despite Omon visiting his mausoleum, where his body is supposedly housed) offer a paradox of Lenin as someone imaginary. Lenin's name is also used to name a fissure on the moon as "Lenin's fissure," allegedly discovered by a Russian sputnik. Despite this fissure not existing in real life, Lenin references in his own writings a "fissure" as discontent from the lower classes for the bourgeoisie erupting out of a crack.¹²⁴ Pelevin uses the communist metanarrative to name a moon crater, conveying how young people in post-Soviet Russia may feel misguided and confused by the role models and metanarrative previously set forth in the Soviet Union.

Omon also defines Marxism as the "the goal for which you will give your life" which "is in a formal sense, a deception" despite Omon previously declaring it's only "the Americans who risk human lives."¹²⁵ Omon thus contrasts Marxism as a tool to legitimize suicide missions with the US in an attempt to find a perpetrator and a victim for injustices caused during the Soviet Union. This statement highlights confusion over these inherited narratives and a lack of justification for Soviet ideals now that key figure heads such as Lenin and Marx have fallen. Omon also notes a Marxist theory of the moon, in which the fall of the moon will "usher in the absolute victory of communism throughout the solar system."¹²⁶ Despite this, Pelevin depicts that "Marx's teachings, which was intended for an advanced country, won its victory in the most backward one."¹²⁷ Thus, despite Omon

¹²¹ Stakun, 'Terror and Transcendence in the Void: Viktor Pelevin's Philosophy of Emptiness'.

¹²² Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 42.

¹²³ Ibid, 14

¹²⁴ Vladimir Illich Lenin, 'The Collapse of the Second International', 1915, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/ii.htm>.

¹²⁵ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 44.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 72.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 42.

allegedly believing that communism is inherently linked to the moon, he believes Russia has failed communism, conveying shame and defeat.

Despite these references to communist ideology, Omon also harbours serious anger towards the Soviet regime. This is evident as when he remembers finding a little plasticine figure inside the cockpit of a fake plane at summer camp without a door to exit from as a child, he retrospectively comments "I'd like to find the man who stuck this rocket together...I'd punch his ugly face."¹²⁸ This stresses the anger felt at pointless missions and the sense that one must give their life to the state in order to become "Real Men."¹²⁹ Pelevin portrays Omon as ideologically conflicted, as he at one point "stopped thinking that all communists were cunning, mean and self-serving"¹³⁰, yet simultaneously was willing to give his life to an overarching metanarrative that in reality he does not understand. As Pelevin shows at the end of the novel, Omon finally understands that "becoming a heavenly body is not much different from serving a life sentence in a prison carriage that travels round and round."¹³¹ Thus, him giving his life has made no difference to the emptiness of communism, as he may as well have ridden round and round on the metro his whole life (which in reality, he did). Overall, Pelevin's approach to communism portrays that Omon has little understanding of the communist figures and narratives he so often refers to, with communism having little basis or resonance in post-Soviet Russia and no new metanarrative currently gaining dominance.

2.5. Conclusion

Pelevin's first example of a post-Soviet Bildungsroman blends parody of the Soviet youth novel with classical structural elements of the Western Bildungsroman of trials and tribulations. As a postmodern text, it offers a rejection of all stereotypical genres and portrays a pointlessness to life, which many young adults may have been feeling in post-Soviet Russia. Pelevin either mocks Soviet symbols or portrays them as empty and

¹²⁸ Pelevin, *Omon Ra*. 15.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 41.

¹³⁰ *Ibid* 56.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 112

misunderstood in capitalist Russia, adopting symbols previously used to promote the Party to promote capitalism. Additionally, the metanarrative of the Soviet Union is exposed as void and almost fictitious in Omon's fake space mission. Despite this, Pelevin does not present a new metanarrative to take communism's place in 1991. Overall, Pelevin presents Omon's development as guided by a path of lies in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR and as chasing dreams for other people and living in a simulated version of reality. As postmodernism is quite a pessimistic genre, this conveys how the expose of Soviet lies was a popular theme in this novel in the early 1990s, reflected in an unusually depressing journey of development in *Omon Ra*.

3. Post-apocalyptic Russia in Tolstaya's *The Slynx*

3.1. Introduction

Following on from Pelevin and our first postmodern text, Tatyana Tolstaya offers us our second example of a less conventional Bildungsroman in the postmodern masterpiece *The Slynx*. Published in 2001, this text comes almost ten years after *Omon Ra*, important to note as the representation of a young adult's development may have changed over the course of the decade, with new symbols possibly being introduced or a new metanarrative to replace communism suggested. Tolstaya allegedly wrote *The Slynx* over the course of 1986-2000, spanning the break-up of the USSR, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, Yeltsin's resignation and the appointment of Putin.¹³² Nadya Peterson, professor of Russian literature, notes that Tolstaya is a prominent Russian female writer who came to prominence during the Gorbachev period.¹³³ Tolstaya was born in Leningrad in 1951, residing for many years in the US where she works as a professor of creative writing in New York.¹³⁴ Professor of Slavic languages Helena Goscillo has written an entire book on Tolstaya's works and notes that Tolstaya is a contemporary Russian female writer, who is also prominent in the Western culture scene.¹³⁵ Goscillo notes that Tolstaya has an

¹³² Mattias Agren, 'Phantoms of a Future Past: A Study of Contemporary Russian Anti-Utopian Novels' (Stockholm University, 2014), <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:755072/FULLTEXT02.pdf>. 41.

¹³³ Nadya Peterson L., 'Reviewed Work: The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction by Helena Goscillo' 58, no. 1 (1999): 270–72, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.2307/2673065>.

¹³⁴ Helena Goscillo, *The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction* (Routledge, 1996). Introduction.

¹³⁵ Ibid

attitude typical of the Russian intelligentsia towards the Western literary scene, as she opposes typical “feminist” norms such as the category “women’s writing”¹³⁶. She highlights the main features of Tolstaya’s prose as the grotesque (akin to Gogol), an absurdly comical use of humour and an extravagant use of metaphor.¹³⁷ *The Slynx* was Tolstaya’s first novel, much awaited after publishing short story collections such as *On the Golden Porch* (1987).

Professor of Russian Nonna Benevolenskaya describes *The Slynx* as being met in Russia initially without enthusiasm, describing it as a creative failure devoid of persuasiveness and logic.¹³⁸ Here, she refers to postmodern literary critic and professor of Slavic literature Mark Lipovetsky retracting his initially positive review of the novel. Initially, Lipovetsky noted enjoying the novel’s assessment of the role of culture in modern-day Russia and its theme of oblivion.¹³⁹ Despite this, in later years he referred to the novel as contributing to the demise of Tolstaya as a writer, as the dystopic novel was in stark contrast to her previous folkloric collection of short stories, *On the Golden Porch*.¹⁴⁰ In relation to her earlier works, Lipovetsky depicts Tolstaya as a central Russian author of the early 2000s, as she managed to capture Soviet and Western scholars’ attention with her writing as it paid great attention to fairy-tale and mythological motifs.¹⁴¹ However, US and Russian philosopher Boris Paramonov’s retains an entirely positive opinion on *The Slynx*, describing it as a much-needed encyclopaedia of Russian life and history.¹⁴² Peterson notes that in order to fully understand the novel, an intimate knowledge of Russian language, culture and history of the past several decades is needed.¹⁴³ Thus, mixed reviews surround this novel, which like *Omon Ra* is postmodern in its poetics, retaining elements such as pessimism and lack of clarity for readers.

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Ibid

¹³⁸ Nonna Petrovna Benevolenskaya, ‘«KYS’» T. TOLSTOĬ KAK IDEOLOGICHESKIĬ ROMAN’, *IZVESTIJA ROSSIJSKOGO GOSUDARSTVENNOGO PEDAGOGICHESKOGO UNIVERSITETA IM. A.I. GERCENA* 110 (2007): 132–42. 133.

¹³⁹ Mark Lipovetsky, ‘. Sled Kysi // Iskusstvo Kino’, 2001.

¹⁴⁰ Mark Lipovetsky, ‘Beskonechny Konets Istorii, Ili Kys’ VS. «Kys’», *Roman Tat’yany Tolstoy «Kys’»*, 2007.

¹⁴¹ Mark Lipovetsky and Elliot Borenstein, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction Dialogue with Chaos* (Routledge, 1999). 130-131.

¹⁴² Boris Paramonov, ‘Na Kys’ Tatiyany Tolstoy’, 2000, <http://old.guelman.ru/slava/kis/paramonov.htm>.

¹⁴³ Paramonov.

As an example of a Bildungsroman, *The Slynx* is the most unorthodox example within this thesis. Scholars at Arab World English Journal describe the novel as primarily dystopic in its genre, noting that the novel is a prophetic warning against clashes of civilization.¹⁴⁴ This is largely due to the novel being set after “The Blast” (an indirect reference to Chernobyl) that throws Soviet Russian society back to the Stone Age.¹⁴⁵ They note that the thriving of anti-utopias and dystopias in Russia in the early twenty-first century was largely due to the collapse of the USSR leading to a fear of the future.¹⁴⁶ Professor of Russian literature Mattias Agren notes that *The Slynx* is anti-utopian, as it is not a parody of the utopia of the Soviet Union, but rather a manifestation of a utopian metanarrative that has many flaws.¹⁴⁷ Meanwhile, he depicts a dystopia as a non-existent society that is intended to portray a criticism of the contemporary society.¹⁴⁸ Professor of Russian literature Boris Lanin describes anti-utopia as a pseudo carnival genre of Russian literature in which laughter is replaced by terror.¹⁴⁹ Overall, scholar Aleksandr Chantsev notes that Russian literature in the 2000s portrayed negative images of present-day Russia haunted by pessimism, with dystopian literature rising as it documented frustration at the current political situation.¹⁵⁰ Whilst this thesis does not have the scope to engage in the anti-utopia/ dystopia debate surrounding the novel, it will examine *The Slynx* as a Bildungsroman as there is no development possible in the dystopic, post-apocalyptic society presented for protagonist Benedikt.

