

**The Essayistic Vision: Representations of America in Russian
Literary Essays, 1991-2004**

by

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A Note on Translation

All translations in this dissertation are my own, unless otherwise noted. In transliterating Russian citations I have used the Library of Congress system.

Introduction

That which is greater than us (a feeling, a city, a country) cannot be described adequately. In fact, any such portrait is the description, not of an object, but of the one describing.

– Dmitry Bavilsky¹

Russian writers and intellectuals have been preoccupied with the United States of America and the ideas associated with this country for more than three centuries².

Many eminent Russian authors, from Aleksandr Radishchev to Vasilii Aksenov, have written about the United States in conjunction with various historic events and personal circumstances, be they the defeat of Britain by the American colonies or a brief trip to California.³ Russian intellectuals' unfading interest in the United States is evident from the tradition of writing about America that has evolved into a sub-genre of Russian travel prose. Depending on the changes in the Russian socio-political climate textual representations of America fulfilled various functions – educational, propagandistic, or self-reflective – while the image of America perpetually changed.

In my dissertation I examine three collections of texts produced in the last two decades by Russian authors who have harnessed the genre of the essay to express their opinions and impressions of the United States: Mikhail Epstein's *On the Borders of Cultures* (1995), *Amerikana* (1991) by Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, and the collection of essays by a variety of Russian authors edited by Mikhail Iossel and Jeff Parker

Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States (2004). My study focuses on the relationship between essay writing and the diversity of interpretations and representations of America in these collections. The underlying assumption in my approach to these essays is that their authors treat America as a cultural text the interpretation of which becomes essential to understanding of their own cultural placement. By turning to the essay genre, with its eclecticism, resistance to the literary canon, and orientation towards the author, the writers become free to choose any given tactic of tackling the cultural text depending on their personal circumstances and intellectual agendas.

Indeed, the intellectual agendas of all these writers are very diverse, inasmuch as their motivation to write about America is shaped by different historical and individual circumstances. What warrants the writers' personal response is the sudden disruption in their relationship with the cultural text due to a certain event that significantly alters the perception of that text. As a result of this disruption the individual has to reevaluate his or her relationship with that text and, by extension, reconfigure the self to adjust to new cultural paradigms. For the authors of the three collections that I have singled out, such a disruptive event is the abrupt change of the status of America in the context of their lives. For some authors (Vail', Genis, and Epstein) the disruption came in the form of immigration to America, whereas for other writers (the *Amerika* project) the disruption was caused by the sudden and intense presence of American popular culture in post-Soviet Russia. The grand Soviet dualistic narrative of America as a symbol of the imaginary West and a Cold-War rival had to be reevaluated in the emerging context of the world as a heterogeneous place that ushered in a myriad of competing discourses associated with America. Thus, the individual who attempted to establish a new

relationship with America was now facing a daunting task of having to reconcile the Soviet luggage of representations of America with new impressions and paradigms of critique.

The three essay projects that I discuss in this dissertation offer very distinct scenarios of the process of such reconciliation, which ultimately gives the authors a sense of liberation from cultural contestation. Mikhail Epstein, Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis acquire this sense of liberation through intellectual play in the form of cultural analysis of the phenomena of American life. These authors approach American culture with a set of different cultural codes (Russian, European, Soviet) that allow them to recode American reality and thus feel empowered by their ability to dwell, as it were, within the matrix of translation, at the crossroads of cultures. In contrast, the writers represented in the *Amerika* collection foreground their textual experience through a distinctly personal reflection on the role their perception of America has played in their lives. By doing so, they withdraw the discussion of America from the politically laden domain of popular interpretations and place it into the more neutral realm of their personal everyday life. The sense of cultural liberation for these authors comes not from intellectual play but from a rigorous revision of their long, often life-long, relationship with a cultural other. In the end, no matter what path of cultural engagement with America the authors choose, the essay becomes indispensable for representation of their personal experience, which exists in that fragmented, essayistic form.

Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the American topic has provided a particularly fertile ground for a new kind of essay-writing, and therefore could offer a

useful case study for the essay as a relatively recent phenomenon in the Russian literary and intellectual tradition.

***The History of Russian and Soviet Interest in and
Literary Representation of America***

For many Russian intellectuals, America has always been a semi-mythical place: otherworldly, unreachable, incomprehensible, and profoundly alien. The epithets are numerous, as the tradition of Russian intellectuals' apprehension of America is extensive. Russian interest in the "New World" dates back to the early 16th century, as is apparent from Maxim Grek's reference (however geographically skewed) in his theological commentary (1530) (Hasty and Fusso 6). Extremely popular translations of European geographical literature continued to nourish curiosity about the "distant land" in the 17th century. Subsequently, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idealization of the "noble savage" (identified with a Native American) along with the advent of the U.S. Constitution made a profound impression on Russian thinkers of the late 18th - early 19th century. For them, the political make-up of the new democratic state seemed like a welcome alternative to autocracy to such an extent that America became an important catalyst for Russian political thought. "[T]he newly created United States became a very influential factor in the opposition to Czarist autocracy. Its influence inspired the first political works of Russian thinkers such as Radishev and subsequently the Decembrists [...]" (Laserson 51-52).⁴ The Decembrists, a group of young liberal Russian noblemen who take their name from the abortive revolt of December 14, 1825, used the U.S. Constitution as a model for their proposed political program. American political experience was essential to the development of the group's ideas about reformation of Russia into a 'bourgeois

democracy' of a republican or constitutional monarchic type calling for the liberation of the serfs, the establishment of constitutional government, and the restructuring of Russia along federal lines. The severe suppression of the Decembrist revolt by Czar Nicholas I led to a number of repressive measures and strict censorship that limited the official circulation of information about the United States.

The first Russian eyewitness account of America appeared soon after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and the United States. Pavel Svin'in, a member of the first diplomatic mission to the United States, wrote his *Opyt zhivopisnogo puteshestviia po Severnoi Amerike (A Description of a Picturesque Journey in North America)* in 1815. Svin'in's account, which may be regarded as an example of the first Russian publicist writing on America, offered descriptions of the American Revolution, social and political institutions, technology, and everyday life. Although not uncritical – Svin'in's sketches targeted American cultural materialism, among other things – the author's writing on America was generally positive, showing genuine concern for promoting a better understanding between the two nations.

In the 1830s, when the Russian cultural elite became preoccupied with ideas of Russia's destiny vis-à-vis "the West," the interest in America as a political model for emulation slightly subsided. The two most influential intellectual movements, the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, despite their dissimilar perspectives on Russia's relationship with the West, criticized America's preoccupation with materialism (Westernizers) and focused on the absence of true spiritual values due to the lack of commonly shared religion and history (Slavophiles). Instead of approaching America as a political ideal, the Russian cultural elite began to identify with America as a nation that,

on par with Russia, formed a vibrant alternative to stagnant Europe. In this context, an incredibly influential work by Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835-1840) gave the interest in America a new impetus. For a few decades, de Tocqueville's work became the sole most important source of information about America, the country that, as professed by de Tocqueville, along with Russia was "marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe" (Zunz 135).

Nonetheless, in the second half of the 19th century America still had a somewhat mythological and otherworldly status for Russians, as a few examples from Russian literature testify. For instance, in Nikolai Chernyshevskii's 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?* (*Chto delat'?*), one of the main characters Dmitrii Lopukhov allegedly committed suicide but later it turned out that he went to America instead. Moreover, after this trip he returned under a different name, Charles Beaumont. Thus, a trip to the United States meant the death of an old self, followed by a rebirth under a different name. In another popular novel of the 1860s, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, going to America is also associated with crossing the boundary into the land of the dead. One of the protagonists of the novel, Svidrigailov, before shooting himself, asked a policeman to tell people that he went to America if they were to inquire about him. Despite this myth of America as an otherworldly place, some Russian intellectuals continued to see the United States as a real and progressive social space.

By the 1860s, the young adherents of the Populist movement (*narodnichestvo*), indefatigable seekers of a better "socialist" future inspired by ideas of Alexander Herzen and Charles Fourier about cooperative societies, began to view the United States as a testing ground for social experiments. It is then that Russian writers started visiting

America in an attempt to create an image of this country by describing their travel experiences in public lectures and autobiographical writing. Among the most influential and informative works of the time were accounts by the writers with populist leanings: Grigorii Machtet, Vladimir Korolenko, and subsequently the ethnographer Vladimir Bogoraz. These authors attempted to portray America as “objectively,” (that is, accurately and realistically) as possible. Machtet’s vivid and engaging portrayal of life in the Midwest, Korolenko’s sketches of the adversities of America urban life and Bogoraz’ reflections on the destinies and hardships of struggling immigrants and minorities supplied valuable factual information about life in the United States. Along with facts and details, these works also introduced social critique that targeted racial and social inequality and industrial barbarism of the New World. This type of critique later became the foundation for much of the Soviet negative representations of the United States.

By the beginning of the 20th century, there was already a certain tradition of America-writing that could not be ignored by ‘early Soviet de Tocquevilles.’ In 1906, Maxim Gorky undertook a trip to the United States that resulted in a series of pamphlets/sketches *In America (V Amerike)*. An unpleasant incident involving his companion Maria Andreeva and his strong anti-liberal convictions, among other things, prompted Gorky to write a rather gloomy and negative account.⁵ Gorky’s most resonant and bitter piece about America is the sketch “The City of the Yellow Devil” (“*Gorod zheltogo d’iavola*”). Here Gorky unleashes all his rhetorical ingenuity, often slipping into grotesque hyperbolization, to portray New York as an extremely oppressive and terrifying place and common people as depressed and enslaved by “ichtyosauruses of capital.” Despite the fact that Gorky’s impressions of the United States found in his

personal correspondence with friends in Russia and Europe were quite favorable, his “official” account of America was caricaturistically negative (Reilly 11). Subsequently, due to Gorky’s status and popularity in the Soviet Union, his sketches set the tone for (and lent the language to) almost all later Soviet descriptive and propagandistic narratives about the United States.

The legacies of Gorky and his predecessors re-emerged in the “American” travelogues of prominent Soviet writers who traveled to the United States in 1920s and 1930s. By that time, an image of America became associated, first and foremost, with industrialization; the United States was perceived as a paragon of modernity, while “Americanization” became synonymous with “modernization.” American technological progress became a point of genuine admiration despite the obvious clash of ideologies. Yet, along with celebration of the power of American technology, Russian writers continued the onslaught on American “cultural barrenness” and “spiritual flabbiness.” This double-edged critique is prominent in Sergei Esenin’s 1923 literary response “Iron Mirgorod” (“Zheleznyi Mirgorod”) and Vladimir Maiakovskii’s 1925 travel notes “My Discovery of America” (“Moe otkrytie Ameriki”) and his cycle of poems “Poems about America” (“Stikhi ob Amerike”). On the one hand, both Esenin and Maiakovskii did little to hide their admiration for American technological progress and the everyday life conveniences that it brought about. If for Esenin American technological dynamism represented a welcome, if unattainable, alternative to Russian rural backwardness, for Maiakovskii it invited a comparison with Russia’s revolutionary vigor and Futurist aesthetics. In the end, however, both authors saw American technology, wedded to capital, as unable to redeem the American civilization’s spiritual lethargy. This

opposition between the rich and technologically advanced but spiritually impoverished United States and the materially poor but spiritually vibrant Soviet Russia became essential for later Soviet and Russian representations of America.

The moral and aesthetic critique of the United States soon gave way to openly ideological invectives in Boris Pil'niak's 1933 work *Okay: an American Novel* (*O-kei, amerikanskii roman*). Not a political writer, Pil'niak fell out of favor with the Soviet government and was accused of being a Trotskyite because of his ideologically devious works such as the novel *The Naked Year* (*Golyi god*) and the novella *Mahogany* (*Krasnoe derevo*). Based on a three-month trip across America, Pil'niak's *Okay* was the author's (unsuccessful) attempt to restore his ideological reputation; subsequently, he was arrested and most probably shot in 1937. An anti-capitalist treatise rather than a novel, Pil'niak's work presented America as a two-dimensional embodiment of evils of the capitalist world. The author's observations of America in the midst of the depression nonetheless revolved around the perennial propaganda themes such as: exploitation of the masses by the capitalist elite; discrimination against blacks and Native Americans; dehumanizing effect of technology; obsession with money; crime, gangsterism, and moral corruption.

The early Soviet literary representations of America were crowned by perhaps the most buoyant and comprehensive account of the United States by two satirical authors Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov. Their 1937 travelogue *One-Storyed America* (*Odnoetazhnaia Amerika*) combined good humor, subtlety of observations, and a genuine desire to present America as an exciting, albeit contradictory, place. Overall, during the 1920s and 1930s the fledgling Soviet state perceived the United States as a model of modernity. America's industrial progress, especially Fordism and Taylorism, was much

admired and emulated. However, while the written accounts of the authors dispatched to America by the Soviet government recognized the benefits of American progress, they nonetheless refused to validate an American model of living as ideologically acceptable.

One can find a mild summary of this attitude in Il'f and Petrov's travelogue:

What can one say about America, which simultaneously horrifies and impresses, makes one feel sorry for it and at the same time offers an example worthy of emulation, a country that's rich and poor, talented and inept? [...] We can say honestly, hand on heart: this country is interesting to observe, but one wouldn't want to live in it.

Что можна сказаць аб Амерыке, катораіа адновременно узхасае, воххышае, вызывае жалост' і дае прымеры, достоіныя падражання, о стране богатоі, нішчэі, талантлівоі і бездарноі? [...] Мы можам сказаць чэстна, папозха руку на сердце: ету страну інтэресна набліудаць, но зхіць в неі не хохчэсія. (410)

After World War Two, and with the onset of the Cold War, literary representation of America became much more tendentious and profoundly ideologized, replete with the portrayal of horrifying social scenes and anti-capitalist propaganda. Meanwhile, the official image of the United States was becoming progressively antagonistic. It was not until the period of the "Thaw" of the early 1960s that a few privileged poets and writers like Andrei Voznesenskii, Evgenii Yevtushenko, and Viktor Nekrasov were granted an opportunity to travel to America, whereupon they produced a number of poetic and prose accounts reflecting their impressions. The works of these writers stirred much controversy inasmuch as the authors refrained from many of the Soviet anti-American rhetorical and thematic clichés in favor of a more lyrical and benevolent representation guided by a sense of (re-)discovery and reconciliation (Reilly 49-173).

Thus even during the more relaxed atmosphere of the post-Stalin era, writing about America continued to be a highly sensitive and tricky business. Literary

representation of America had to be aligned with the “Party-minded” official perspective of the Soviet state. Any diversions from this *status quo* could bring about severe repercussions, as was the case with Nekrasov’s 1962 account *Po obe sotorony okeana*. For his moderate representation of America, the author was accused of “servility to the West” (*nizkopoklonnichetvo pered zapadom*); Nekrasov subsequently immigrated to France in 1974.

Following the disparagement of Nekrasov’s work, travel writing became closely supervised by a myriad of Soviet bureaucratic functionaries to ensure “proper ideological content and purpose.” Nikita Khrushchev’s authoritative recipe for “travel prose” (*putevaia proza*), that it must “truthfully illuminate the lives and struggles of peoples,” typified most of the works of this potentially “tricky” type that made it onto the printed page, especially those dealing with the arch-rival – America (Khrushchev 32). Strict ideological supervision soon turned the literature of travel into “literature on order” (*literatura zakaza*). The author’s vision of foreign countries had to conform to an official perspective that dictated “truthful illumination.” The element of subjectivity in such works was suppressed in favor of “objective” portrayal. A Soviet writer, Daniil Granin, who traveled extensively both home and abroad and produced a substantial number of travel prose accounts of Australia, Europe, and Cuba, among other places, has the following revealing note about the status of a travel writer in his 1967 piece “Primechaniia k putevoditeliu” (“Notes to a Guide Book”):

I myself did not exist as an individual, nothing was expected of me. The tour-guide gave me all the required information and all the official preapproved impression for each monument. I didn’t have to think or act. I only needed to be present, to be like everyone else, not to lag behind or stand out in any way. But there was a time, they say, when traveling involved discovering the unknown and travelers experienced adventure and danger.⁶

The official anti-American propaganda of the 1970s and early 1980s stirred the imagination of many Russian intellectuals about America as a mythical home of great literature and “forbidden pleasures,” such as pop-culture and rock-n-roll. One of the most colorful accounts of American travels from that time, *Kruglye sutki non-stop (Around the Clock Non-Stop)* by Vasilii Aksenov, was published in 1976, in *Novyi Mir*. Aksenov’s work significantly departed from the much-abused format of travel notes as it combined elements of surrealism and explicitly subjective meditations of the narrator about the experience of transcribing his experience of America.⁷

With the advent of *perestroika*, many more writers and journalists gained permission to visit and travel extensively throughout the United States. At the time, two of the most engaging and very different accounts of America were authored by the Soviet journalist/writer Vitalii Korotich, *Litso nenavisti (The Face of Hatred)*, and by Aksenov, who was by then a writer in exile, *V poiskakh grustnogo beibi (In Search of a Melancholy Baby)*. The former work, a series of Cold-War style reportages illustrating the “class struggle and ugliness” of the social dynamic in New York, found its audience almost instantaneously as it was awarded the USSR State Prize (*Gosudarstvennaia premiia SSSR*) in 1985, whereas Aksenov’s autobiographical novel, written in America in 1987, did not reach the Russian reader until the early 1990s due to censorship.

By the end of the 1980s, in the context of the looming economic and political crisis, the ideological grip over travel writing disintegrated, but so did the institution of state-sponsored literary travel. Most Russian writers and publicists found themselves on the periphery of the cultural dialogue, unable to offer any significant compelling contributions because of the lack of first-hand experience of America. However, a few

satirical writers and performers such as Mikhail Zhvanetskii and Mikhail Zadornov were able to secure private contracts for American concert tours. Upon their return, they would indulge Russian audiences with detailed stories of the material abundance and the cultural incongruities of America to expose the political and social backwardness and the lack (from their perspective) of cultural sophistication of the late Soviet State. During the late 1980s and 1990s, satirical writers were perhaps the most popular educators of mass audiences about the West. Capitalizing on the immense popularity of the genre, they toured extensively both at home and abroad sharing their observations about cultures and cultural differences with large Russian-speaking audiences in Russia and in the West.

Given the cultural grotesqueness of the late socialist and of the early transitional period, authors like Zadornov and Zhvanetskii had no shortage of material and little restraint in the choice of themes for their caustic critique. For a while, no other writers and intellectuals had the privilege of sharing their critical impressions of the West and of the home culture to such acclaim. For a great number of Russians, especially the less privileged, deprived of opportunities to travel and bedazzled by the social disarray of the transitional period, satirical comparative “analysis” of life in America, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union often became a substitute for independent self-reflection and informed critique of other cultures.

These first attempts by satirical writers to translate some of the reality of Western life to Russian audiences were marked by a certain naïveté. Still under the influence of the late Soviet travel restrictions and isolationism, they were optimistically delighted by the mere chance to be in America.⁸ The intellectuals who were perhaps better equipped to enlighten Russian society about the West due to their more superior knowledge of

Western life were Russian emigrants. Zadornov and other intellectuals in Russia had just begun asking themselves questions like “What does it mean to be Russian?” or “Is there a future for Russia with the West?” but Russian émigré writers in exile had been grappling with these issues for quite some time. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in sight, émigré authors such as Vasilii Aksenov, Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn, Eduard Limonov, Iurii Mamleev, Joseph Brodsky, and Sergei Dovlatov suddenly gained a widespread audience that craved to learn more about life in the West – not just from the West itself but from their compatriots. It was around this time that many of the émigré writers’ works became available to the broad Soviet/Russian audience. Sergei Dovlatov’s “Chemodan” (1986, “The Suitcase”), Eduard Limonov’s *Eto ia – Edichka* (1979, *It’s me – Eddie*), and Vasilii Aksenov’s *V poiskakh grustnogo bebi* (1987, *In Search of a Melancholy Baby*) were by far the most representative and popular works that depicted American life as seen through the eyes and lives of Russian Americans. Unlike the traditional Soviet travelogues that aimed at “objective” portrayal of American life, the texts of émigré writers were often very subjective, autobiographical, and at times narcissistic. The figure of the author and the author’s personal idiosyncratic experience became central to these narratives. Moreover, these works, as any works of art, had very distinct aesthetic agendas that did not necessarily privilege verisimilitude or claims for objective representation.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Russians relinquished America’s status as a home and symbol of counter-culture and anti-Sovietism. It was now viewed as one of the models of the progressive Western civilization associated with the promise of economic prosperity and unlimited personal opportunity. At the time, this shift in Russian popular perception made America even more alluring, albeit no less distant. The general attitude

towards America was rather euphoric, “induced by unrealistic expectations of ‘becoming the West’ overnight” (Shirayev 43).

After the demise of the USSR, the United States became one of the chief advisors to the government of Russia and its fledging democratic polity about the path to capitalist prosperity and political freedom. (For a while it seemed that Alexis de Tocqueville’s prophecy of the two countries sharing the same destiny and a bright future was coming true). The importation of economic and political ideas from the States was largely accompanied by an influx of products (from theoretical paradigms to detergent commercials) that ultimately saturated the post-Soviet space. Initially, this saturation did not meet many objections, because the hermetic confines imposed on Soviet culture had created an enormous appetite for everything previously forbidden and non-Soviet. Very soon, however, it became obvious that the journey toward prosperity was much thornier than anybody could have expected. After the economic “default” crisis of the 1998, Russian people’s confidence in the U.S.-schooled reformation significantly dwindled giving way to popular anti-American sentiments. The latter were further fueled by popular dissatisfaction with United States foreign policy: the America-led NATO operation in Kosovo (1996-1999) and the American invasion of Iraq (2003).⁹

Alongside political objections, criticism that targeted American culture strongly took hold in the minds of many Russian intellectuals. The once refreshing, if not welcome, inflow of American culture (from McDonald’s to Hollywood) was now often interpreted as a cultural invasion that halted the development of national culture and/or drove cultural evolution in the “wrong direction.” And once the importation of culture significantly outweighed its domestic production (let alone its export), the rhetoric of

cultural superiority of Russia vis-à-vis the United States reemerged. While the reasons for reintroduction of such rhetoric are quite obvious, the arguments used to back up this position seem to be an extension of a similar type of discourse from the 1890s and 1920s, i.e. the time when the Russian cultural elite tried to forge a compensatory scheme in order to offset Russia's economic and political backwardness.

Throughout this complex history, America consistently stands as a catalyst for ongoing political and cultural debates permeating Russian society regarding the issues of national identity, national culture, and, in general, the destiny of Russia as a capitalist democratic state in the global context. As one Russian cultural critic put it: "In the years to come, national self-determination will be by and large self-determination vis-à-vis the Americans" ("V predstoiashchie gody natsional'noe samoopredelenie v bol'shoi mere budet samoopredeleniem po otnosheniiu k amerikantsam," Kagramanov 128). And the peculiarity of the position of the Russian intellectuals in these debates could not be any more perceptible than in its views and attitudes toward the United States, the traditionally perceived paragon of modernity and a cultural other.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, writing about America underwent a significant change, especially in its function. Apart from the obvious ideological swing, the difference between the representation of America before and after the demise of the Soviet Union was in the scope and number of representations. The influx of information disseminated by media and other "authoritative" sources inundated the now actively receptive Russian cultural space with an immense number of images of the United States, a great share of these images originating from the most productive engineer of representations of America – American culture itself (and especially Hollywood).

Subsequently, a Russian intellectual evolved into an expert “perverted with knowledge” (to use L. Tolstoy’s expression) of representations of America to such an extent that any further inquiry into the nature of the object seemed almost superfluous. As Igor Shevelev put it in his essay “America as It Is and Is Not”:

America for Russians is not so much a political science issue as a psychoanalytical problem. It is dear to me personally as a *constant source of thoughts about it*. Perhaps it has nothing to do with reality. But Russians do not care” (142). [my emphasis]

As such, America has recently become a contested intellectual common place; and personal apprehension of this fact warranted an exchange of subjective opinions, not necessarily founded upon an immediate experience.