¹⁴⁴ Tetiana Kleofastova, Natalia Vysotska, and Oleksandr Muntian, ‘Kleofastova, Tetiana and Vysotska, Natalia Teaching Anti-Utopian/Dystopian Fiction in RFL/EFL Classroom as Intercultural Awareness Raising Tool’, *Arab World English Journal*, no. Special Issue on the English Language in Ukrainian Context, November 2020 (2020). 107.

¹⁴⁵ Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, Kindle Edition (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2003).

¹⁴⁶ Kleofastova, Vysotska, and Muntian, ‘Kleofastova, Tetiana and Vysotska, Natalia Teaching Anti-Utopian/Dystopian Fiction in RFL/EFL Classroom as Intercultural Awareness Raising Tool’.

¹⁴⁷ Agren, ‘Phantoms of a Future Past: A Study of Contemporary Russian Anti-Utopian Novels’. 42-46

¹⁴⁸ Agren, 42-46

¹⁴⁹ Boris Lanin, ‘Images of Women in Russian Anti-Utopian Literature’, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 71, no. 4 (1993): 646.

¹⁵⁰ Aleksandr Chantsev, ‘The Antiutopia Factory.’, *Russian Social Science Review* 50, no. 4 (2009): 61–96.

Professor Alexander Fedorov notes an interesting trend in Russian film from the 1930s-1990s of focusing on settings after ecological disasters.¹⁵¹ This intensified in 1985 due to Perestroika and Glasnost reforms, resulting in post-apocalyptic settings being popular due to the uncertainty Russians faced, resulting in films such as *Dead Man's Letters* (*Pis'ma mertvogo cheloveka*, 1986), a film set following an explosion that presents characters fighting for survival.¹⁵² Tolstaya somewhat reflects this theme in *The Slynx*, reminiscent of the Chernobyl 1986 disaster due to the “Blast” in the story. Within this dystopic setting, no development is possible for Moscow or characters. An online Russian encyclopaedia of literature describes *The Slynx* as a negative Bildungsroman, as protagonist Benedikt fails to develop, representing the disappointment of post-Soviet Russian political and social life,¹⁵³ making the novel another example of an anti-Bildungsroman. For clarity, this chapter shall follow the same structure as in the *Omon Ra* chapter, first noting the plot, the novel as Bildungsroman, the symbols used and metanarrative presented in *The Slynx* to understand how in addition to being dystopic, it is also an anti-Bildungsroman as society or Benedikt cannot progress.

3.2. *The Slynx* as Bildungsroman

3.2.1. Plot in *The Slynx*

As previously noted, *The Slynx* is an unorthodox example of a Bildungsroman as it is largely analysed as dystopic in secondary literature. In addition, the protagonist, Benedikt, is older than a “young adult”, as he is in his “third decade” in the novel,¹⁵⁴ older than typical characters of Bildungsroman who are young adults. Despite this, other characters such as his mother’s friend Nikita Ivanivich think that Benedikt is still too young to get married at thirty, potentially as Nikita himself is 400 years old, representing large age gaps between characters. His late developmental process late may be indicative of how backward the society presented to us is. Tolstaya sets *The Slynx* in the town of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk,

¹⁵¹ Alexander Fedorov, ‘Jekologicheskaja Tema v Rossijskom Igrovom Kinoiskusstve Zvukovogo Perioda: Problemy i Tendencii’ (Taganrog, 2002).

¹⁵² Ibid, 12.

¹⁵³ Harold Baker D., ‘TOLSTAYA, TATIANA NIKITICHNA’, 2018, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/russian-and-eastern-european-literature-biographies/tatyana-tolstaya>.

¹⁵⁴ Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, Kindle Edition (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2003), loc 1907.

named after its dictator, and set 200 years after “the Blast”, a reference to a nuclear disaster which destroyed Soviet Moscow and plunged Russia back in time.¹⁵⁵ Benedikt is initially portrayed as solely surviving, eating only mice and avoiding potentially lethal rabbits as a food source. Benedikt is the child of an “Oldener”, a reference to the Soviet intelligentsia. His mother lived before the Blast and attended university. Benedikt is a scribe in the novel, copying old books which dictator Fyodor Kuzmich claims to have written, but which are actually copies of Russian classics and various nursery rhymes. Tolstaya presents a subplot of Benedikt falling in love with the beautiful Olenka, whom he meets at work and proposes to. They marry and Benedikt unknowingly marries into wealth: Olenka’s father is “head Saniturion” (law enforcer) who has piles of food and a library of books, forbidden to ordinary citizens of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. Olenka grows enormous due to the amount of food she eats and gives birth to triplets, which Benedikt has no interest in. As the main plot of the novel, Tolstaya presents Benedikt as desperately hunting for knowledge in any form and seeking books which are banned. As his father-in-law is head Saniturion, he confiscates books and kills for a living, which Benedikt joins him in. In a post-apocalyptic world, Tolstaya presents this complex plot with humour and elegance, to presents us with an anti-Bildungsroman, as shall next be examined.

3.2.2. *The Slynx* as a classic Western Bildungsroman: Moretti on modernity and youth

Despite being a dystopic anti-Bildungsroman, Tolstaya still plays with certain features of classic Western Bildungsroman. As Moretti notes, a traditional Western Bildungsroman is a symbolic form of modernity, symbolised through youth.¹⁵⁶ Thus, Bildungsroman are usually set in present times, as these are the height of modernity as we know it. Tolstaya subverts this expectation in her version of an anti-Bildungsroman, as Soviet Moscow is thrown back to the Stone Age (Каменный век)¹⁵⁷. In this setting, modernity is Neolithic, as wise Oldener character Nikita is thrilled that “material culture is being restored hour by hour” as finally “the wheel has been reinvented.”¹⁵⁸ Instead of a modern-day setting,

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, loc 78

¹⁵⁶ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987). 15.

¹⁵⁷ Tatyana Tolstaya, *Kys’* (Podhova, 2000), <https://docplayer.ru/38378658-Tatyana-tolstaya-kys.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Tolstaya, *The Slynx*. Loc 1870.

all characters without education are referred to as “Neanderthals” and the novel ends with another explosion or Blast, as a former gas station is ignited by Benedikt’s father-in-law to murder intelligent elder Nikita. The postapocalyptic setting after the Blast is certainly not modern as characters struggle for survival in huts without heating and survive off mice, notable as this is not the classic, modern-day setting Moretti describes as pivotal to Bildungsroman.

In addition, Moretti typically depicts a character finding cohesion to society and experiencing personal development, as a character’s maturity abolishes their youth.¹⁵⁹ However, Tolstaya portrays the opposite in this anti-Bildungsroman, as Benedikt is intellectually stunted throughout the whole novel. As Benedikt reads more and more, he notes “how stupid and blind”¹⁶⁰ he used to be, yet simultaneously thinks that Macbeth, Hamlet and The Gingerbread Man are the same calibre of highbrow literature. Despite Bendikt being a 30-year-old man and having a plethora of literature made available to him (through his marriage he inherits a library, prohibited to all other characters), Tolstaya presents us with a protagonist whose ageing does not progress his character, thus again contradicting Moretti’s traditional Bildung of maturity implying development as Benedikt’s ignorance does not change throughout the novel, resulting in his character not developing. Tolstaya’s subversion of modernity and Benedikt’s lack of growth are the main elements applicable to Moretti’s theory. Unfortunately, Bakhtin’s writings on Bildungsroman where less applicable here, so Clark shall instead be discussed in more detail.

3.2.3. Clark’s Soviet youth novel: mentor figure

As previously seen in the last chapter, Clark’s aforementioned Soviet mentor figure was a prominent feature of the Soviet youth novel in which an older figure, in close allegiance to the Party, guided a young figure to maturing and progressing.¹⁶¹ Tolstaya interestingly presents readers with two potential mentor figures for protagonist Benedikt in *The Slynx*,

¹⁵⁹ Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. 15.

¹⁶⁰ Tolstaya, *The Slynx*. Loc 4008.

¹⁶¹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 167.

the first being Oldener Nikita, a supposed representative of the Soviet intelligentsia, who wants to make a “contribution to the restoration of rebirth and culture” and is head stoker, capable of breathing fire.¹⁶² Tolstaya portrays Nikita as a close ally of Benedikt’s mother, who attempts to guide Benedikt in life as he cuts off Benedikt’s tail (a deformity as a result of the Blast) and urges him to “think, think for yourself, young man, use your head!”¹⁶³. However, as character Nikita represents the intelligentsia and does not comply with the totalitarian state, he tempts Benedikt to also not coincide with society. Tolstaya presents Nikita as having features and an ideology different to all other characters, as he refers to people as comrade and blesses himself, implying adherence to religion present before Soviet times (Никита Иваныч перекрестился: Господи, благослови!)¹⁶⁴. Nikita spends most of his time erecting a statue to honour Pushkin and regularly encourages Benedikt to become more cultured. Meanwhile Benedikt is happier eating worms and mice and thinks that the honeycomb Nikita eats is glue (МЕТ ем.-Какой МЕТ?-А вот что пчелы собирают. А то жрете мышей да червей, а потом удивляетесь, что столько мутантов развелось)¹⁶⁵.

Tolstaya contrasts the anti-state figure of Nikita with father-in-law and head Sanitursion, responsible for law and order and book confiscation, Kudeyar. Kudeyar represents another potential mentor figure for Bendikt, yet as he is a key state figure, he represents a figure more in line with the Soviet youth novel mentor figure. Despite this, Kudeyar encourages anarchy as he insists Benedikt should help him overthrow dictator Fyodor Kuzmich. As Tolstaya describes, Kudeyar has his own vast library of books he confiscates from other citizens after killing them, potentially portraying the restrictiveness of the Soviet regime. As a mentor figure, Kudeyar is portrayed as saying to Bendikt “I see you love culture” to which Benedikt replies “I adore culture”¹⁶⁶. Thus, Kudeyar and Nikita represent different meanings of culture: Nikita embodies the intelligentsia, with a passion for Pushkin and religion, whilst Kudeyar also thinks *The Gingerbread Man* is of the same

¹⁶² Tolstaya. Loc 380.

¹⁶³ Tolstaya. Loc 1990.

¹⁶⁴ Tolstaya, *Kys'*. 207.