Thus, in the 1990s and early 2000s writing about America was moving away from Soviet literary paradigms that emphasized “objectivity” and “typicality” of perspective. Russian writers were now free from the responsibility of educating the masses and could focus on the privacy of their own experience of America. It is thus not accidental that many authors turned to the genre of the subjective essay as a vehicle for presentation of their individual experience of America. Thus, the focus of America-writing shifted from America as a direct object of description to America as an indirect object, whose main function is to highlight the author’s subjectivity. Ultimately, one could say that writing about America evolved into more of an experiment or an experience (*opyt*), one directed at the subject’s attempt to observe and understand not the much contested other, America, but the *self* through its relationship with that other. America has become a cultural text, the interpretation of which is used to underscore the subjectivity of the interpreter rather than the meaning of the text. And the form that some writers chose to describe that *opyt* was a relatively new one: the essay.

The Many Uses of the Essay

The essay, as a genre and form, is a fairly new phenomenon on the Russian literary scene. In a recent, 1999, interview, poet and writer Igor' Pomerantsev shared the following sentiment:

[...] In a way this genre [essay] has been lost in Russian literature. We've had what we call the *ocherk*, a sketch or feature in a newspaper or journal, which has been part of 'underground' writing as well as of the official press. But that's different from the essay, which is the genre of the mature personality – and until now there hasn't been a place for mature, independent personalities in Russia. [...]. But for me, as a Russian, it's existentially interesting to try myself out in this genre – to discover whether I have a personality. (Sally 211-12)

According to Pomerantsev, then, there is a salient difference between the *ocherk* and the essay, which is seen as a genre associated with discovery and affirmation of one's personality. Indeed, in the Russian language, there are two terms that are used, often interchangeably, to refer to the English word 'essay' – *esse* and *ocherk*. The works that I analyze in this dissertation are written in the essay (*esse*) form/genre. This formal designation is made either by the publishers or by the authors themselves. In fact, some authors in later editions of their essays now begin referring to their works as *esse* rather than *ocherki*, the term that they used in the earlier editions.¹⁰ I find this shift very telling, because in the Russian literary tradition *ocherk* and *esse* have a more or less distinct existence, as Pomerantsev reminds us, attached to concrete literary practices. Let us turn to a few relevant definitions.

Literaturnyi Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar' (*The Literary Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1987) offers the following definition of *esse*:

Esse (from French – an attempt, trial, *ocherk* (*sketch*)) is a short prosaic composition with free structure that expresses individual impressions or opinions about a certain situation or subject matter and does not presuppose a definitive or

conclusive interpretation of the matter. As a rule, *esse* presumes a new, subjective word about something; it can have a philosophical, historical-biographical, publicistic, literary, critical, popular scholarly, or purely belletristic character. The style of the *esse* is marked by figurativeness (*obraznost'*), aphoristicity, and tendency towards the spoken word and intonation. From the earliest times, it [the style] formed in compositions in which the personality of the author (*lichnost' avtora*) came to the fore. (516)

The author of the article, V. S. Murav'ev, then goes on to list writers that were instrumental to the development of essaysim: Michel de Montaigne, John Donne, Henry Fielding, Johann Herder, Jean-Paul Sartre, Thomas Mann, and others, noting that: "Eminent writers, poets, and philosophers turned to the essay genre to popularize the achievements of scientific and humanitarian thought and to foster a closer dialogue between scholarly interests of readers." As for the Russian tradition of essayism, Murav'ev notes: "For Russian and Soviet literature, the genre of *esse* is not so characteristic" (*menee kharakteren*); although, according to the author, some examples of essayistic style can be found in the works by Aleksandr Pushkin, Aleksandr Herzen, Lev Shestov, Vasilii Rozanov, Il'ia Erenburg, and a few others (516).

Unlike the *esse*, the *ocherk* has a much larger presence in the Russian literary tradition. Some of the earliest examples of the literary *ocherk* date back to the 18th century. Nikolai Novikov's and Ivan Krylov's satirical writing, Aleksandr Radishchev's *Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu* (*The Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, 1790) and Nikolai Karamzin's *Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika* (*Letters of a Russian Traveller*, 1789-1790) are some of the earliest works written in this genre (Brown 29; Terras 421). By combining literary and journalistic elements, the *ocherk* presented the author's commentary on factual and typical phenomena of external reality as witnessed by the author.

The kind of *ocherk* that was most influential on Russian literature of the mid-19th century was the *physiological sketch* (*fiziologicheskii ocherk*) that came to Russia from France. One of its great practitioners was Honoré de Balzac who in his “physiologies” of Parisians gave the *sketch* its distinctive form and orientation towards naturalism. The principle that the *sketch* adopted following Balzac’s work was “that of conveying the sense of a sociological class by relating (usually in the present tense) salient [typical] features in the behaviour of a composite figure – a representative, but imaginary example” (Hutchings 53-4). Russian authors from Saltykov-Shchedrin and Turgenev to Chekhov and Gorky in their portrayal of the everyday provincial and urban life were in many ways influenced by this literary genre.

Other kinds of *ocherk* emerged in the 19th century in conjunction with the emergence of new classes and social movements. For example, the *enlightening ocherk* (*prosvetitel'skii ocherk*) appeared in 1860s-1870s to introduce the social attitudes of the emerging middle class. Other social movements, such as populism and liberal populism (*narodnichestvo* and *liberal'noe narodnichestvo*), also produced their *ocherk* literature to express their vision of the social reality.

In the early Soviet period, the *ocherk* played an important role as a genre employed in Soviet official prose to portray the “successful revolutionary remodeling of reality.” The *ocherk* became a mighty weapon of Soviet propaganda, despite a few unsuccessful attempts by the Soviet avant-garde to liberate it from political ideology in favor of an aesthetic privileging documentary presentation of reality, the “literature of fact” (*literatura fakta*), as opposed to its fictional refraction in imaginative literature (*literatura vymysla*). Thus, in the Soviet literary tradition, the *ocherk*, having combined

the early characteristics of typicality, naturalism, realism, and social engagement, evolved into one of the leading genres of Socialist Realist representation and critique of reality as is apparent from a substantial article devoted to it in the *Literaturnaia Entsiklopediia* (*The Literary Encyclopedia*) published in 1934:

Ocherk is a literary genre, the distinguishing feature of which is the artistic (*khudozhestvennoe*) description of predominantly singular phenomena of reality interpreted by the author in their typicality (*v ikh tipichnosti*). What is central to the *ocherk* is the author's first-hand experience of the object. The main feature of the *ocherk* is drawing from life. [...] Typicality (*tipizatsiia*) in the *ocherk* is achieved through the choice of typical phenomena or typical characteristics of a certain phenomenon. The descriptive character of the *ocherk* determines its compositional structure. The *ocherk* may have no plot, or the plot may be downplayed. The author of the *ocherk* often shifts from one phenomenon, or its constituent, to the other, thus only sketching out their interrelation. Not bound by the necessity to present the development of the action clearly, the author of the *ocherk*, more often than the authors of other genres, interferes with the described events from the first-person point of view. This kind of interference allows for a more liberal combination of the material and more diverse comparisons, analogies, etc.

Furthermore, in much the same Marxist vein, the *ocherk* was perceived as a critical genre especially during “the period of formation of a new literary ideology by an emerging class, when the active stance of the class requires immediate interference with new conditions of life. Similar circumstances determine the superior role of the *ocherk* among the established class that, due to certain cataclysms of history, recognizes the necessity of construing the world anew” (381-187).

From the Soviet definitions of the *ocherk* and the *esse* it becomes apparent that the essential differences between the two lie in the relationship between the author and her/his material. Where the *esse* emphasizes the author's individual and subjective treatment of the subject matter with no restrictions on how the matter should be approached, the *ocherk* ties the author's perspective to class consciousness and calls for

the treatment of the subject matter in its typicality. Hence the difference in the function of the *esse* and the *ocherk*: if the former is appropriated to foster dialogue within an intellectual community with no ideological agenda attached, the latter is supposed to actively participate in social and ideological restructuring and critique. It is thus not accidental that the *ocherk*, as a genre wedded to the class-conscious typicality, became crucial to the development of the Soviet Socialist Realism, whereas the *esse*, as a genre linked to intellectual freedom and rational autonomy, was considered until very recently only in the context of the Western literary and philosophical tradition.

It is thus not coincidental that the *ocherk* became the major genre of Soviet travel prose. Already in the 1920s, the travel essay (*putevoi ocherk*) acquired a distinct ideological agenda that operated within the binary opposition of one's own (*svoe*) and alien (*chuzhoe*) environment. The negative portrayal of alien space, in its typicality, was used to empower the belief in the righteousness of one's own environment (Balina, *Literatura puteshestvii* 898). Examples of the enactment of such an agenda can be found in almost all Soviet accounts of foreign travel, especially in the travel essays about America (M. Gorky, V. Maiakovskii, I. Filatov). The travel writer going abroad fulfilled the function of a missionary-traveler who carried the "truth" of the Soviet land to foreign countries and returned with the "truth about the struggles of people" abroad. The author of this kind of travel prose fashioned him-/herself as a typical representative of the Soviet Union devoid of the individuality of perspective. Only by the late 1960s and 1970s did there appear a few travel accounts by the authors, such as Daniil Granin, Grigorii Baklanov, Vasilii Aksenov and Andrei Bitov, among others, who managed to step away from the already over-tired genre of the *putevoi ocherk* in favor of a new kind of prose,

the important components of which were confessional autobiographicity (Balina, *Literatura puteshestvii* 907). The author was now finally able to claim some space for the description of the personal inward spiritual quest.

This is not to say, however, that *ocherk* was successfully forgotten. In fact, it persevered more than ever, especially when it came down to writing about such ideologically sensitive topics as life in the United States. The *putevoi ocherk* remained the dominant genre of travel writing until the late 1980s. Its legacy, preserved in the “memory of the genre,” to use Bakhtin’s term, is still a daunting obstacle for any Russian author sitting down to reflect on their experience of a foreign country or one’s own, for that matter. The essays of the writers that I analyze in this study exhibit, as I hope to show, precisely that tension caused by the necessity to break away from the legacies of a by-now bastardized form and, by extension, its corrupted paradigms of representation.

The Essay and Culturology

Unlike the *ocherk*, the *esse* was virtually obliterated from the official Soviet literary scene. The scarcity of Soviet/Russian scholarly publications on this genre testifies to the void in Soviet essay-writing, with a few exceptions of Osip Mandelshtam, Viktor Shklovskii, Marina Tsvetaeva, Andrei Siniavskii, Sergei Averintsev, Georgii Gachev. The only scholarly treatment that this genre received was in conjunction with the study of Western practitioners of the essay, such as Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, or Mark Twain. One of the few scholars who gave the essay genre some notable consideration was the Moscow philosopher and critic Mikhail Epstein.

In his early, 1982, piece “An Essay On The Essay” (“Esse ob Esse”) Epstein made an attempt to outline the main properties of the essay genre. Parallel to his work on the essay, Epstein began to elaborate a theory of “transculture” that sought to incorporate the practices of Russian culturology as a “discipline that investigates the diversity of cultures and their common underlying principles,” in order to be able to affect culture creatively not through Art but through meta-cultural practices (*After the Future* 296). Ultimately, Epstein’s conception of essayism became wedded to “transculture” as a practice. I will discuss these connections below in more detail. But first, I outline briefly Epstein’s idea for the essay genre and essayism as a practice.

There are three properties of the essay that are central to Epstein’s theory:

1) The eclecticism of the essay that keeps it free from genre constraints and allows the essay to stay on the borders of various disciplines and modes of expression:

The essay is part confession, part discursive argument, and part narrative – it is like a diary, a scholarly article, and a story all in one. It is a genre legitimated by its existence outside any genre.

Esse – chast’iu priznanie, kak dnevnik, chast’iu rassuzhdenie, kak stat’ia, chast’iu povestvovanie, kak rasskaz. Eto zhanr, kotoryi tol’ko i derzhitsia svoei printsipial’noi vnezhanrovost’iu. (*Amerussia* 484-85)¹¹

2) The liberating power of the essay that allows the author to feel free in the process of essayistic play and the creation of an individual myth:

Essaysim is a mythology based on *authorship*. The self-consciousness of a single individual tests the limits of its freedom and plays with all possible conceptual connections in the unity of the world. In an essay, individual freedom is not negated in the name of a myth, with its tendency for depersonalization, but flourishes in the right to individual myth. This authorial, mythopoetic freedom, which includes freedom from the impersonal logic of myth itself, constitutes the foundation of the genre.

“Esseism – mifologija, osnovannaja na *avtorstve*. Samosoznanie odinochki oprobujet vse svoi vozmozhnye, ponevole odnositel’nye svyazi v edinstve mira. Svoboda lichnosti ne otritsaetsja zdes’ v pol’zu “obezlichivajushchego” mifa, no vyrastaet do prava tvorit’ individual’nyj mif, obretat’ vnelichnoe i sverkhlichnoe v samoi sebe. Eta avtorskaja svoboda mifotvorchestva, vključajushchaja svobodu ot nadlichnoj logiki samogo mifa, formiruet sam žanr. (*Amerussia* 490-91)

3) The unifying power of the essay that brings together the fragmented parts of culture into a unique totality that is not totalitarian. In other words, the essay, and essayism by extension, connects differences but doesn’t destroy their uniqueness, as is the case with totalitarian mythologies:

Essayism rejoins fragmented portions of culture. But in so doing, essayism leaves enough space between them for play, irony, reflection, alienation, and defamiliarization. These are definitely antagonistic to the dogmatic rigidity of all mythologies based on *authority*.

Esseism vossoedinaet raspavshiesja časti kul’tury – ne ostavljajet mezhdju nimi to prostranstvo igry, ironii, refleksii, ostranennosti, kotorye reshitel’no vrazhdebnyj dogmatičeskoj nepreklonnosti vsekh mifologii, osnovannykh na *avtoritete*. (*Amerussia* 491)

Thus, Epstein outlines not only the major properties of the essay as a genre, but also extends these properties to essayism as a cultural practice that lays the foundation of his culturological theory, which he calls “transculture.”

Epstein’s ideas of “transculture,” with its reliance on essayism, reflect the traditions of Russian culturology. Culturology can be thought of as a Russian equivalent to Western “multiculturalism” or the Anglo-Saxon tradition of cultural studies. However, unlike the relatively overtly politically engaged approach of cultural studies or “multiculturalism” (often tied to a certain political agenda) culturology remains avowedly politically disengaged, its field being “philosophical, speculative, anthropological, and often openly ‘ethnographic.’” Culturologists ask questions such as: What is a community?

How does a culture change and survive crises? Can one culture study another culture that is radically different from it? Can cultures genuinely learn from each other – and if so, on what basis – or can they only exploit and assimilate, that is interact solely in terms of dominance and power? “ (Emerson, “Keeping the Self Intact” 107). This scholarly tradition is represented by Iurii Lotman, Mikhail Bakhtin, Sergei Averintsev, Vladimir Bibler, and Alexei Losev among others.

Much influenced by Bakhtin, Epstein conceives his “transcultural” theory as a theoretical extension of culturology. While culturology, according to Epstein, is the self-awareness of culture, “transculture is the self-transformation of culture, the totality of theories and practices that liberate culture from its own repressive mechanisms” (*Transcultural Experiments* 24). In other words, culturology supplies analysis and self-reflection, whereas “transculture” brings together the disjointed parts of self-reflection and analysis into a unity that is not totalitarian. This unity doesn’t really belong to any one part of culture; it stays inside culture, while being, as it were, outside it, on the *borders* or on the *crossroads*. Thus, it is the conscious staying on the borders, in no-man’s-land so to speak, that liberates one from the constraints of one’s native culture of identity, assuring personal (intellectual) agency and cultural renovation. Keeping these ideas in mind, it becomes apparent that the essay, as described by Epstein, with its accentuated and vital fragmentariness, an emphasis on personal agency and mythopoesis, and a unified but fluid and playful wholeness, is a perfect genre to carry out the task of creative liberation from culture.¹² This vision of Epstein’s is extrapolative, one could say even futuristic. The essay may very well have the attributes and potentialities that Epstein ascribes to it, but the Russian literary and intellectual tradition is moving slowly towards

capitalizing on these potentialities, as I show in this study. After all, the word always seems to get through the window whenever theory holds the door for it wide open.

Thus, the authors of the texts that I analyze in this dissertation, including Epstein himself, appropriate only certain aspects of essayism outlined by Epstein's theory. As I demonstrate in Chapter one, Mikhail Epstein's essays in the collection *On the Borders of Cultures (Na granitsakh kul'tur)* exhibit the characteristics of the *ocherk* rather than the essay (*esse*) of the author's own theory. In his texts Epstein appears to be writing on behalf of "Russian consciousness" attempting to capture the "signs of Americanness" and analyze them against the Soviet/Russian context. This agenda leads the author to lapse into the paradigm of 'typicality,' which is a dominant strategy of the *ocherk*. Epstein's essays do not overtly assert the individuality of the author as the ultimate source of his judgments because rather than presenting the authorial self that exhibits a unique subjectivity Epstein seeks to integrate the self into a public body. And yet, the author deploys a number of rhetorical techniques, such as irony, to indicate the parodic nature of his essays, particularly with regard to his stance as an "objective" narrator. Finally, I demonstrate that Epstein's peculiar maneuvering is quite consistent with his theory that emphasizes dwelling on the borders of cultures and discourses as a way towards liberation from culture.

In Chapter two, I focus on the ways Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis deploy their "lyrical culturology" to engage in a playful interaction with the phenomena of American culture/ everyday life. The essay for these authors is a vehicle primarily for cultural critique that results from their first-hand experience of life in the United States. At the same time, they use the essay to reflect on the ways this cultural critique contributes to

the evolution of their understanding of American culture and their own place in it. From the outset, the authors set up a dialogic framework for their essayistic investigations that is based on two types of approaches to America: one embraces American values and the democratic way of life and the other is marked by general skepticism about the values of life under democracy. Thus, the entire collection exhibits a dialogic tension, which the authors fuel with real-life examples and allusions to various authority figures and discourses. In the end, as I show, the skeptical perspective prevails. Nonetheless, the texts of these authors demonstrate how the essay can be used as a tool for discursive play and self-reflection that is both enlightening and empowering.

In Chapter three, I turn to the essays by various Russian authors that appear in the collection *Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States* and the online journal of literary essays *America in My Life (Amerika v moei zhizni)*. Unlike Epstein, and Vail' and Genis, who engage in the culturological and philosophical maneuvering attempting to negotiate intellectual autonomy, the writers from the two collections take advantage of the essay form to situate America in the context of their personal mythologies. The fact that most of these authors have never traveled to the United States shifts the focus of writing from the reflection of the object to self-reflective analysis of the author's idiosyncratic experience of it. America here serves, to quote W.H. Auden, more like a "background to a torso" – an intellectual common place and a text, while the written account of its reading serves as a mechanism of asserting individuality.

In this study's conclusion, I draw on Iurii Lotman's semiotic theory of the self to suggest a reading of the essays as texts oriented towards what Lotman theorizes as 'autocommunication.'

Notes to Introduction

¹ “Cheliabinsk-Moscow.” In *Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States*. Ed. M. Iossel and Jeff Parker. [Normal, Ill]: Dalkey Archive Press. 2004. 14.

² In this study I use the word ‘intellectuals’ to refer to the educated stratum of the Russian society rather than ‘intelligentsia,’ a concept that is used – referentially and self-referentially – by Russian cultural elite to refer to a particular, historically determined, social group that is thought to fulfill particular social and intellectual functions within the society.

³ I refer here to Aleksandr Radishchev’s 1781 ode “Liberty” (“Vol’nost”) and Vasilii Aksenov’s 1976 travelogue *Around the Clock, Non-Stop (Kruglye sutki non-stop)*.

⁴ Quoted in Fusso and Hasty, 7.

⁵ At the time of their visit to America Gorky and Andreeva were not officially married. American media promptly took advantage of this flaw in the biography of a pro-Bolshevik writer. As a result, Gorky and Andreeva were denied service at a number of hotels.

⁶ Quoted in Balina, M. “A Prescribed Journey: Russian Travel Literature From the 1960s to the 1980s.” 261.

⁷ For a discussion of *Kruglye sutki*, see D. Barton Johnson, “Aksenov as Travel Writer: Round the Clock, Non-Stop,” in *Vasilii Pavlovich Aksenov: a Writer in Quest of Himself*, Ed., Edward Mozejko. 181-191.

⁸ In her analysis of M. Zadornov’s travel notes from America, Olga Mesropova calls this naïve perspective of a traveler “tourist-as-child.” See her article “From Infantile Regression to Post-Tourist Breakthrough: America in Two Russian Travelogues of the 1990s.” *SEEJ*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2004): 27-40.

⁹ The tragic events of September 11, 2001, seemed to have swayed the pendulum of public attitude toward the more benevolent side.

¹⁰ See, for example, Epstein’s *Collected Essays* (2005) and *On the Borders of Cultures* (1995).

¹¹ Translated by Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover.

¹² In a way, Epstein’s idea of the “essayization” of culture is similar to Bakhtin’s idea of the “novelization” of literature. Bakhtin emphasized the novel’s resistance to canonization, its placticity, and its perpetual self-examination. See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic*

Imagination. Ed. by Michael Holquist. Tr. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, 2002. 39-40.

Chapter One

‘Philosophical pop’: Mikhail Epstein’s Essays from the Borders

Mikhail Epstein is a Moscow-born philosopher-turned-culturologist, who upon emigration to the United States, in 1990, produced a collection of essays *On the Borders of Cultures* (“Na granitzakh kul’tur”), 1994, offering a comparative analysis of Soviet, American, and Russian cultures. Throughout the early 1990s, many of Epstein’s essays from this collection appeared in Russian periodicals and were broadcast for Russian audiences on *Radio Liberty, New York*.

In the “Essay on Essay,” 1982, Epstein thus defines essaysim:

Essayism is a mythology based on *authorship*. The self-consciousness of a single individual tests the limits of its freedom and plays with all possible conceptual connections in the unity of the world. In an essay, individual freedom is not negated in the name of a myth, with its tendency for depersonalization, but flourishes in the right to individual myth. (*Amerussia*, 490)

The essay form then, according to Epstein, can be regarded as one of the major vehicles for asserting individuality. The essays in the collection *On the Borders* exhibit a tension that may seem to be somewhat at odds with Epstein’s own conception of essayism.

Rather than emphasizing the author’s right to individual myth, Epstein sets out on the shaky path of conflating his narrator with the subjectivity of “Russian consciousness” (“russkoe samosoznanie”) on whose behalf the author speaks and to whom he addresses his thoughts. The plethora of self-ironic meta-textual commentaries betrays Epstein’s

fears of being taken as a sort of broadcaster of collective wisdom. To shift focus from the figure of the author, Epstein conceives a genre for his texts that he calls *filosoficheskii lubok* and defines it as folk philosophy. Thus, speaking on behalf of the “Russian consciousness,” Epstein downplays authorial individuality.

Yet, Epstein’s analysis of Russian and American cultures suggests that the authorial perspective, although not always clearly defined and often purposefully dodged, does not necessarily coincide with that of the mythical “Russian consciousness.” The author’s point of view, informed by his personal ethical and aesthetic preferences, class, gender, education, and a unique set of personal circumstances illicitly stands out in a few texts and points to the authorial individual subjectivity which the author otherwise tries to downplay. However, taking into account Epstein’s theoretical work on “transculture” that, among other things, advocates transcending the borders of one’s identity in order to gain a different level of understanding, it becomes apparent that Epstein simply withholds the finality of the authorial position lest it should interfere with the process of free self-discovery on part of the author *and* the reader. The author, therefore, uses the essays not to broadcast his reformed self but to outline the frontiers within which the self vacillates in the process of self-discovery. This process, Epstein seems to intimate, is very similar to the way in which a culture seeks to redefine itself at a certain historical juncture.