¹⁶⁵ Tolstaya. *Kys'*.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 2704

significance as *Macbeth*. Tolstaya in this sense portrays Nikita as a more fitting mentor figure for Benedikt, despite his resistance to the totalitarian state. Kudeyar murders Nikita in the end as he is a fire hazard (as he can breathe fire and gasoline has been invented). It is unclear in the end if Nikita dies, representing the fact that old culture is much harder to remove than the Soviet state previously thought. Tolstaya subverts our expectations of a mentor figure by including two mentors vying for Benedikt's attention and development, potentially representing the numerous different spheres of influence post-Soviet young adults may have growing up. Overall, Tolstaya employs certain classical features of both Western and Soviet Bildungsroman yet subverts our expectations of these.

3.3. Retrofitting Soviet symbols

3.3.1. Old words, new meanings

In addition to examining the novel as Bildungsroman, Oushakine's theory of retrofitting Soviet symbols shall again be examined here. As Peterson earlier noted, a unique understanding of the Russian language and history is needed to fully understand the complex signs and signifiers Tolstaya uses within this novel.¹⁶⁷ Tolstaya cleverly depicts a world in which the Blast has also mutated language, meaning certain words have gained new meanings in the post-apocalyptic world. A glossary is given at the start of the novel to guide readers, including words such as "golubchik" or "golubushka" to be used instead of comrade.¹⁶⁸ A word commonly used in 18th century literature (also in usage currently in Russian, particularly amongst the intelligentsia), "golubchik" (literally transliterated from Russian) implies a term of endearment similar to darling.¹⁶⁹ Tolstaya thus replaces the formal, Soviet comrade with darling, implying that as time progresses, elements of the Tsarist system and language are actually being implicated in post-Soviet Russia. In contrast to what Oushakine suggests on Soviet symbols, this implies nostalgia for anything but the Soviet period. Other words given in this glossary by Tolstaya are "izba", which is a

¹⁶⁷ Peterson, 'Reviewed Work: The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction by Helena Goscilo'.

¹⁶⁸ Tolstaya, *The Slynx*.

¹⁶⁹ Kartaslov, 'Znachenie Slova «golubchik»', 2021, <https://kartaslov.ru/%D0%B7%>

wooden style of house common in 18th and 19th century Russia, when sleeping on top of a stove for warmth was the norm.¹⁷⁰

By using words potentially out of date in post-Soviet Russia (so much so that a glossary is provided for readers), this indicates that time has travelled backwards since the end of the Soviet regime. In fact, Tolstaya spares nearly all reference to the Soviet regime. As PhD student Ekaterina Pak notes in her thesis, Tolstaya focuses on the grotesque and physical deformities of the body that occur after the Blast.¹⁷¹ Tolstaya thus only reminds us of the Soviet regime through physical deformities, as “whoever was born after the Blast, they have consequences”¹⁷². These consequences are ugly, grotesque violations of bodily norms, such as Benedikt having a tail or Olenka having claws. Therefore, in order to identify who is post-Soviet, all one has to do is look for physical deformities in characters. Tolstaya does not re-use or retrofit Soviet symbols, but implies a total loss of them and eradication, with the only reference to the regime being the intelligentsia or physical deviations that people must endure following the regime.

3.4.A New Metanarrative

Whilst there is certainly an ideological void present in *Omon Ra*, this is not as obviously presented in *The Slynx*. As Agren notes, Tolstaya does not depict a governing idea of how to live, instead describing a dysfunctional state with no overarching, legitimizing metanarrative.¹⁷³ However, I believe that despite the state being dysfunctional, Tolstaya attempts to create a new legitimizing metanarrative for knowledge and life in the form of dictator Fyodor Kuzmich. The legitimacy of the Neolithic period and any scientific discoveries are attributed to the dictator, as Kuzmich allegedly invented fire and “made a scientific invention for us. The mouse trap!”¹⁷⁴. He also implements state holidays and decrees, such as celebrating women’s day on the 8th of March, a day when women must clean everything and not be beaten. Kuzmich’s advice is hilarious and childlike, but

¹⁷⁰ George Manaev, ‘The Wonders of the Russian Izba’, *Russia Beyond*, 2014, https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/01/30/the_wonders_of_the_russian_izba_33697.html.

¹⁷¹ Yekaterina Pak, ‘THE GROTESQUE IN TATYANA TOLSTAYA’S THE SLYNX’ (Nazarbayev University, 2017.).

¹⁷² Tolstaya, *The Slynx*. Loc 116.

¹⁷³ Agren, ‘Phantoms of a Future Past: A Study of Contemporary Russian Anti-Utopian Novels’. 46.

¹⁷⁴ Tolstaya, *The Slynx*. Loc 666.

nonetheless, offers a narrative to guide the golubchiks' lives. Dictator Fyodor Kuzmich keeps these statements legitimized and fear enforced in the city through the myth of the Slynx: a creature which will allegedly make you lose your mind, if you commit Free Thinking, keep books or even go outside after dark. Despite this, no one has ever actually seen the Slynx, with Oldener Nikita arguing "there isn't any Slynx, it's nothing but human ignorance"¹⁷⁵. Thus, Kuzmich preys on the civilians' ignorance to keep them trapped. Meanwhile, Nikita searches for Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which is described as "The Book" and his "life consists of the search for this book"¹⁷⁶. Whilst dictator Kuzmich may not present a new ideology, he attempts to rationalise and legitimize living in the dark ages through fear of the Slynx and capitalising on the civilian's ignorance.

Tolstaya exposes Kuzmich halfway through the novel, as in reality the fear-striking dictator is miniscule, "not much taller than Kitty, he barely reached Benedikt's knee", who sits on Olenka's lap and instructs her to "hold me with two hands, under my arms. But no tickling!"¹⁷⁷. Tolstaya usurps our expectations of a dictator by conveying the small height and physical deformities of a leader who enforces fear yet is scared of being tickled. Lyotard defines a metanarrative as a use of philosophy to legitimize knowledge and notes how decision makers allocate these narratives to our lives to grow themselves power.¹⁷⁸ These narratives define what has the right to be said and done, with the question of knowledge being a question of the government and who has access to these ideas.¹⁷⁹ Whilst Kuzmich does not promote a certain philosophy (in fact, this is forbidden) he has all access to knowledge and determines what people can know, in this sense enforcing the power aspect of metanarrative without a convincing ideology behind it.

The ownership of knowledge is further explored by Tolstaya in the character Kudeyar (father-in-law) who competes for this ownership of knowledge with Kuzmich. As Agren notes, Kudeyar actually is the main instigator of fear in the city, with him and his entire

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 1717

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 2312

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 1521

¹⁷⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

¹⁷⁹ ibid

family fitting the physical appearance of the Slynx with glowing cat eyes and claws.¹⁸⁰ Kudeyar's eyes light up pathways and even burn Nikita, conveying how he lights the path to knowledge with his secret library. He asks Benedikt if he "feel like doing a bit of overturning? Ready to knock off the evil tormentor? That damned dwarf?"¹⁸¹. As Kudeyar overthrows Kuzmich (who cries and says it is not fair), he says he "has to write a decree. When you carry out a coup d'état, you always write a decree"¹⁸². Therefore, Tolstaya presents Kudeyar as rushing to legitimize his regime and restrict knowledge. The decree consists of "I am going to be the Boss now" and Kudeyar renaming the city after himself and giving himself a long title.¹⁸³ Meanwhile, Benedikt works on ensuring that no one has access to books or knowledge. Tolstaya portrays two dictators' regimes, both of which throw Moscow further back in time and restrict knowledge further. Paramonov argues that nothing new follows communism, marking the end of Russia in this novel.¹⁸⁴ Whilst Tolstaya does not present a new philosophy, she portrays Nikita's desperate search for an old one in a world where the government grows power every day by restricting knowledge, which certain characters such as Benedikt accept with blind ignorance.

3.5. Conclusion

Overall, Tolstaya presents us with an extremely unorthodox Bildungsroman as our second example. As Benedikt is an older character, Tolstaya may be suggesting that adults develop slower in a post-Soviet setting. The post-apocalyptic setting depicts a sense of destitution and a world devoid of hope, with Tsarist systems and a social hierarchy being reinforced and no mention of the Soviet era bar the intelligentsia. No new ideology is suggested, but the harvesting of knowledge to grow power is a central theme in the novel. Benedikt also fails to fully develop, as he aligns himself with the corrupt Kudeyar rather than Nikita, suggesting again a failed Bildung process. Tolstaya offers odes to certain classical structures of Bildungsroman, such as enlightenment, youth and a mentor figure, yet subverts all of our expectations of these to once again provide us with a pessimistic,

¹⁸⁰ Agren, 'Phantoms of a Future Past: A Study of Contemporary Russian Anti-Utopian Novels'. 52.

¹⁸¹ Tolstaya, *The Slynx*. 4136

¹⁸² Ibid, 4624

¹⁸³ Ibid, 4277

¹⁸⁴ Paramonov, 'Na Kys' Tatiyan Tolstoi'.

failed outcome. Tolstaya presents a bleak portrayal of a version of post-Soviet Russia for young adults attempting to just survive, portraying an anti-Bildungsroman as society fails to progress in this dystopic world and thus no characters can.

4. Neo-realism and anarchy in Prilepin's *Sankya*

4.1. Introduction

After approximately a decade of postmodernism in post-Soviet Russia, the tide turned to authors such as Zakhar Prilepin, stemming from the neo-realist branch of literature. Born in 1975, Prilepin is an award-winning author and political activist, previously editor of *Novaya Gazeta*,¹⁸⁵ a newspaper highly critical of the Russian government. Prilepin's background undoubtedly influences his writing, as he served in the Russian army in Chechnya and is a political activist. Previously, Prilepin was a member of the National Bolshevik party and leftist political school "Open Russia" (founded by Kremlin critic and businessman Mikhail Khordorkovsky), yet in lieu of this, Prilepin began to openly support current Russian president, Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin in 2014.¹⁸⁶ Prilepin on his own website describes his current political ideology as conservative, nationalistic and even xenophobic (ксенофоб)¹⁸⁷. Interestingly, despite these current nationalistic sentiments, the foreword of our next Bildungsroman, *Sankya*, (published in 2006) is given by leftist Russian political opposition leader, Alexey Navalny in the 2014 English translation. Navalny describes *Sankya* as encapsulating all the post-Perestroika generation's sentiments, as they are a generation stuck between eras who cannot remember the USSR or state economy.¹⁸⁸ Navalny describes Prilepin as having active influence over the hearts and minds of young Russians, with attempts to turn *Sankya* into a film being foiled by the Russian government several times.¹⁸⁹ Despite this, *Sankya* was the basis for Kirill Serebrennikov's play *Thugs*. Prilepin as an author has been met with much praise from other Russian critics, with journal *Samizdat* describing Prilepin as paving the way in

¹⁸⁵ Zakhar Prilepin, *Sankya*, Translated by Maria Gusev, Jeff Parker, Alina Ryabovlova (Glagoslav Publications, 2014), loc 5114.