Transculture, Transcultural Practices and Essayism

Mikhail Epstein is a prolific cultural critic, essayist, and literary scholar. As a cultural theorist he is renowned for his research on Russian Postmodernism and applications of postmodern theories to the Russian/Soviet context. At the same time,

Mikhail Epstein is one of the most avid advocates of cross-cultural relations and an active researcher of theories of transcultural communication. In 1990, Epstein immigrated to the United States and soon joined the faculty of Emory University, Atlanta, as a professor of Russian and Cultural Theory. While in the Soviet Union, Epstein, inspired by the work of such culturologists and moral philosophers as Mikhail Bakhtin, Vladimir Bibler, and Nikolai Berdiaev, pursued ideas of transcending the boundaries of (national) culture by way of culturological and transcultural practices.

Already in the 1980s, while still in the Soviet Union, Epstein started developing ways to adapt the scholarly apparatus of culturology to social transformative practices. Epstein's first concrete ideas and formulations of the transcultural project date back to early 1983, when he was seriously contemplating alternative approaches to Soviet culture. In search of a "post-Soviet" mentality capable of challenging both pro-Soviet and dissident models of cultural activity, Epstein recognized the necessity for a cultural practice that would lead to internal "creative erosion" rather than a forceful demise of Soviet culture. Attempting to divorce culture from politics, Epstein developed and advocated an estranged perspective on Soviet culture that would allow analyzing it as a cultural phenomenon in its own right. The approach, and the analysis that it shapes, would have to be different from other subversive artistic projects such as, for example, Conceptualism or Sots Art, as they are not comprehensive and analytic enough. Epstein was really after something more *total*, a practice that would come not from separate branches of culture, say literature or art, but from culture in its entirety. Thus Epstein attempts to mobilize Russian intellectuals, engaged in diverse areas of intellectual pursuit, to transcend their cultural identities and reflect collectively and creatively on phenomena

of Soviet culture in a manner that would allow appearance of a meta-cultural discourse: speculative, analytic and politically disengaged.

After his move to the United States, Epstein adds yet another dimension to his transcultural project – cross-cultural. What originated as an attempt to analyze and transcend Soviet culture became a project of transcending national culture and, ultimately, culture itself. Although our goal here is far from providing detailed critique of Epstein’s ideas about transculture and their theoretical implications, identifying some central tenets of his theory could aid in understanding the analytical context that shaped the author’s approach to America.

In his book, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Epstein describes culturology as a practice that introduces a much-needed element of self-reflection to culture helps avoid self-centeredness and stagnation: “Official culture resisted intimate scrutiny or comparison with other cultures, claiming for itself a kind of super-historical and super-cultural status. It failed to develop the need or capacity for self-reflection, and it is precisely this that constitutes culturology” (285). Following the idea of Mikhail Bakhtin of *vnenakhodimost’* (being located outside) as an essential condition for creative understanding of an *other*, and, by extension, of understanding *self*, Epstein develops his notion of transculture¹.

What is transculture, then? Epstein understands culturology as a study in diversity of cultures and their “common underlying principles” (296). In addition to its epistemological merits, culturology has an empowering existential effect as it liberates an individual from the constraints of culture². Thus, culturology is not only a scholarly

discipline but also a practice that “contains some possibilities that lead beyond the realm of scholarship, into certain practices that we call “transcultural”” (23). In *Transcultural Experiments* (1999), the book that he co-authored with Ellen Berry, Epstein offers the following, among many, description of transculture:

Transculture is a way to transcend our “given” culture and to apply culture’s transformative forces to culture itself. Transculture is the second order of “culturality” of culture, its capacity for self-cultivation and self-transcendence. If culturology is the self-awareness of culture, then transculture is the self-transformation of culture, the totality of theories and practices that liberate culture from its own repressive mechanisms. (23-24)

Therefore, transculture is not only a condition or a scholarly method that aids understanding, but also a large-scale (meta-meta-)cultural practice with liberating and ameliorative teleology. What is at stake then for an individual engaged in transcultural practice? Does that mean that our ethnic and cultural identities could be compromised, jeopardized, or eroded by transcultural practices? No, Epstein assures:

Transcultural practice is not a diminishment of or confrontation with our cultural selves but rather a way of expanding the limits of our ethnic, professional, linguistic, and other identities to new levels of indeterminacy and “virtuality.” (24-25)

And further:

Culture, by releasing us from physical limitations, imposes new limitations, of symbolic order, and transculture is the next step in the ongoing human quest for freedom, in this case liberation from the “prison house of language” and the variety of artificial, self-imposed, and self-deified cultural identities. (25)

In other words, transcultural practice does not lead to entrenchment in one’s cultural identity by contrasting it to the *other* but rather makes one’s identity more loose, taking it to an even higher degree of indeterminacy. Finally, in addition to transculture’s scholarly and ameliorative objectives, there is also an ontological aspect to it: “Although it is a theoretical extension of culturology, the transcultural model is not just a field of

knowledge but also a mode of being, located at the crossroads of cultures” (25). Based on these definitions then, we can discern three major aspects of transculture being advanced by Epstein: epistemological, transformative, and ontological.

To drive the complex objectives of transculture and to make it truly a *practice*, theory has to find appropriate avenues of concretization. Epstein outlines a number of possible genres that could accommodate the complexity of transcultural practice and its agendas:

Since transculture is the self-construction of culture, the project becomes its principal genre. A project is a theory that justifies in advance a certain practice but does not predetermine its realization. There are a number of projects that exemplify the current stage of transculture: the “lyrical museum,” the “ultimate work,” “epistemological practice,” “neo-lubok,” “collective improvisation.” (*TE*, 37)

Among the projects that were in fact realized and turned out to be quite productive was *collective improvisation*. The improvisations originated in a form of collective writing, and commenting on that writing, on arbitrary topics about culture within a small group of Epstein’s colleagues and friends, such as the artist Il’ia Kabakov and sociologist Iosif Bakshtein. The shared immediacy and intimacy of writing allowed the three intellectuals to appreciate the difference of their perspectives on the same subject, to aid understanding of their own perspective in conjunction with the others’ commentaries. Between 1982-1987, in Moscow, the improvisations became more public and more frequent (monthly); they attracted participants from various walks of intellectual life and their guests. The topics of improvisations were mostly taken from the politically neutral domain of the everyday life. Some of the topics included: garbage, hockey, jealousy, berries, pain, weather, money, etc. The process of improvisation often went through six stages: 1) collective discussion of the topics; 2) writing individual essays; 3) reading and

discussion of the essays; 4) writing an essay/commentary based on the discussion of the essays; 5) discussion of the meta-commentaries; 5) summary of written materials in a “collective monograph” (41-42). These public experiments in *creative communication*, wedded to the practice of collective writing, turned out to be closely associated with the *essay* as a literary form and a form of social interaction. In Epstein’s own words:

“Improvisation is the social extension of essayism, which, starting in individual creativity, grows into a model of a new community shaped across cultural boundaries” (34).

Essay writing, further complicated by other meta-textual manipulations, thus becomes one of the central forms transcultural expression. In fact, one can see that Epstein finds a close affinity between essayistic thinking and transcultural being. In the essay “At the Crossroads of Image and Concept: Essayism in the Culture of the Modern Age,” Epstein thus characterizes essayistic thinking:

The basic property of essayistic thought – to remain always within a mode of openness – might be called *antitotalitarian totalization*. In a single act of consciousness, an essay can shatter the falsehood of a petrified whole and then re-create from its pieces a new whole possessed of internal dynamism.

[E]ssayism can become the conductive wire between opposed tendencies – integrative ones as well as differentiating ones – and in the struggles between them, it takes both sides, defending the intermediary position of culture itself and its interests in a multiple and complex unity. (*After the Future* 250-251)

In other words, Epstein approaches the essay as a form of thinking that is meant to deconstruct culture in its rigidity, and reinvent it dialogically so as to create a new whole that is flexible and dynamic. By extension then, essayism is a sort of culture-conscious practice that fosters dialogic creativity leading to a new dynamic *totality* unburdened by rigidity and finiteness:

With the increasing integration of human reason, its powers will move into precisely the realm of such transcultural creative work, in the sense that transculture is a mode of culture created not from within its separate spheres, but organically in the holistic forms of culture itself – within the field of interaction of all its constituent parts. Our entire post-communist culture can become a laboratory in which all previous cultural forms and styles are rediscovered and intermingled in a new *nontotalitarian totality*. (292)

Just as the essay (or a particular kind of essay) stages an encounter between various perspectives and serves as a mediator, the transcultural mode of culture works to accrue diverse cultural experiences to interrogate the established cultural status quo. Thus, going by Epstein's framework, acts of "antitotalitarian totalization" (essay) appear to be shaping the "nontotalitarian totality" (transculture), while also being miniature models of this totality. For some concrete examples of essayistic thought contributing to transcultural vision let us now turn to Epstein's essays on Soviet, American, and Russian culture.

'Philosophical pop' from the Borders: Genre and Form

In 1990, Mikhail Epstein emigrated from Russia and settled in the United States. Thus, finding himself "located outside" of his native culture, Epstein embarked on a number of cross-cultural projects. After receiving a fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, he spent a year at the Kennan Institute, in DC, working on comparative analysis of American and Russian cultures. The bulk of this work, in the form of essays, became part of the collection *On the Borders of Cultures: Russian – American – Soviet (Na granitsakh kul'tur: rossiiskoe – amerikanskoe – sovetskoe, 1995)*. Since then, Epstein has been an active participant and organizer of various cultural projects and events, both in Russia and the U.S., that aim to foster

“creative understanding” between the two cultures. For his contributions to the advancement of cross-cultural interactions, more specifically Russian-American, Epstein was awarded the Liberty Prize in 2000.

Mikhail Epstein found himself at the crossroads of cultures at the same very time when Russian culture found itself at the crossroads of history. In the early 1990s, an aspiring democracy, Russia became an avid importer of American democratic ideas along with cultural products, codes, and paradigms. Cultural critics and theorist could not help but notice the incongruous hybridity of cultural and social forms³ that emerged as a result of hyper-modernization of Russian society through juxtaposition of Western, Soviet, and Russian cultural, political, and social codes. America, being the main source of Western codes, more than ever became associated with a dream for a better modern society. Given such an intense presence of America on the post-Soviet scene, many cultural critics and intellectuals once again directed their critical eye at America, its culture and civilization, to scrutinize the “ideal” of the Westward bound Russia. In other words, America became even more popular, now not only as a symbol of everything anti-Soviet but also a paragon of a modern Western democracy, which Russia aspired to become one day.

Thus Mikhail Epstein’s inquiry into American culture and civilization is shaped, on the one hand, by the author’s advantageous perspective, theoretically prepared and geographically reinforced, from the borders of three cultures: Soviet-American-Russian. On the other hand, Epstein’s approach to America is affected by the important historical moment: Russia’s voracious and peculiar appropriation of Western ideas coming mostly from America. Ultimately, Epstein’s project seems to fulfill two functions: 1) to take advantage of having a unique perspective on cultures due to being located, as it were,

outside; and 2) to share the ideas, gained with the aid of this perspective, with the audiences in Russia through the collection of essays, some of which were also broadcast to Russia via *Radio Liberty* in New York.

In the introduction to “On the Borders of Cultures...” Epstein prudently cautions the reader:

In this book, I do not claim to offer a description of the American civilization as such; what interests me are the *signs* of Americanness that could work in the consciousness of contemporary Russia as points of reference for her possible entry into the circle of “other,” “developed,” “serene” civilizations. Thus, the book focuses on the contrasts of 1) the American and the Soviet, 2) the Russian and the Soviet – and hence 3) the phenomena of convergence of the Russian and the American.

Ia ne pretenduiu v etoi knige na opisaniie amerikanskoi tsivilizatsii kak takovoi, menia interesuiut te *znaki* amerikanskogo, kotorye mogut rabotat' v samosoznanii sovremennoi Rossii kak orientiry eio vozmozhnogo vkhozhdeniia v krug “drugikh,” “razvitykh,” “blagopoluchnykh” tsivilizatsii.