¹⁸⁶ Tetyana Dzyadevych, 'Political Subjectivities in Russia and Ukraine through the Lens of Post-Soviet Literature' (Doctor of Philosophy in Slavic Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2019).

¹⁸⁷ Zakhar Prilepin, 'Zakhar Prilepin: Vopros Avtoru', 2021, <https://zaharprilepin.ru/ru/feedback/>.

¹⁸⁸ Alexey Navalny, 'Foreword', in *Sankya* (Glagoslav Publications, 2014).

¹⁸⁹ *ibid*

modern literature¹⁹⁰ and a group of Russian literature experts at a round table for literary magazine *Druzhba Narodov* describing him as a major revelation in the 2000s.¹⁹¹ Prilepin's interesting background makes the Bildungsroman *Sankya* occasionally examined as an autobiography¹⁹², due to the intense political nature of the novel, despite Prilepin's denial of this on his own website.

In addition to the interesting political background of the author and reception of the novel, *Sankya* also offers us our first example of a style other than postmodernism: neo-realism. As literary experts at *Druzhba Narodov* (including Nikolai Aleksandrov, Roman Arbitman, Ol'ga Balla, Pavel Basinskii et al) noted, Russian literature in the 2000s began to pay greater attention to literary prizes and mass market fiction.¹⁹³ They note that neo-realism conveys that postmodernism has disappeared from centre stage and that literature of new realists is emerging, with authors disavowing Russia's liberalized society and reminiscing of long-lost heroes.¹⁹⁴ Student Ekaterina Kolmakov in her MA thesis describes new realism as a reaction to postmodernism, which actively combines realist traditions of modern literature, such as using simple street language with some reference to myths.¹⁹⁵ She notes that postmodernism writes about issues which lie beyond the interest or understanding of their audience, with post realism instead turning towards the everyday and the banal, more easily understood by all.¹⁹⁶ Thus, stylistically, the Bildungsroman is returning to a more traditional structure and plot in post-Soviet Russia. *Sankya* has previously been examined by MA students such as Elizabeth Morgan to study nationalism and self-identity in literature,¹⁹⁷ understanding political motivations by Slavic literary professor Tetyana Dzyadevych,¹⁹⁸ and even as a biographical text by Russian literary

¹⁹⁰ Lembit Koroyedov, 'Pressa o Romane «Sankia» / Zhurnal "Samizdat"', 2010
<https://zaharprilepin.ru/ru/prensa/sankya/zhurnal-samizdat.html>.

¹⁹¹ Narodov, 'The Literary Naughts, a Place of Residence and Employment'. 18.

¹⁹² Bartosz Osiewicz, 'Avtobiograficheskoe Nachalo v Romane Zakhara Prilepina Patologii' (Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 2019).

¹⁹³ Druzhba Narodov, 'The Literary Naughts, a Place of Residence and Employment'. 4.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 16.

¹⁹⁵ Ekaterina Kolmakov, 'New Realism in Russian Literature of the 2000s and the Prose of Evgenii Grishkovets' (MASTER OF ARTS Department of German and Slavic Studies, University of Manitoba, 2015). 25-26.

¹⁹⁶ ibid

¹⁹⁷ Elizabeth Pearl Morgan, 'Nation Versus Soul: Questioning Pre-Revolutionary Cultural Myths and Memory in Post-Soviet Russian Literature' (MA Thesis, Russian Studies, Montreal, McGill University, 2017).

¹⁹⁸ Dzyadevych, 'Political Subjectivities in Russia and Ukraine through the Lens of Post-Soviet Literature'.

professor Bartosz Osiewicz.¹⁹⁹ Despite this, it has not been examined at length as a Bildungsroman. Again, for clarity, this chapter shall follow the same structure as the previous two in noting the plot and Bildungsroman features of the novel, symbols present and metanarrative.

4.2. *Sankya* as Bildungsroman

4.2.1. Plot

Prilepin's *Sankya* has a more classical structure than the previous novels and tells the story of Russian teenager Sasha Tishin (known affectionately to his friends as Sankya) who, out of school and unemployed, attempts to find a place in society.²⁰⁰ The novel starts at a protest, as Sasha is part of an anti-government group called the Union of Creators (Союз создающих)²⁰¹ or the Founding Fathers (English translation used in the 2014 version of the novel) who regularly stage protests and use guerrilla warfare tactics against the government. Sasha regularly escapes trouble from the OMON and police in Moscow by travelling back to the smaller city on the outskirts that his mother lives in. Sasha is from a tiny village where his grandparents still live, which is even further away from the city but one cannot "get to the village in the fall, winter or spring- only during the warm and dry month of May²⁰²" due to bad weather conditions. Sasha feels intensely depressed by the village he comes from, as it is "disappearing, dying out²⁰³". His grandmother had three sons (one of which was Sasha's father) yet all three died of alcoholism, as did most other young teens from his village, or from motorcycle crashes when inebriated. Sasha's grandfather fought in World War II and was a prisoner of war in Germany, later excluded from the Communist Party for being captured. He later dies in the book.

The novel largely revolves around Sasha's participation in the Union of Creators, in which he helps send one of his friends, Negative, to Riga to seize an observation deck. Sasha is captured after this and tortured for information, before heading to Riga on a mission of

¹⁹⁹ Osiewicz, 'Avtobiograficheskoe Nachalo v Romane Zakhara Prilepina Patologii'.

²⁰⁰ Dzyadevych, 'Political Subjectivities in Russia and Ukraine through the Lens of Post-Soviet Literature'.

²⁰¹ Zakhar Prilepin, *Sankya* (ACT, 2006).

²⁰² Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. Loc 419.

²⁰³ Ibid, loc 445.

his own to kill the judge who sentenced Negative to 15 years in prison. The judge is murdered by someone other than Sasha, yet when Sasha returns to Russia, his former lover Yana (also a member of the Union of Creators) sneaks into a theatre and pours food over the Russian president's head. The Union of Creators then begin to be rounded up and executed by the police. Sasha returns to the town where his mother lives to take over an OMON station, police headquarters and the city hall, burning them to the ground with his friends and fellow Union of Creators members. At the end of the novel, Sasha is shot by the OMON, resulting in an anti-Bildungsroman due to his death. Despite this, *Sankya* follows a classical structure of a Bildungsroman, as shall next be noted.

4.2.2. Classical Western Bildungsroman features

Prilepin embodies some features Moretti mentions that are frequent in many Western Bildungsroman. For example, Moretti notes the importance of location in Western Bildungsroman, as characters typically abandon the countryside in favour of the city.²⁰⁴ This is typically for work and initially begins with disillusion with the countryside, followed by acceptance of it after spending time in the city.²⁰⁵ Prilepin conveys this initial abandonment of the countryside for the city, as when Sasha returns to the town where his mother lives, he feels as though the doors slamming shut on the train clearly indicate that he has been "cut off."²⁰⁶ When Sasha returns to his village, here it is "difficult for him to feel any kind of joy upon returning to the village- just the sight of it was bleak and sickening"²⁰⁷ as in the rural setting, "everything was foreign"²⁰⁸, conveying how Sasha no longer feels at home here. As previously mentioned, the village is described as dying out, as so few men live there now due to deaths from alcoholism. The stables on his grandmother's farm have seen no animals for ten years, with mud and scraps littering the countryside. Prilepin conveys how Sasha is forced to leave the village in which he was born due to the imminent poverty and lack of job opportunities there. When he returns, he feels a stranger here and feels no sense of home. Despite this, Sasha does not feel at home

²⁰⁴ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987). 4.

²⁰⁵ Ibid

²⁰⁶ Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. Loc 394.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, loc 445.

²⁰⁸ "Все было чуждым" - Prilepin, 2006, 18

in Moscow either, a city which he describes as a “rapist” as he has no “place to belong” there.²⁰⁹ Thus, in typical Western Bildungsroman fashion, Sasha abandons the countryside for the city, yet finds no cohesion in either place and ultimately feels more disorientated. Prilepin does portray the classical abandonment of the countryside as outlined by Moretti as common to many Western Bildungsroman, but unfortunately, Bakhtin was less applicable here than in previous chapters, hence why more space has been given to discuss Clark and the Soviet youth novel.

4.2.3. Clark and the Soviet youth novel elements of *Sankya*

As previously noted in chapters on both *Omon Ra* and *The Slynx*, a mentor figure was a key element of the Soviet youth novel. Clark notes that within this, an older and more conscious figure assists a younger protagonist to achieve social integration.²¹⁰ Clark describes how the protagonist and mentor figure typically meet three times in the traditional Soviet youth novel, as this dramatizes the character’s progression to consciousness.²¹¹ Prilepin uses the character of Professor Bezletov to provide somewhat of a mentor figure to Sasha. Bezletov was a pupil of Sasha’s father at university and is seven years older than Sasha. Prilepin depicts how the pair do meet a symbolic three times in this novel. The first meeting described takes place at a café, where Bezletov questions Sasha on his political ideas, advising him to leave the Union of Creators as he does not appreciate their violent tactics.²¹² The next time Sasha bumps into the professor in his town when Bezletov is driving a car, to which Sasha responds, “you and I are class enemies now.”²¹³ Despite this, Bezletov pays for a meal for Sasha and urges him to leave the Union of Creators, as they are just thugs without ideology.