Takim obrazom, v knige rassmatrivauiutsia kontrasty 1) amerikanskogo i sovetskogo, 2) rossiiskogo i sovetskogo – i vznikaiushchie otsiuda 3) fenomeny sblizheniia rossiiskogo i amerikanskogo. (5-6)

While being very upfront about what his book is and what it is not, Epstein does not seem to be overly concerned about the purpose. The author’s disclaimer/statement of purpose seems to be rather vague and ambiguous in regards to the objectives of this book. Epstein conceives the framework for his interpretation of America as focusing on those phenomena of “Americanness” that *may*, in some way, be relevant to the process of *possible* formation of a new Russian consciousness. The agenda seems rather harmless, if a bit nebulous. In the context of Epstein’s discussion of Russia’s grotesque cultural hybridity during the transition period, one would expect perhaps a more pointed and concrete perspective from a cultural critic. Yet Epstein goes in the opposite direction: away from concreteness towards fuzziness and playful indeterminacy as conditioned by

his choice of the genre – *lubok*. This preference is certainly not accidental as it echoes the author’s earlier mentions of “neo-lubok” among potential transcultural projects (*TE* 37).

Given the fact that a number of Epstein’s essays in this collection were broadcast on the radio, the “general audience,” in the words of the author, “inadvertently dictated the constraints of the genre, that, for me, ended up turning into a sort of philosophical pop” (“Obshche-narodnaia auditoriia ponevole diktovala zakony zhanra, kotoryi slozhilsia u menia v nekii filosoficheskii lubok,” 7). So the *lubochnost’* of the genre here goes along with the author’s concern about making his texts more accessible to the general audience. Epstein also reflects on the nature of the combination of *lubok* and philosophy in the genre, which, on different occasions, he terms “pop philosophizing,” “intellectual folklore,” and “folk philosophy.” The reasoning Epstein offers relies mostly on the fact that there exists folk poetry, folk music, and folk art (*lubok*), so there is bound to be some place for folk philosophy (*fol’klornaia filosofii*). What makes folklore attractive for the author is its “anonymous universality of an image” (*universal’naia vseobshchnost’ obraza*), whereas philosophy’s contribution is the “logical generalization of a concept” (*logicheskaia obobshchennost’ poniatii*). Thus, both sides, Epstein notes, strive for “utmost unity” (*k predel’noi obshchnosti*): of imagination and reasoning, and there is no reason why the two should not join forces.

Yet another quality that Epstein favors in *lubok* is its combination of “laquered naivete and lurking perfidy” (“lakovaia naivnost’ i skrytoe v nei lukavstvo,” 9).⁴ The fusion of seriousness and parody (*ser’eznaia parodiia*), according to Epstein, is perhaps the most suitable attitude an intellectual in his situation could rely on, given the historical and his personal circumstances. And it is this fusion of parody and seriousness that is

mostly responsible for the effect of deliberate indeterminacy and fuzziness that the essays produce; the indeterminacy here refers especially to the author's refusal to endorse the validity of one or the other cultural perspective. Even though Epstein reserves just a couple of pages of the introduction for the issues of the genre in general and the *lubok* quality of his essays in particular, it is worth investigating *lubochnost*' as a mode of representation a bit further.

Lubok is not only a form of primitive art but also a traditional subversive cultural practice that has been part of Russian culture since 1700s. Originating among the lower classes and peasants, as a primitive graphic art form, *lubok* is immersed in grotesqueness in as much as it does not seek naturalistic portrayal of reality but rather feeds on whatever is already created by professional artists and by culture in general (Iurkov 177-187). Wedded to parody and 'play' *lubok* and *lubochnost*' soon became forms of 'anti-behavior' (*antipovedenie*) related to carnival and jestership, co-existing with the official high culture. While at the beginning the producers of *lubok* art were peasants and artisans, by the end of the nineteenth, early twentieth century, the production of *lubki* was taken up by more or less professional artists. The advent of lithograph printing made it possible to achieve aesthetic sophistication that became more appreciated than the earlier peasant-made specimens printed off woodcuts. With the progress in means of production, the *lubok* acquired not only wider circulation but also more sophisticated producers and consumers; in other words the *lubok* gradually infringes on the realm of high art.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, in the atmosphere of looming metaphysical crisis, lingering eschatological anticipations, and the general feeling of despair, art became viewed as the only means through which one could hope to subdue

the chaos, coopt it into culture and thus make it less petrifying. “The essence of things and events was replaced by the essence of one’s relationship with them” (“Sushchnost’ veshchei zameniaetsia sushchnost’iu otnosheniia k nim,” Iurkov 181). Among the many cultural and artistic movements and groups, such as modernism, cubism, futurism, and so on, preoccupied with transcending reality and conventions, there appeared an artistic movement advocating the return to the “roots,” to the folk origins, to the pre-cultural forms of chaos and indeterminacy – neoprimitivism, with *lubochnost’* being its essential component. Be it poetry, art, or theater, the artist aimed to blur the boundaries between the producer and the consumer of art through grotesque, laughter, and defiance as part of *lubochnoe* anti-behavior associated with *balagan*, *iurodstvo*, and *karnaval*⁵. So instead of suggesting an alternative, an ideology, a doctrine that would stabilize chaos and eliminate indeterminacy, neo-primitive *lubok* art sought to enhance that indeterminacy in order to transcend the boundaries of culture by returning to pre-cultural or rather trans-cultural forms. It is not accidental then that in the context of the crisis of ideology under late socialism Epstein calls on the *lubok* as one of the means to transcend culture in a playful-yet-serious manner. ‘Playful’ because it is the process of play – irony-clad refusal to entrench in any one perspective or ideology – which creates indeterminacy. And ‘serious’ because the objective of this approach, just like during the first decade of the 20th century, is to rid culture of the rigidity of conventions: the established forms of production and perception. Thus we can see how in Epstein’s framework *lubok*, philosophy, and essayism join forces to work towards transcendence of culture.

The playfulness of *lubok*, the conceptualizing power of philosophy, and the open dynamism of the essay all in some way speak about the author’s relationship with reality

and with the text. When writing about Michel de Montaigne's *essais*, Epstein notes that de Montaigne was among the first to outline the essential property of the essay genre "as seen in its orientation toward self-discovery and self-definition of individuality" (*After the Future* 214). Subjective by definition, the essay then is not only a form of communication with the other but also a form of communication with the self.

The texts from *On the Borders of Cultures* were written between 1990 and 1994. Since then they appeared in various Russian periodicals and were broadcast on *Radio Liberty*. Furthermore, Mikhail Epstein has been republishing the bulk of this collection in more recent editions of his selected essays, including the 2007 bilingual edition of selected essays under the title *Amerussia/Amerossia*. In authorial introductions to various editions, Epstein mentions that, even though there is often a large time gap between writing and publication, he does not find it practical to make any situational changes or adjustments to the essays in order to emphasize the relevance of experience to a particular moment in time⁶. Even though Epstein does leave most of his essays intact, there are however a few noteworthy alterations. For example, in the 1994 edition of *On the Borders of Cultures*, Epstein uses the Russian word *ocherk* to refer to his works. In the 2007 edition of *Amerussia*, as well as the 2005 edition of collected essays *From America*, the same works that make up the bulk of this bilingual collection are referred to as *esse* and *opyty*, thus alluding to Michel de Montaigne tradition of 'essais' known in Russian as *opyty* (essays, i.e. 'attempts'). Considering that Epstein is one of the very few Russian scholars who have researched and written about the essay genre, this later preference for the essentially subjective, Montaigne-esque *opyty* as opposed to more Soviet-sounding and ideologically contaminated *ocherk* is quite telling. Yet another important direction

that these later changes point to is perhaps Epstein's subsequent realization that *opyty* is a more appropriate term for his works because they also reflect the author's personal development rather than simply deliver information, presented from the point of view of an unwavering, stable narrator. For, in Montaigne's tradition of the *opyt* the center of gravity of the essay falls more on the relationship between the author and the text rather than that of the text and reality⁷. Thus, it is the relationship between the author and his/her own text that reinforces the process of "self-discovery" and "self-definition of individuality." This, Epstein's later, reconsideration of terminology – substitution of *oherk* for *opyt* – signals the author's attempt to come to terms with the subjectivity of the narrative experience/experiment⁸ as a way of affirming individuality through the *word*.

On the status of the Self

When referring to Americans and American culture, Mikhail Epstein seems to eschew using the third-person pronoun "them/they." So there is no sense of deliberately constructed dichotomy of *my* vs. *oni*. Rather, when talking about Russia or some specific Russian phenomenon, Epstein introduces his discussion by adverbial modifiers of place, for example "in Russia..." The same is true for his descriptions of America and American culture. Furthermore, while writing from America, the author avoids using, what Roman Jakobson called, shifters such as 'here' or 'there' when referring to America or Russia. This kind of narrative deployment makes it difficult to locate the authorial *self* vis-à-vis the narrative context. To put it in different terms, the author makes it quite obvious where he is coming from, so to speak, but keeps in obscurity the place where he is.

In the previous two sections we briefly discussed a few points of convergence and continuity between Epstein's work on theory of transculture and theoretical and methodological framework of his essayistic project of *On the Borders of Culture*. In this analysis, Epstein comes through as a royalist and loyalist of culture, in a sense that his theory and philosophy seem to be concerned with the well-being of culture rather than the being of the subject in it. Does Epstein's theory leave any space for speculation about what happens to the Self that is so busy celebrating indeterminacy, difference, openness, and non-hegemonic cultural totality? What is the status of the first-person singular in his work? By extension, we would venture to question the role of the intellectual and his personal voice in this situation. To answer these questions let us briefly return to Epstein's discussion of genre in the introduction to *On the Borders of Cultures*.

Noting that the essays in the collection were broadcast to Russia for tens of millions of listeners, the author thus describes the peculiarity of his perception and narration of America and Russia:

In relation to Russia, America was a utopia-come-alive. And Russia, in relation to America, was as a never easing nostalgia. I used the realia of one to mark the other either nostalgically or in utopian way, as a pure idea. Well, it's not Russia or America but precisely the Russian *memory* and American *dream*, as phenomena of social consciousness, which the author addressed and on whose behalf he broadcast as its typical representative, the lyrical "we."

Amerika byla po otnosheniiu k Rossii – ozhivshei utopiei. Rossiia byla po otnosheniiu k Amerike – ne otpuskaiushchei nostalgiei. Ia pol'zovalsia realiiami odnoi, chtoby druguiu oboznachit' – to nostalgicheski, to utopicheski – kak chistuiu ideiu. Da, eto ne Rossiia i ne Amerika, eto imenno rossiiskaia *pamiat'* i amerikanskaia *mechta*, kak iavleniia obshchestvennogo soznaniia, k kotoromu avtor po radio obrashchalsia – i ot kotorogo veshchal kak tipichnyi ego predstavitel', liricheskoe "my." (9)

Coming from a foreign traveler writing about both America and his native country, this statement does not seem unusual. Indeed, describing one culture (or an idea thereof)

through, or under the influence of, the codes of another enhances the sense of estrangement and heightens the awareness of difference. Epstein attributes the peculiarity of his perception – of America as utopia and of Russia as nostalgia – to “social consciousness” (“obshchestvennoe soznanie”). Furthermore, the author notes that his perception is the product of and the message for this “collective consciousness.” The authorial lyrical first-person plural, therefore, comes through as the main agent in this type of communication: “we” functions as the addresser and the addressee.

Epstein uses the pronoun “we” predominantly to indicate the commonality of experiences under the Soviet system and the shared Russian/Soviet cultural heritage that in many ways shape his perspective and, by extension, his identity. At the same time, the use of the first-person plural betrays the author’s sensitivity to academic etiquette with its tendency to withhold the subjective authorial ‘I’ in favor of the more objective “we,” especially in the Russian scholarly tradition. However, in place of the academic community, to whom a scholarly work is usually addressed and whose shared knowledge validates the hypothetical objectivity of analytic discourse, Epstein speaks to and from the “Russian social consciousness” (“rossiiskoe obshchestvennoe soznanie”).

In the context of Epstein’s transcultural experimentation we have already discussed the author’s choice of the genre – *filosoficheskii lubok* – that sets the tone for his essays: borderline ironic philosophizing on behalf, as it were, of the folk. By claiming his work’s affinity with folk art Epstein attempts to deemphasize the authority and the subjectivity, in a sense of idiosyncrasy, of the author. The playfulness of the genre also allows the author to shed responsibility should the reader decide to subject the author’s claims to a ‘True/False’ test. Moreover, being obviously very sensitive to the problems of

perspective, in addition to an attempt to explicate the issues of authorial engagement with the text and reality in the introduction, Epstein furnishes a number of other essays with meta-commentary. Thus, in the essay “America on a Rendezvous” (“Amerika na randevu”) that discusses sexuality in America, Epstein sets out with a following note:

By way of a disclaimer: the American of our speculations is as schematic as the bourgeois in the works of proletarian thinkers. In America there are more peculiarities and exceptions than anywhere else. That’s why a homogenized approach is often at risk of being erroneous. Yet, even my erroneous thinking could truthfully comment, if not on America itself, on the difference between American and Russian experience on this universal issue. [...] From the point of view of a Russian foreigner, an average American is too obsessed with his/her health [...].

Sdelaem ogovorku: amerikanets v nashikh rassuzdeniiakh – takoe zhe uslovnnoe sushchestvo, kak burzhua v rabotakh proletarskikh myslitelei. Chastnostei i otklonenii v Amerike bol’she, chem gde by to ni bylo, i potomu usrednennyi podkhod chashche vsego riskuet okazat’sia oshibochnym. No i dopushchennaia mnoiu oshibka mozhet pravdivo svidetel’stvovat’ esli ne o samoi Amerike, to o raznitse amerikanskogo i rossiiskogo opyta v etom obshchechelovecheskom voprose. [...] S tochki zreniia rossiiskogo inostrantsa, srednii amerikanets slishkom zabotitsia o svoem zdorov’e [...]. (235-236)

Here, once again, Epstein’s tone verges on self-irony when he compares his generalizations about sexuality in America to those of proletarian authors about bourgeois culture. However, a display of prudence mocking the objectivity claims of stereotyping leads the author to a rather ambiguous assertion that the inaccuracy of his analysis would “truthfully” (objectively?) reflect the difference of American and Russian experience of the issue. What Epstein seems to say is that his speculations reflect his observations of sexuality as experienced, practiced, and supported by the American and Russian societies. Yet, phrased as it is, the testimony “o raznitse amerikanskogo i rossiiskogo opyta v etom obshchechelovecheskom voprose” comes through as impersonal and objectified. Moreover, this statement further veils and obfuscates the

authorial personal voice: could the difference of Russian and American experience refer to his own, Epstein's, experience of sexuality in Russia and America?

Unlike in Russia and Europe, passionate romantic love, celebrated by the likes of Pushkin and Petrarch, is profoundly "depoeticized" in America. Americans, according to Epstein, seem to be perfectly self-sufficient, content, and contained, unlike the late Soviets who, at the time of troubles of the 1990s, became hyper-sexual and codependent. "Seven million abortions a year," Epstein notes, is just "another side of the social wilderness." In the rest of the essay the author discusses the rigidity of American social conventions in regards to the interaction of sexes: the discrepancy between representation of eroticism in adult media and sexuality in "real life" (238); the restrained display of sexual behavior in public among co-workers, students, (238); the American propensity for monogamy that leads to high divorce rates contrasting with the Soviet preference for monogamy that factors in polygamous behavior (239); the striking rigor of the American legal system protecting individual's sex rights (240); the hyper-sensitivity of American law to various forms of sexual abuse that puts on trial a certain "American Werther" who harasses his beloved with love letters, or prosecutes an unfortunate husband who sexually pleases his treacherous wife in a way unwarranted by the state of Georgia (241).

Closer to the end of the essay, Epstein offers a number of explanations for the "austerity of morals in the freest country of the free world." One of Epstein's hypotheses points the finger at America's ethnic cultural diversity that complicates the etiquette of romantic interaction of sexes calling for the all-around courteous neutrality. The other explanation comes in the form of a meditation on personal freedom in America. Epstein notes that, otherwise very legal, personal freedom in America becomes instantaneously

illegal whenever it jeopardizes the personal freedom of another individual. The benefits of this status quo are apparent if one considers the progress in American legislative and public forbearance that help secure the rights of sexual minorities. However, the obvious side effect of the reverence for personal freedom is the phobia of transgression that love, and especially passionate love, inevitably brings along. As a result, by way of showing respect to another's freedom, one has to suppress many impulses that come from within. Not without a touch of irony does Epstein connect this state of affairs with the sudden popularity of psychoanalysis in America:

Doesn't the reason why psychoanalysis has become a national religion lie in the fact that the freedom of the other costs the soul dearly? One has to subdue too much in oneself, and then vent on the couch of a sympathetic doctor, who offers you the freedom of self-expression at three to five dollars a minute.

Ne potomu li psikhoanaliz stal obshchenatsional'noi religiei, chto svoboda drugogo dorogo obkhoditsia dushe? – prikhoditsia slishkom mnogoe podavliat' v sebe. I otvodit' dushu na kushetke u chutkogo vracha, prodaiushchego tebe svobodu samovyrazheniia po tri-piat' dollarov v minutu. (243)

In the closing cautionary note, Epstein reminds us that, while studying the enticing content of *Playboy*, one has to beware of the glossy illusions that may lead to not-so-glossy repercussions in real life in America. At this point, the essay comes full circle to finish off where it started – with references to the European literary discourse of romantic love and sexuality as opposed to American more scientific and depoeticized attitude towards the same matter. Under the circumstances, Epstein concludes, if even Petrarch, who was writing sonnets to his hopelessly married beloved Laura, is unwelcome in the United States, then what should one say about characters the likes of Rabelais and Maupassant? What's more, it's not at all accidental that America's own

‘free-spirited’ writers, such as Henry Miller, preferred to stay away from the United States.

Thus, the gist of Epstein’s critique relies on the strong contrast between the late Soviet hyper-sexual behavior as conditioned by social disintegration and American moral austerity seen, among other things, as a side effect of individual freedom. Furthermore, Epstein ironically contrasts the rigidity of American mores with the expression of romantic love in European literature. Without being explicit about his personal attitude towards sexuality and romantic love, and by parodying the two extremes, Soviet and American, Epstein’s critique seems to occupy a vantage point that lies outside the two national cultures. The author’s benevolent references to European literary representations of love betray his partiality for a more romantic and poetic time-space that exists, as it were, outside of the time-space of the given national cultures.

Even though the European point of reference for Epstein’s critique is quite apparent, the author is very reluctant to introduce unambiguously a culture, a cultural space, or a cultural time that would be equidistant from the American and Soviet extremes thus allowing the author to present them precisely as extremes. The cultural entity in question is certainly the author himself, i.e. a forty-year-old Russian heterosexual male intellectual of liberal leaning currently living in the United States. Yet, in his own conceptual framework, Epstein plays down the role of the subjective and the individual as he dispatches his work masquerading as the voice of “Russian consciousness” dressed in “folk philosophy.” Indeed, he does little to fashion his speculations as a product of his unique individual experience. However, this kind of mode of representation, when the authorial experience becomes the objectified *vox populi*,

very conspicuously makes Epstein feel uncomfortable. The authors' discomfort then is promptly translated into laying his narrative devices bare, i.e. the introductory notes on *filosoficheskii lubok*.

Yet another tactic that the author consistently employs to demonstrate his awareness of the peculiarity of such a perspective is self-reflective meta-textual irony. We have already quoted Epstein's ironic remarks comparing his own generalizations about an average American to generalizations of proletarian writers about an average bourgeois. In the following passage Epstein ironically reflects on his role as the author in these texts:

And naturally, when your voice falls prey to the radio, when half the population of the country on the other side turned into one big ear, the voice cannot but tremble because of the stress, while radiating the flash and thunder of some super-valuable ideas. When there is a microphone in front of you, one inevitably becomes a rhapsode, akyn, or bayan, whose voice wanders around the country and is devoid of authorship like a totality of one's reflected voice. Yet, inside this sonorous manner, a contemporary spieler cannot but laugh at the shallowness of his thinking self, attached to an amplifier. Radio, by increasing the reverberation of the text, allows one to realize the parodic nature of the text.

Isn't this where Postmodernism – the dominant trend of all Western culture – originates? – as a comic fright of a rather shallow content in the face of the progress of technical means and thunderous forms that cannot be filled. If truly capital Truths used to be shared in a quiet voice with a few select people, then what could one say with the aid of multi-million amplifier? All that remains is to poke fun of this rolling and tense tenor and pretend: it's not me, it's the tenor that speaks. It's the mighty language of radio that speaks me, and I have almost nothing to do with it, I just quote what is being said through me. And thus the voice curdles and goes sour, just like milk in the heat. The text is a residue of this overboiled voice. Postmodernism – is the residue that is left in culture by its enormous technological possibilities, it's a humbled content of arrogant forms...

... or perhaps simply the radio that recognized itself as a parody of an angelic message.

I estesstvenno, kogda tvoï golos stanovitsia dobychei radio, kogda polnaseleniia strany prevratilos' po tu storonu v odno ogromnoe ukho, - golos ne mozhet ne drozhat' ot napriazheniia, radiiruia blesk i grom nekikh sverkhstsennykh idei. Kogda pered toboi radiomikrofon, ty ponevole – rapsod,

baian, akyn, chei golos bluzhdaet po strane, lishennyi avtorstva, rastushchaia summa svoikh otgoloskov. No, vnutri etoi polnozvuchnoi manery, sovremennyi govorun ne mozhet ne smeshit' samogo sebia melkost'iu svoei mysliahshechi figury, pril'nuvshei k tekhnicheskomu usiliteliu. Radio, uvelichivaia gulkost' teksta, pozvoliaet osoznat' ego parodiinost'.

Ne otsiuda li proizoshel ves' postmodernizm, gospodstvuiushchee napravlenie vsei zapadnoi kul'tury? – kak komicheskii ispug melkovatogo sodержaniia pered razgonom tekhnicheskikh sredstv, gromoglasnykh form, kotorye nechem zapolnit'. Esli uzh deistvitel'no gromovye istiny govorilis' tikhim golosom dlia tesnogo kruzhka liudei, - to o chem govorit' po millionnomu usiliteliu? Ostaetsia tol'ko podtrunivat' nad raskatistoi, napriazhennoi strunkoi v sobstvennoi rechi i slegka pritvoriat'sia: eto ne ia, eto ona sama tak govorit. Eto vsemogushchii iazyk radio govorit mnoiu, a ia tut pochti ne pri chem, lish' tsitiruiu to, chto cherez menia skazalos'. I vot golos svorachivaetsia, skisaet, kak moloko na zhare. Tekst – vypavshii osadok etogo perekipevshego golosa. Postmodernizm – osadok, ostavlennyi v kul'ture ee ogromnymi tekhnicheskimi vozmozhnostiami, pristyzhennoe sodержanie gordelivnykh form...

... ili, poprostu, radio, vdrug osoznavshee sebia parodiei na angel'skuiu vest'." (9-10)

The self-reflective irony of this passage is quite revealing. As we mentioned before, many of the texts from the collection *On the Borders of Cultures* were broadcast to Russia on *Radio Liberty*; hence Epstein's copious references to radio in this section. And it is the collaboration with this medium that prompts Epstein's self-conscious meta-literary reflection on the role and status of the authorial voice vis-à-vis the mass audience.

There is an obvious tension here between the self-imposed role of an "epic storyteller" – a vocalizer of truths – and the humbling self-conscious postmodern deflation of authorial agency. Epstein's project in this collection of essays thus exhibits a dilemma of an intellectual who attempts to offer enlightening observations about culture in a "disengaged" objective manner while being conscious of the inevitable subjectivity of his experience, and of his moral and aesthetic judgments. At the same time, Epstein seems to be suspicious of the legitimacy of unambiguously subjective narration, which he shuns in favor of the mockingly objectified and generic "folk philosophy." The narrator's self thus

becomes integrated into the public cultural body. It is a self that is being fashioned as a witness.