The third and final meeting between the pair takes place at the end of the novel, when a battle is ensuing between the OMON and the Union of Creators. As Sasha takes over city hall, he finds Bezletov inside, as he works there. Sasha initially handcuffs Bezletov to a

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 1612.

²¹⁰ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 167.

²¹¹ Ibid, 171.

²¹² Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. Loc 972.

²¹³ Ibid, loc 3058.

radiator before bringing him over to the window, putting him on the windowsill and seemingly using him as a bargaining tool with the OMON. Bezletov urges Sasha to stop, as “your soul will die even before you do” to which Sasha responds, “Russia is nourished on the soul of her sons.”²¹⁴ Bezletov, whilst representing liberal politics and thus not being in strong cohesion with the National Bolshevik Party as in the classic Soviet youth novel, still provides Sasha with guidance and mentoring throughout the novel. Bezletov attempts to reconcile Sasha with society, referring to him as son and urging him to attend university and find a job. However, Sasha refuses Bezletov’s help, is outraged by his critiques of his political views and Prilepin represents Sasha as an outsider, uncomfortable in post-Soviet circumstances and unable to find a place for himself in the world.²¹⁵ Here, Prilepin subverts our expectations of a mentor figure as Bezletov fails to persuade Sasha to reconcile with society and is killed by Sasha at the end of the novel. Overall, Prilepin provides a classical structure of disillusion with one’s hometown yet subverts the norms as the protagonist gets his own mentor figure killed. Bakhtin’s classifications on Bildungsroman were not as relevant here as in previous chapters, so thus were not used.

4.3. Retrofitting Symbols

4.3.1. The narod (common people)

As in previous chapters, this section shall refer to retrofitting or replicating Soviet symbols in post-Soviet texts whilst attributing them with new meanings.²¹⁶ Despite this, *Sankya* notably had far fewer obvious retrofits of Soviet symbols than in the previous two novels. However, certain elements of the Soviet aesthetic pertain. In particular, true Russianness in the *narod* (common people) is explored thoroughly. As social historian Orlando Figes notes, use of the *narod* as a more political term appeared around the time of the 1917 revolution.²¹⁷ This term exclusively referred to the lower classes as having the true essence of Russia, referring most commonly to the peasantry and always excluding the upper classes from this definition.²¹⁸ Prilepin also uses this term to refer to the peasantry

²¹⁴ Ibid, loc 4998.

²¹⁵ Dzyadevych ‘Political Subjectivities in Russia and Ukraine through the Lens of Post-Soviet Literature’.

²¹⁶ Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia.’

²¹⁷ Orlando Figes and B.I. Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). 122-123.

²¹⁸ ibid

and villagers, who are conveyed as true Russians in the novel. Sasha's grandmother portrays this essence as when Sasha turns up unannounced after not visiting for a year, "in good village custom, she immediately began to cook."²¹⁹ Other villagers also portray this, by taking in Sasha and a group of friends when they get stranded in the snow and generously giving them a hot meal. Prilepin here portrays an essential "Russianness" of hospitality and selfless values present in the village that are absent in the soulless city.

Prilepin presents the villages in stark contrast to Moscow, which is described as "weak, toy-like- breaking it open was as meaningless as breaking open a toy: there was nothing inside, only a plastic emptiness."²²⁰ Thus, Prilepin rehabilitates the revolutionary 1917 aesthetic of the *narod* as true Russian citizens and Moscow as a fake, meaningless city, representing nostalgia for a time when pride in the lower classes was being reinstated for the first time. Prilepin here portrays adherence to village prose, a literary trend that Professor of Russian David Gillespie notes appeared following the death of Stalin in the 1950s.²²¹ Within this, the village was contrasted with the city as the true spiritual home of Russia, contrasting material needs with spirituality and presenting villagers as true Russians.²²² Despite this, characters such as Bezletov feel as though Russians "have lost their Russian essence,"²²³ yet this is largely in reference to the Union of Creators and Sasha. Sasha is also presented as not feeling a sense of connection or belonging to the *narod*, as he "couldn't even think the word 'reckon' (neshto) without feeling like a fake"²²⁴. Instead, Sasha has a "long-faded connection to the village."²²⁵ Interestingly, Prilepin conveys how Sasha does not like using words his traditional village grandmother regularly uses (such as neshto), to suggest that Sasha does not feel as though he belongs to the countryside. Here, Sasha somewhat represents Oushakine's writings on linguistic aphasia, as Sasha seems unable to select words to match the meanings or sentiments he wants to without feeling like a fake, as

²¹⁹ Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. Loc 494.

²²⁰ Ibid Loc 385.

²²¹ David Gillespie, 'Village Prose (Soviet Russian)', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 2003, [<https://www.litencyc.com>].

²²² Ibid

²²³ Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. Loc 1010.

²²⁴ «Нешто на тот берег никто не ходит?» – подумал Саша, сразу поймав себя на том, что бабушкино «нешто» пристало к языку- Prilepin, 2006, 27.

²²⁵ Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. 738.

there is a lack of other expressive terms.²²⁶ Despite *narod* being more of a sentiment of the 1917 revolution rather than the specific Soviet youth novel, it certainly revives elements of village prose. Professor of Russian Kathleen Parthé notes that writers use certain linguistic phrases in village prose to revisit the village and their childhood,²²⁷ which Prilepin seems to convey in using “neshto” here as reminiscent of the village. By using terms associated with an author’s childhood or the village, people and place who may otherwise be forgotten are remembered and revered as the truly spiritual, quintessentially Russian people.²²⁸ Prilepin conveys how pride in the countryside is a sentiment still present in Russia yet misunderstood by some post-Soviet teens such as Sasha, who feels somewhat excluded from the true Russianness of the village as though he does not belong there, presumably as he did not experience the same hardship his elders have.

4.4. Metanarrative and Fascism

Despite not referring to as many Soviet symbols as other authors, Prilepin plays with the ideological void element of post-Soviet identity far more than Tolstaya and Pelevin. As Dzyadevych notes, post-Soviet nostalgia is tied to wounded and dignity and resentment which is an evident sentiment in *Sankya*.²²⁹ Prilepin presents Sasha as rejecting the previous metanarrative of the Soviet Union, communism. Sasha sees photographs at his grandmother’s house of girls during collectivisation and notes that he “kept forgetting to ask Grandma how this worked exactly.”²³⁰ Remnants of communism, such as his grandfather being removed from the Communist Party, surround Sasha’s life yet he feels no affiliation with these and does not understand how the economic system functioned. Instead, Prilepin presents Sasha as lost and having no place in post-Soviet Russia. Bezletov notes that Sasha does not “have any relation to your homeland. Nor the homeland to you²³¹”, further stressing how there is no place for this generation caught between eras.

²²⁶ Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia.’

²²⁷ Kathleen Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

²²⁸ Ibid

²²⁹ Dzyadevych, ‘Political Subjectivities in Russia and Ukraine through the Lens of Post-Soviet Literature’.

²³⁰ Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. Loc 628.

²³¹ Ibid, loc 985.

As Makarychev notes, post-Soviet Russia is presented by Pelevin as devoid of beliefs, metanarrative and values, ultimately a country without a soul.²³²

To fill this void, nationalism and to some extent, fascism are depicted by Pelevin as growing in strength. As Dzyadevych notes, the group the Union of Creators in Russian is *Soyuz Sozidayushchikh*, which in the Russian text is abbreviated to the SS, having remnants of the German Nazi SS.²³³ A soldier in a café comments to Sasha that he does not consider the Union of Creators to be Nazis, despite their flag looking like a fascist flag.²³⁴ Sasha argues that the group have no ideology, as “land, honour, victory, justice- none of this requires ideology.”²³⁵ Despite this, xenophobic elements of Sasha’s ideology are constantly presented, for example, a fight breaks out with Sasha and other members of the Union of Creators with some men from Chechnya in a bar. Sasha says with disgust that in a hundred years, Russia will be “populated by Chinese and Chechens.”²³⁶ He mocks the men’s accents, greets them sarcastically with Salam Alaykum and argues that a Chechen cannot be called Sasha, as he is “not a real Sasha, probably a Sakha.”²³⁷ Despite Sasha feeling alienated from the state and Russian authorities, he is thrilled when a police officer says that he would “have jumped those black arsed worms myself” as he feels as though they are on the same side.²³⁸ Sasha’s frequent use of racial slurs and hatred for anyone he believes to not be ethnically Russian conveys how fascism is certainly an element of the Union of Creator’s ideology, despite them arguing that they do not have one.

In addition to fascism, a sense of pride in a “motherland” is frequently noted in this novel. Sasha feels as though he has a strong bond with his friend Negative as “the word motherland entered their mutual code of basic, irreducible brotherly understanding.”²³⁹ Despite feeling totally disillusioned from society, Sasha feels as though everything he does

²³² Andrey Makarychev, ‘Political Issues in Russia’s Literary Discourse’, *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 3 (2012).

²³³ Dzyadevych ‘Political Subjectivities in Russia and Ukraine through the Lens of Post-Soviet Literature’.

²³⁴ Prilepin, *Sankya*, 2014. Loc 1109.

²³⁵ *Ibid*, loc 2597

²³⁶ *Ibid*, loc 1010.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 1209.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, loc 1271

²³⁹ *Ibid*, loc 3190.

is for the motherland, as he cares “about my country, its soul, its children, its workers, its old people.”²⁴⁰ Sasha thinks revolution is inseparable from his Russia and argues that Bezletov’s liberal ideology is “worse than the plague.”²⁴¹ Despite this, Sasha is contradictory and verges on pure anarchy in his thoughts, as he believes post-Soviet Russia is “foreign to everyone” and “must be terminated.”²⁴² It is clear that in post-Soviet Russia, Sasha feels totally lost and between generations, as he argues to Bezletov that “you’re traumatised, I’m traumatised, everyone is. And we’re all working through our traumas for our entire lives.”²⁴³ According to Sasha, this quote encapsulates the sentiments of the younger generation in post-Soviet Russia. Sasha offers us a contradictory ideology, blending elements of nationalism and fascism, yet still the Union of Creators suggest no new metanarrative for young Russians to follow, united simply in rage against the current government. In a Lyotardian sense, Prilepin does not suggest that there is a new metanarrative on how to live one’s life in Russia or a legitimizing function to knowledge. However, Prilepin does note the rise of nationalism and fascism in post-Soviet Russia, suggesting that new ideologies (if not metanarratives) are rising to the surface. This is prophetic in terms of Putin’s Kremlin, as in 2016, President Putin declared that Russia had no unifying idea besides patriotism, which he stressed as a common idea that unites all Russians (“У нас нет и не может быть никакой другой объединяющей идеи, кроме патриотизма”).²⁴⁴ As aforementioned, Prilepin has been a close ally of the Kremlin since 2014, portraying how the values of patriotism mentioned in *Sankya* have become more of a part of the national metanarrative.

4.5. Conclusion

Overall, Prilepin’s *Sankya* conveys how the tide of literature turned in the earlier 2000s away from postmodernism to neo-realism. Within this, symbolism took more of a backseat than it did in the previous two chapters, whilst the interest in exploring metanarrative and ideology soared. Dzyadevych notes that the novel conveys how volatile

²⁴⁰ Ibid, loc 3597.

²⁴¹ Ibid, loc 3597.

²⁴² Ibid, loc 2724.

²⁴³ Ibid, loc 3597.

²⁴⁴ Kommersant, ‘«У нас нет и не может быть никакой другой объединяющей идеи, кроме патриотизма»’, 2016, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2907316>.

a situation can become when political institutions ignore ordinary people and that the novel acts as warning from those people who feel outsiders in post-Soviet Russia, longing for order and hierarchy.²⁴⁵ She notes how these youngsters feel lost in Russia, cheated and ready to exact revenge on society.²⁴⁶ This is certainly the anti-Bildungsroman Prilepin presents to us, which has a similar classical structure to Western Bildungsroman, yet its tragic ending and plot convey the opposite of a positive development and cohesion to society. As we move further away from the collapse of the Soviet Union, less visible critiques of communism and the Soviet Union are visible, with anger turning more towards the current government and its leaders in this example of a Bildungsroman.

5. Village prose and Soviet nostalgia in Lebedev's *The Year of the Comet*

5.1. Introduction

Our final example of a post-Soviet Bildungsroman is another neo-realist novel from critically acclaimed author Sergei Lebedev. Born in 1981, Lebedev himself only experienced 10 years of Soviet rule before its collapse.²⁴⁷ In addition to being an author, Lebedev is a journalist and has spent seven years on geological expeditions in Northern Russia and Central Asia.²⁴⁸ Lebedev has spoken and written quite extensively on memory in post-Soviet Russia, focusing on how to remember difficulties in Soviet history such as the gulags and difficult political figures such as Stalin.²⁴⁹ His second novel, *The Year of the Comet*, was published in 2014 and is a Bildungsroman set just as the Soviet Union is about to collapse.²⁵⁰ This is interesting as despite being the most recently published novel examined in this thesis, it casts the setting back to the Soviet Union and how its collapse was experienced by the younger generation. Like Prilepin, Lebedev is a neo-realist author,

²⁴⁵ Dzyadevych 'Political Subjectivities in Russia and Ukraine through the Lens of Post-Soviet Literature'.

²⁴⁶ *ibid*

²⁴⁷ Alpina Book, 'Sergei Lebedev', 2021, <https://www.alpinabook.ru/authors/67065/>.

²⁴⁸ Roberta Silman, 'Book Review: "The Year of the Comet" — Surviving History', *The Arts Fuse*, 2017, <https://artsfuse.org/155680/book-review-the-year-of-the-comet-surviving-history/>.

²⁴⁹ Irina Aleksandrovna Erisanova, «*Za poliarnym krugom pamiati*». *Razgovor s pisatelem Sergeem Lebedevym.*, 2017., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eVZCDmMLJs&t=1325s>.

²⁵⁰ Silman, 'Book Review: "The Year of the Comet" — Surviving History'.

combining traditions of modern literature and representing certain values (such as adherence to communism) rather than critiquing metanarratives as in postmodernism.²⁵¹

Unfortunately, unlike the other novels studied in this thesis, *The Year of the Comet* has not been examined academically in theses or in secondary literature on neo-realism to my knowledge. Secondary literature on *The Year of the Comet* remains limited to book reviews by literary critics and authors. Specialist Ukrainian literary translator and literary critic Ali Kinsella notes that this coming-of-age novel conveys a young boy cut off from history, with the youthful perspective of our narrator allowing him to criticize the USSR from a child's perspective.²⁵² Literary magazine editor, Christina Tang-Bernas, notes that Lebedev's choice of an unnamed narrator in this story highlights the difficult search for identity and purpose in post-Soviet Russia for the younger generation.²⁵³ She notes that traumatic events such as Civil War, famine and World War II result in untold stories and missing people in post-Soviet Russia, leaving our narrator to create his own family history and situate himself within this.²⁵⁴ Both critics emphasize how Lebedev focuses on ancestral and collective memory of the post-Soviet generation, an aspect previously untouched in the previous Bildungsroman. Journalist and literary critic Olga Lebedushkin echoes this, noting that the DNA of post-Soviet people is made up of national traumas and collective horrors.²⁵⁵ She stresses that *The Year of the Comet* acknowledges the terrible and secret side of sacrifice and heroism that was idolised during the Soviet Union, with the novel noting regular, everyday experiences.²⁵⁶ Author and novelist Roberta Silman praises Lebedev as an extremely talented author, with the initial slow plot and structure of the novel being reminiscent of lazy childhood days, whilst the ending speeds up as life does in your later teens.²⁵⁷ Overall, most critics tend to emphasize Lebedev's success in celebrating memory and offering a solid example of how many youngsters felt when

²⁵¹ Narodov, 'The Literary Naughts, a Place of Residence and Employment'. 6.

²⁵² Ali Kinsella, 'Sergei Lebedev. The Year of the Comet', *World Literature Today* 91 no3-4, no. 95 (2017).

²⁵³ Christina Tang-Bernas, 'THE YEAR OF THE COMET by Sergei Lebedev', *Cleaver Philadelphia International Literary Magazine*, 2017.

²⁵⁴ Ibid

²⁵⁵ Olga Petrovna Lebedushkin, 'Mal'chik i Mister', *Biblioteka v Shkole* 9 (2015): 54–56.

²⁵⁶ Ibid

²⁵⁷ Silman, 'Book Review: "The Year of the Comet" — Surviving History'.

growing up during the later years of the Soviet Union. This offers a valuable and potentially more realistic example of the mundane, routine affairs of a young adult in the USSR than the postapocalyptic setting of *The Slynx*. It also offers us the first example of a novel set in the years just before the USSR collapsed, and is thus interesting as it was written in retrospect by Lebedev. As Lebedev himself notes, it is important to focus on how to give memory to the Soviet Union and how to tell the mundane alongside the horror of certain events.²⁵⁸ Again, for clarity, this chapter shall follow the same structure as the three previous, first noting the plot and Bildungsroman features of the novel and examining how Soviet symbols and the communist metanarrative were experienced and understood by a young teen.

5.2. *The Year of the Comet* as Bildungsroman

5.2.1. Plot

This novel has four parts, the first of which is called “Child of an Earthquake”, depicting that when our narrator was born, there was an earthquake that shook Moscow for the “first time since the German bombing.”²⁵⁹ As our narrator is unnamed, I shall refer to him in this chapter as narrator or protagonist. Unfortunately, specific years are not given consistently throughout the novel and as such it is hard to estimate exactly when the narrator was born or the historic events he refers to. He is approximately eleven at the beginning of the story, and therefore our youngest protagonist featured in this thesis, potentially suggesting how a post-Soviet generation mature quicker than in the Western trajectory. The narrator feels as though being born during an earthquake made his first impression of the world instable, shaky and wobbly,²⁶⁰ foreshadowing how his world shall be when the Soviet Union collapses. The first part of the novel focus on depicting the narrator’s homelife and family history. The narrator’s mother and father are specialists in catastrophes, again foreshadowing the upcoming collapse of the USSR. The narrator is raised predominantly by his grandparents, spending some time in Moscow with Grandma Tanya, who is from an aristocratic background and is deaf. In contrast to Tanya is Grandmother Mara, who cares for the narrator in summer at her dacha. She is “heavy,

²⁵⁸ Erisanova, «*Za poliarnym krugom pamiati*». *Razgovor s pisatelem Sergeem Lebedevym*.

²⁵⁹ Sergei Lebedev, *The Year of the Comet*, Translated by Antonia W. Bouis (New York: New Vessel Press, 2017).

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²⁶⁰ Lebedev, 4.

solid and physically strong, a true dacha sovereign.”²⁶¹ Mara is from a peasant background, with her deceased husband receiving dozens of war medals. The narrator spends most of his time with his grandmothers, searching for clues as to who his grandfathers were (as both are now dead) and his other relatives’ backgrounds. In Part Two of the novel, Mara remarries a retired submarine commander, united as “both of them had been victims of monstrous circumstances.”²⁶²

The narrator also confusedly experiences the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in this section, a word and event alien to him. He does not understand the severity of the event, only noting that he is excited to remain home from school for three days. In addition, the narrator experiences witnessing Halley’s Comet from earth, a comet visible approximately every 75 years from earth and visible in the novel in 1986. He describes not fully understanding the comet’s significance, confused as his grandmother’s seem anxious in anticipation of its arrival. He questions his grandmother on this, who describes that the last time the comet was seen was 1910, when “everyone thought the comet was an omen of great misfortune, and so it was”²⁶³ (the misfortune she refers to is World War I). In this novel, the approaching comet presumably foreshadows the collapse of the Soviet Union. Professor of science communication Felicity Mellor notes that the media and the general public often see comets as risky and threatening the future’s certainty, highlighting a “the end is nigh” narrative,²⁶⁴ which is also present in the text. Both Chernobyl and the comet evince a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety in characters, the disastrous events foreshadowing how Soviet Russia will be “hit” and toppled by capitalism.

In addition to these events, in Part Three of the novel, a “maniac child killer” appears in the countryside nicknamed Mister.²⁶⁵ Our narrator desperately wants “to become a hero in a Soviet epic”²⁶⁶ and seeks out to catch the murderer. The killer murders boys aged

²⁶¹ Lebedev, 40.

²⁶² Lebedev, 113.

²⁶³ Lebedev, 118

²⁶⁴ Felicity Mellor, ‘Negotiating Uncertainty: Asteroids, Risk and the Media’, *Public Understanding of Science* 19, no. 1 (2010): 1-3.

²⁶⁵ Lebedev, 154

²⁶⁶ Lebedev, 84

around eleven, and the narrator is convinced he can catch Mister as only a child could recognize him. He is convinced that Mister is fuelled by hatred for the USSR, and he is unrecognizable as he is disguised as a “simple good Soviet man.”²⁶⁷ The narrator eventually finds Mister on a slip-road by the highway. Mister is aged around thirty and he attempts to kidnap the narrator, before a group of army deserters appear and scare Mister off. He is later apprehended on the highway and arrested by the police. By Part Four of the novel, time speeds up significantly as seasons slip by, in which the protagonist deals with the trauma of his attempted murder and the collapse of the Soviet Union (presumably five years have passed from 1986, as the narrator states that he hears a radio bulletin that the USSR has collapsed.)²⁶⁸ At the end of the novel the protagonist witnesses and stands amongst crowds at the White House when a group of devoted communists staged a coup against final Soviet President Gorbachev’s reforms, protesting glasnost and perestroika in 1991.²⁶⁹ He wanders through the crowds before accepting that “it was time to go down” and that he “was to be born anew.”²⁷⁰ Overall, the novel the first three parts of the novel are quite slow in depicting the plot, before the final chapter spans five years in only a few pages, indicating how the slow, whimsical childhood of the narrator has come to an end and his rapid development must begin now that the USSR has collapsed.

5.2.2. Western Bildungsroman components of *The Year of the Comet*

Overall, Lebedev presents our narrator as feeling quite settled in Soviet society. Whilst Moretti stresses that marriage or the compromising of freedoms are prominent themes in most Western Bildungsroman,²⁷¹ these are not fitting themes in *The Year of the Comet* as the protagonist is only around 12 and thus too young to leave home or get married. The narrator also does not spend much time searching for a homeland as he already feels at home. *The Year of the Comet* does loosely match with Bakhtin’s fifth definition of a Bildungsroman, in which man develops alongside history and time.²⁷² Within this, a

²⁶⁷ Lebedev, 169

²⁶⁸ Lebedev, 235

²⁶⁹ Politika, ‘1991 i 1993: Skhodstvo i Otlichii Tragedii u Belogo Doma’, 2018, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2018/10/06_a_12011149.shtml.

²⁷⁰ Lebedev, *The Year of the Comet*. 245.

²⁷¹ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987). 22.

²⁷² Mikail Bakhtin, *Roman Vospitaniia i Ego Znachenie v Istorii Realizma* (Эстетика словесного творчества, 1979).

person's development is set in actual historical time, alongside real events without man forming in a static, solid world.²⁷³ Lebedev portrays this as events such as the Chernobyl disaster and Halley's comet advance our narrator's development significantly. This results in the point that he feels his "childhood was over"²⁷⁴ was at the age of eleven and not even halfway through the novel. Equally, feeling as though he is born again when the USSR collapses conveys how his personal development is metaphorically comparable to events in history. Overall, Lebedev portrays few of Moretti's classical Western Bildungsroman elements, yet the sense of matched personal development with history corresponds to Bakhtin's fifth definition of a coming-of-age novel more readily.

5.2.3. Clark and the Soviet youth novel

Besides setting the novel in the Soviet Union, Lebedev certainly plays on classical elements of the Soviet youth novel as outlined by Clarke. In particular, Clark outlines a specific hero of these novels who achieves a significant achievement, and his quest remains central to the novel.²⁷⁵ This quest should be completed in public and fuse public and private goals to convey cohesion to society, testing a character's manliness.²⁷⁶ Lebedev's narrator avidly states from the start that he wants to be a hero and that the task of capturing child murderer Mister is his best chance to achieve this goal. As he is willing to sacrifice his own life to help catch Mister, this conveys how his private goal of heroism will match up with society's in catching a murderer. The narrator notes that "the death of one hero gives birth to many his equal, greater than he was, that is the universal law"²⁷⁷, implying how his death as a hero will lead to the continuation of heroism. He also believes that as he is the grandson of war heroes, he is the only person who can correctly identify Mister. However, the narrator never tells anyone about his near-death experience with Mister, making his task less public and conveying how traumatic many heroic quests in reality are.

²⁷³ Ibid

²⁷⁴ Lebedev, 98

²⁷⁵ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 68.

²⁷⁶ Ibid

²⁷⁷ Lebedev, 175

In addition to a heroic task, Lebedev also includes a mentor figure in the novel. As Clark notes, in a Soviet youth novel a mentor figure was typically older and someone who occasionally helps a younger figure achieve a social, heroic task.²⁷⁸ Lebedev introduces the character of Ivan, a character who is about ten years older than the protagonist, has a car and no other friends in the countryside. The narrator notes how he himself was dubbed “Ivan’s girlfriend” by other children who noticed his infatuation with the older boy. Meanwhile, the narrator is driven by a “desire to prove to Ivan I wasn’t like my pathetic comrades”²⁷⁹ by catching Mister. Ivan offers to help the narrator by giving him advice but convinces him that he can more successfully catch Mister. Interestingly, Lebedev modernises the typical Soviet mentor figure by introducing an almost homoerotic relationship between Ivan and the narrator. The narrator is presented as ultimately infatuated with Ivan, as he “experiences physical lust for Ivan’s blood” and says that he wants to “catch Mister so that Ivan would be unharmed.”²⁸⁰ Despite meeting Ivan only a handful of times, the narrator’s obsession with him conveys the intimate element of their relationship. When swimming in a lake together, the narrator describes how fragile Ivan’s body is and he saves him from a strong current. The narrator saving a character almost twice his age and experiencing “lust” subverts Clark’s aforementioned Soviet mentor figure as someone older and physically stronger. This clever element of the plot by Lebedev offers an interesting twist on the mentor figure and conveys an almost homoerotic element of heroism untouched in other post-Soviet Bildungsroman (both boy’s sexuality is unconfirmed in the novel).

5.3. Soviet symbols and their new meanings

5.3.1. War mimicking and linguistic aphasia

As in previous chapters, I will attempt to use Oushakine’s theory on retrofitting the Soviet past to analyse symbols in these post-Soviet Bildungsroman. Despite *Sankya* being neo-realist and having fewer Soviet symbols to analyse, *The Year of the Comet* has notably more Soviet symbols present, presumably due to its setting. The narrator openly

²⁷⁸ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 167.

²⁷⁹ Lebedev, 163

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 186

confesses in the novel that “my feeling about Soviet symbols was...lifelessness”²⁸¹, as he finds the abundance of war and patriotic symbols overwhelming. Lebedev to some extent embodies Oushakine’s theory of mimicking the Soviet past, which in post-Soviet Russia acts as an earnest process of identification.²⁸²The narrator goes to a photography studio every year, where a Red Army plastic stallion is brought out and the narrator is forced to pose with sword, shield and fake medals as a mock war hero, something his parents enjoy to feel a “sense of connection to the past” yet to the narrator it is “painful and insulting nonsense.”²⁸³ Here, the imitation of Soviet battle scenes with fake props certainly blends the high culture of war heroes with the lower of plastic props in a gimmicky photo studio.

In addition, as previously in *Sankya*, Lebedev somewhat engages with linguistic aphasia, a dysphoria when individuals find it hard to match words with meanings or define certain concepts in post-Soviet Russia. Lebedev portrays this when the narrator finds Grandmother Mara’s GSE, the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia. The narrator describes how this book “contained names of vanished things” and how “power had deserted these words.”²⁸⁴ Lebedev thus conveys how even towards the end of the Soviet Union, certain Soviet words had begun to lose their meaning to the younger generation and a whole Soviet language was beginning to become obsolete. Again, retrofitting symbols is not as big a theme in neo-realist literature as in postmodernism, but certain elements such as mimicking and linguistic aphasia are evident in all four post-Soviet Bildungsroman.

5.3.2. Ancestral memory in village prose

As in *Sankya*, *The Year of the Comet* echoes some elements of village prose. As professor Kathleen Parthé notes, village prose focuses on a *rodina*, a native homeland and its people, which centres on a strong focus on ancestral memory²⁸⁵. This is true in *The Year of the Comet*, as the narrator is extremely keen to understand how his grandmothers experienced the Soviet Union and who his grandfathers were. Mara grew up in a post-

²⁸¹ Sergei Lebedev, *The Year of the Comet*, Translated by Antonia W. Bouis (New York: New Vessel Press, 2017), 80

²⁸² Serguei Alex Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia.’, *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 66, no. 3 (2007): 462.

²⁸³ Lebedev, *The Year of the Comet*. 82

²⁸⁴ Lebedev. 91

²⁸⁵ Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past*.

revolutionary orphanage whilst Tanya's sisters died during the Leningrad blockade, important information which the narrator savours and probes to receive in order to understand the intense pain his grandmothers have experienced. Ancestral memory in this sense is dependent on roots and pain which ties his grandparents to Russia. Despite this focus on ancestral memory and the majority of the novel being set in the countryside, the narrator focuses more on measuring how "Soviet" characters are, in comparison to how quintessentially "Russian" characters are in village prose. Overall, the character's aversion to Soviet symbols means that they are examined less at length within this novel, hence why more space has been given to discuss the centrality of the communist metanarrative to the plot.

5.4. Understanding communism as a metanarrative

5.4.1. Existing for the whole

As a metanarrative, communism serves to discredit capitalism as morally corrupt, promoting existing for the whole (ie the whole communist state) rather than just for oneself.²⁸⁶ In *The Year of the Comet*, this is represented as characters are presented in varying degrees of who is the perfect Soviet person in how much they exist for the whole. Lebedev presents this primarily in Grandmother Mara: Mara is "at one with her generation, she was the embodiment of the era's heroine, a simple Soviet girl, a peasant from a leading Kolkhoz"²⁸⁷ (referring to a collective farm in the USSR). Grandmother Mara is depicted as a true Soviet heroine, as she grew up in post-revolutionary orphanages as her father died in the Civil War. In addition, Mara is presented as at one with the countryside, as she drinks birch bark, collects nettles, remembers when "glue" from flour and water was her main meal and how she and her war hero husband had to boil a leather belt to eat when starving.²⁸⁸ Grandmother Mara is portrayed as the ultimate Soviet woman as she even treats the plants in her dacha garden as needing to exist for the whole. The narrator describes her as ruthless, as if she feels that a "fruitless plum tree was setting

²⁸⁶ Jason Schulman, 'In Defense of Grand Narratives', *Jacobin*, 2011, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2011/03/in-defense-of-grand-narratives>.

²⁸⁷ Lebedev, *The Year of the Comet*. 56.

²⁸⁸ Ibid

a bad example for the others,"²⁸⁹ she will happily rip it up. Tanya is also depicted somewhat in this light due to the sacrifices she made for her predecessors to survive during the Leningrad blockade, yet as she had an ex-Tsarist general husband, this brings shame on the family as it is not in true Soviet spirit. The narrator depicts how his grandmothers act as the "widows of an entire generation,"²⁹⁰ as they represent the pain of all women who lost their husbands during the Soviet Union under painful circumstances such as war. Overall, this novel conveys how the communist notion of existing for the whole is embodied through how much pain and suffering older generations have endured in order to deliver the fully-formed Soviet state to younger generations such as the narrator.

5.4.2. Private ownership and Soviet heroes

In addition to the perfect Soviet person existing for the whole, the opposition of private ownership and capitalism is another element of the communist metanarrative examined in this novel. Whilst the narrator enjoys owning things and having possessions, his grandmothers disapprovingly say, "oh look at this owner growing here" which is said with a "grimace of scornful disapproval."²⁹¹ Unlike in previous novels, the metanarrative of communism is not rejected by the author but experienced as hard to understand in later Soviet generations, as the narrator finds it confusing why he cannot enjoy owning things. For the first time in the three novels I have examined, Stalin is named and Grandmother Mara in particular displays a peculiar attachment to him, which the narrator does not fully understand. For Grandmother Mara, her "creator was Stalin" and she finds that "Lenin and Stalin were immutable for her, they had said it all."²⁹² The narrator, of a different generation, feels that the Soviet Union was "incapable of development despite its progressive rhetoric" yet still oddly felt as though he "could not connect myself with someone before the Soviet Union."²⁹³ However, the narrator does have an allegiance to the communist metanarrative, portrayed as he unusually witnesses an attempted coup

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 42

²⁹⁰ Ibid

²⁹¹ Lebedev, *The Year of the Comet*. 12.

²⁹² Ibid, 56

²⁹³ Ibid 69

against President Gorbachev at the end of the novel, suggesting he feels upset at communism's demise as he is protesting glasnost and perestroika, which he feels are unravelling the Soviet Union²⁹⁴. *The Year of the Comet* certainly portrays a different metanarrative to the nationalistic, fascist narrative presented in *Sankya*, instead portraying allegiance to communism based on ancestry rather than personal experience in youngsters.

5.4.3. Conclusion

Overall, Lebedev offers us another interesting variant of a neo-realist Bildungsroman. He plays with more elements of the Soviet youth novel than its Western counterpart, including the mentor figure relationship and providing us with a hero who actually achieves the task he sets out to of finding murderer Mister. Lebedev's use of linguistic aphasia portrays how Soviet jargon and language were hard to understand for youngsters born later in the USSR. The narrator presents communism as the metanarrative that he identifies with and does not portray an ideological void in other novels as obviously, the Soviet Union has not yet collapsed. However, this may help the post-Soviet generation understand how disorientating the collapse of communism was to deal with, particularly for many youngsters without much experience of the USSR but no experience of anything else.

²⁹⁴ Politika, '1991 i 1993: Skhodstvo i Otlichii Tragedii u Belogo Doma'.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the four novels examined present quite different examples of development for their young post-Soviet adult protagonists. In terms of adherence to classic Bildungsroman structures referred to by Clark, Moretti and Bakhtin, all exhibit different adherence to these. *Omon Ra* and *Sankya* certainly play with more classical elements, due to the age of their protagonist as old teens or young adult in their early twenties. They both correspond with Moretti's themes of abandonment of the countryside and clearly replicate Clark's mentor figure. Both *The Slynx* and *The Year of the Comet* also portray mentor figures yet are untraditional in the older and younger ages of their protagonists. They also exhibit less of the potential classic plots Moretti refers to, but interestingly correspond more with Bakhtin's classifications of Bildungsroman. The genres of postmodernism in the earlier titles followed by neo-realism are undoubtedly evident stylistically. Due to the very different plots and stylistically features of these novels, a general conclusion is hard to draw, and I shall thus divide this conclusion into the further subsections, comparing the texts in terms of their protagonist, setting and post-Soviet identity to examine the different versions of post-Soviet Bildungsroman presented. Finally, I shall note some limitations and clarifications of writing this paper.

6.1. Protagonist

The earliest example of a Bildungsroman, *Omon Ra*, portrays a character in his late teens to early twenties, completing a "heroic" and ultimately Soviet task of a suicide space mission. Clark notes how important these heroic missions were in the Soviet youth novel, completing a task in public and also resolving any internal conflict to "prove" oneself.²⁹⁵ Heroic tasks are evident in both *Omon Ra* and *The Year of the Comet* as Lebedev's protagonist also attempts to catch murderer Mister to feel accepted and revered like his war-hero grandfather. To some degree, *Sankya* feels as though he has heroic tasks within his role in the Union of Creators, such as going to Riga to shoot the judge who jailed Negative or being tortured by the KGB but refusing to give up details on the Creators. However, he fails to shoot the judge and his task hardly corresponds with the healthy

²⁹⁵ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*. 162.

functioning of society that Clark outlines, as it results in more anarchy and destruction. *The Slynx* certainly does not present Benedikt as undergoing a heroic task, largely as his character and the society he lives in are so underdeveloped that it is impossible for him to progress. Instead, Tolstaya presents Benedikt's focus as personal development and enlightenment, something he also fails at as he sides with cruel Kudeyar instead of saving educated Nikita from death. The older age of Benedikt is also unorthodox, conveying how hard it is to progress in the post-apocalyptic setting Tolstaya portrays. Meanwhile, the younger age of the protagonist in *The Year of the Comet* portrays how much quicker children had to develop in the later years of the USSR and just before its collapse.

6.2. Setting

In addition to having male dominated settings, the novels all have quite different settings or versions of Moscow. In the 1991 novel *Omon Ra*, the setting is Moscow, but this is rarely mentioned bar visiting Lenin's mausoleum and Red Square. The fake, simulated moon and the space school are the central locations where most action takes place, with Pelevin conveying how during the USSR, trickery and illusions were more important than concrete locations in this novel. The post-apocalyptic setting of *The Slynx* after the "Blast" contrasts the "utopia" of the Soviet metanarrative with the anti-utopian setting Benedikt lives in, a society in which no progress is possible and thus an extremely interesting setting. In the two later Bildungsroman examples, we see a return to more concrete locations and a revival of village prose in varying degrees. In *Sankya*, the village is conveyed as the true heart of Russianness, contrasted to ugly, fake Moscow. Despite this, Sasha does not feel at home in the village, as he feels like a fraud here and feels as though he no longer belongs. In *The Year of the Comet*, the protagonist splits his time between Moscow and the countryside dacha yet narrates far more of the story when in the countryside. In the later novels, there is a return to more concrete settings and a revival of the countryside versus city debate, suggesting the initial dysphoria after the collapse of the Soviet Union is less of a prevalent theme for characters.

6.3. Post-Soviet identity

As mentioned previously, Gill noted how after the collapse of the USSR, an ideological vacuum emerged with Russians pondering how to remember or commemorate the fallen state.²⁹⁶ This is evident in the first two postmodern texts, as *Omon Ra* conveys communism as a cruel trick, enforcing self-sacrifice for a farce. Omon does not describe himself as Soviet, despite his typically Soviet heroic mission of space travel. *Slynx* suggests that communism led to the “Blast”, which threw Russia hundreds of years back in time. Benedikt here is ultimately extremely confused in his identity, with Nikita urging him to follow in his intelligentsia mother’s footsteps whilst Benedikt is led astray by his father-in-law to overthrow dictator Fyodor Kuzmich. Meanwhile, *Sankya* offers up a new metanarrative and identity of patriotism and borderline fascism, in line with Putin’s Kremlin in later years and in this sense quite prophetic. *The Year of the Comet* takes the setting back in time, still referring to the communist metanarrative, yet from a child’s perspective, conveying his inherent disappointment as the USSR collapsed as he attends the 1991 White House protest. Ultimately, the protagonist here is a true Soviet and idolises the perfect “Soviet” individual of his grandmother Mara. The two literary trends examined convey how the initial disillusion with the USSR is reflected in postmodernist texts, whilst neo-realism suggests that more grounding in identity was found in later years.

6.4. Limitations and clarifications

Hopefully, this paper has provided some examples of how a young adult’s development is presented in post-Soviet Bildungsroman. In terms of secondary Russian literature, this was relatively scarce on the post-Soviet Bildungsroman, bar Bakhtin’s work. A combination of Moretti, Clark and Bakhtin offers a relatively original combination of secondary works to analyse post-Soviet Bildungsroman, whilst to my knowledge all of the novels examined have not been studied predominantly as Bildungsroman. Academic Russian literature was limited on *The Year of the Comet*, hence why literary reviews were largely used. The majority of quotes given from novels are taken from English translations from reputable translators when elucidating the plot, as I have written this thesis for English speakers

²⁹⁶ Gill, *Symbolism and Regime Change in Russia*.

who potentially cannot read in Cyrillic. When referring to linguistic or stylistic quotes, the original Russian quote has been given for Russian readers in brackets or footnotes. The wordcount somewhat limited how many quotes could be provided. I believe this research could be replicated in coming years to analyse further how a young post-Soviet adult's development can look in fictitious works, to provide more interesting insights into post-Soviet Russia's developing identity and how this is reflected in literary trends.

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