It's not very surprising then that the author finds the solution to this dilemma in meta-textual self-irony and ambiguity embodied by the *lubochnost'*. But irony in Epstein's work, as we mentioned before, is not limited only to the meta-textual realm. Irony also permeates the extra-literary dimension of Epstein's project. An example of such irony is already quite apparent in the author's above discussion of sexuality in America and Russia. Let us now take a closer look at the way Epstein deploys irony and ambiguity in his comparative analysis of American culture.

Negotiating the Space Between the Extremes

Mikhail Epstein's main working assumption in this collection is that in the Russian consciousness America has always been a symbol of something "absolutely alien, malevolent, and completely opposite" (5). According to Epstein's scenario, Russia's gradual appropriation of the American "otherness" points toward Russia's subjugation of its own Soviet historical past. The New Russia thus is thought to be somewhere midway between the Soviet Russia and America. Capitalizing on the "complete otherness" assumption of the conventional wisdom, Epstein certainly does little to question it, let alone attempt to undermine it. On the contrary, the entire framework of his essays heavily relies on this hypothesis enabling him to talk about America and Russia as extremes.

The technique that Epstein employs for his comparative analyses is rather consistent throughout the entire body of essays. Though the contrasts between Russian/Soviet and American are always very sharp, the author chooses a very careful

position: he brings out cultural contrasts in both cultures while withholding his explicit judgment. Such a position allows Epstein to avoid endorsing a particular culture, emphasizing the cultures' incompleteness and the necessity for cultures to benefit from each other. (Even though, at the end, one can't help noticing that the cultural space at which Epstein arrives by way of such dialectical speculations resembles Europe a tad too much).

As we mentioned above, Epstein's comparisons are based on oppositions of extremes, which the author constructs through poetic and philosophic generalizations. In case the opposing view cannot be located within the Russian/Soviet culture, the author turns to other cultural paradigms, for example European, to remedy the situation and extend the comparative cultural field. It is true that on a number of occasions Epstein aligns Russia with or substitutes it for Europe to form a European perspective that would help to identify or work to offset an American cultural phenomenon. Yet nowhere does the author arrive at an unambiguously normative cultural scenario that would exist in reality. Moreover, the author's perpetual rhetorical maneuvering testifies to a sort of resistance to any tangible scenarios. Epstein's speculations, therefore, belong entirely to a realm outside of the reality of the existing national cultures. And although the author does not explicitly use the term "transculture" in this collection of essays, what he attempts to invoke here is precisely the transcultural space, a hypothetical cultural space that exists on the borders of cultures. To delineate this space in the essays Epstein uses a number of techniques, some of which we have already discussed earlier. The ambivalence of the *filosoficheskii lubok*, the unrestrictive scope of the essay form, and the ambiguity of irony

all help Epstein map out a transcultural space that is marked by indeterminacy, transience, and fluidity.

Mikhail Epstein organizes the forty-two essays, that make up the collection *On the Borders of Cultures*, around six thematic parts: 1) nature; 2) people and the state; 3) symbolism; 4) social rituals; 5) private life; and 6) religious beliefs. It would be fairly safe to argue that the author's rhetorical framework is rather consistent from essay to essay. In almost every text, the author focuses on a particular phenomenon of American culture while summoning analogous or homologous phenomena from other cultures, mostly Russian/Soviet and European. The themes of the essays within a section are often very diverse. For example, the section on symbolism includes texts on money, architecture, calligraphy, art exhibits, literature, television, etc. For the most part, the essays, while sharing a similar rhetorical agenda, contribute assorted elaborated observations related to the theme of the section without, however, forming a discernable unifying argument.

However, the one section that not only exemplifies the author's conceptual agenda and the overall rhetoric of the collection but also forms a cohesive unified argument is the one that deals with nature. Here Epstein's essays seem to work towards the idea of America's culturalization of nature standing in sharp contrast with Russian naturalistic "ordinariness," if not to say authenticity. America's culturalized nature incorporated into history and civilization thus becomes contrasted with Russian unrestrained natural wilderness and European social and cultural history. The incorporation of nature into culture and culture into civilization makes America a highly demarcated, categorized space opposed to the Russian free-range, so to speak, chaotic

environment. Epstein then, while being on the borders of these purported extremes, strives to find a compromise in the form of an intellectual space.

In the opening essay “O dinozavrakh” (“On Dinosaurs”), Epstein explores America’s fascination with dinosaurs: “The dinosaur – is a symbol of America on a par with the skyscraper or the spacecraft that landed on the moon” (“Dinozavr – takoi zhe simvol Ameriki, kak neboskreb ili kosmicheskii korabl’ vysadivshiisia na lune,” 14). This phenomenon the author ties to America’s relationship with history. From the outset Epstein asserts that, given the absence (*otsutstvie*, [sic]) of American social history before the arrival of Europeans, nature for Americans became a substitute for a vast part of history: “Nature for Europeans is non-history and non-culture, a comparatively small sphere of existence that stands alone, a relic. For Americans, however, nature is precisely a crucial part of cultural and historical legacy” (“Dlia evropeitsev priroda – eto ne-istoriia, ne-kul’tura, sravnitel’no malyi sector sushchestvovaniia, otdel’nyi, reliktovyi. Dlia Ameriki priroda – vazhneishaia chast’ imenno kul’turnogo i istoricheskogo nasledii,” 16).

Dinosaurs, then, according to Epstein, are viewed as the greatest actors in this natural history. The reverence and awe that these actors instill in Americans are similar to the mixed feelings with which Europeans relate to their “titans of history,” such as Napoleon, Peter the Great, Robespierre, or Ivan the Terrible (17). Dinosaurs’ 160-million year reign and subsequent complete disappearance introduce a sense of irrationality and intrigue to American history, which otherwise would have been too logical and transparent. By way of comparison, the passion for gigantic creatures comes hand in hand with Americans’ preference for the gargantuan proportions of their civilization, whereas

Europeans' refined and much more modest spatial tastes turn them toward fellow mammals. For Epstein, the cult of dinosaurs is hardly surprising as he considers the fact that the most important American nineteenth-century book was Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Following up on European comparisons, Epstein suggests that Americans can easily counter European glorification of their ancient past with America's even more ancient past in the form of well-preserved remains of prehistoric creatures. Finally, he elaborates that idea that Americans venerate dinosaurs for their exemplary ability to adapt to nature and survive. The essay concludes on a brief personal note, with the author being hopeful that his children will fall in love with dinosaurs without, however, trying to emulate them in everything (22).

Acknowledging the originality of Epstein's observations, a student of American popular culture, if not of paleontology, could probably question the validity of some of these assertions. For example, why does the author choose to ignore the existence of Native American lore when he proclaims the *absence* of American history before Europeans? The parallels between European "titans of history" and dinosaurs hardly explain why children are so drawn to dinosaurs, unless we assume that European children *are* aware of the paradoxes of their national history. The peculiar taste of American popular culture for attractions, especially in and through cinema featuring giants and monstrous animals along with the havoc they create (T. Edison's 1903 documentary "Electrocuting an Elephant" comes to mind) could also offer some explanations for the dinosaurs galore.

Even though one could perhaps come up with an even more extensive list of competing premises and alternative explanations of this phenomenon, the focus of our

analysis of Epstein's work lies elsewhere. What interests us is the discursive framework of Epstein's argument. The central claim of the essay is America's domestication and culturalization of natural prehistory that happens to be a compensation for the dearth of cultural history. The author arrives at this conclusion mostly by staging an encounter between American and European senses of history, wherein Europeans implicitly emerge as being condescending toward the younger and less sophisticated civilization. From the general tone of the essay, it seems as though Epstein is taking on a task of not only investigating American dinosaurphilia but also that of endorsing the historical parity of American vis-à-vis European civilization: "Therefore, European peoples shouldn't make a big deal out of their ancient history. In comparison, Americans can offer their own far more ancient pre-history" ("I potomu da ne tshcheslaviatsia evropeiskie narody svoei drevnei istoriei. Ikh istoricheskomu proshlomu amerikantsy mogut protivopostavit' svoe, eshche bolee glubokoe, doistoricheskoe," 20).

As an outcome of arbitration such a cautionary note to European peoples cannot but sound ironic. It is obvious that the European perspective sketched out by Epstein celebrates Europe's cultural history rather than history in general. If the author were to take this argument earnestly, American culturalized natural history would hardly be able to offset Europeans' sense of the superiority of their cultural legacies (after all, that's why Epstein is still able to talk about it at the end of the twentieth century). The author certainly understands that; yet, he chooses to resolve the encounter peacefully, with what reads as benign irony. By doing so, Epstein emphasizes his willingness to avoid sharp corners of critique in order to maintain discursive neutrality. The advantages of such neutrality are supported by the author's ideas about the transcultural mode of being that

emphasize staying on the “crossroads of cultures” without taking sides. The hermeneutic benefits of this transcultural identification become apparent through the explanatory power of the essay. Thus, in the 2007 edition of this essay, written in 1991, Epstein, surprisingly, quotes from a 1996 article by a celebrated Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould admitting to his own [Gould’s] inability to explain dinosaurs’ allure among Americans, especially children (*Amerussia* 49). Epstein’s successful interpretation of the dinosaur phenomenon certainly benefits even more from such a confession by an American scholar. The post-factum reference to an American authority figure, versed in matters of paleontology as well as American culture, reinforces Epstein’s analysis as a showcase of transcultural vision. For, a Russian-American culturologist turns out to be better equipped to interpret an American cultural phenomenon simply by being able to step outside of cultural boundaries, or rather by staying on the boundaries. Ultimately, this approach becomes a sort of recipe for successful epistemological experiments (*opyty*) and a sure way to maintain personal neutrality, and autonomy.

In the essays “On Elements” (“O stikhiakh”) and “On Land” (“O zemle”), Epstein discusses the difference in Russian and America interaction with natural elements: fire, air, land, and water. Speaking about the peculiar way natural elements in Russia coexist, Epstein notes:

Smoke and mud are two of the peculiarities of the Russian environment that make it softer and warmer.⁹ Of course, the two major human needs: breathing and walking become problematic because of smoke and mud. There is a nagging pain in the chest and in the knees. Yet, the environment as a whole seems to become more human, or rather more bodily. The air becomes warmer because of the smoke, its temperature approximating that of a breath. The earth becomes softer because of the mud, its texture approaching the texture of the body. Everything around becomes more odorous, caustic, gooey, and raw, just like my own self. Just like my flesh and soul.

Dym i griaz' – dve osobennosti rossiiskogo prostranstva, kotorye utepliaut i umiagchaut ego. Konechno, glavnye chelovecheskie potrebnosti: dykhanie i khod'ba – ochen' zatrudniaiutsia dymom i griaz'iu. Sadnit v grudi, noiut koleni. Odnako prostranstvo v tselom vrode kak ochelovechivaetsia, tochnee otelesnivaetsia. Vozdukh ot dyma tepleet, priblizhaia's' k temperature vydokha. Zemlia ot griazi miagcheet, priblizhaia's' k konsistentsii tela. Takoe vse vokrug stanovitsia pakhuchee, edkoe, viazkoe, syroe – kak ia sam. Kak plot' moia i dusha. (23)

This very poetic description of Russian natural environment shares the same subtle ironic tone that Epstein uses in his cautionary note to “European peoples.” When fire mixes with air and water mixes with land what one gets is smoke and mud. And even though such an environmental fusion is a challenge for the inhabitants, it is perceived as more human, more corporeal due to the anthropomorphism that Epstein points out. If one is unable to culturalize the space, one makes it “bodily”: “To unleash mud and smoke. If one can't culturalize it [nature] one makes it more corporeal” (“Napustit' griazi i dymu. Ne okul'turit' – tak otelesnit'” 24).

In comparison, Epstein sees America's environment as much more differentiated: “America is very different. It has none of that mixing of elements that makes it so easy for the voyager's lonely body to ecstatically immerse itself in. American landscape is vast and clearly delineated” (“Amerika – sovsem drugaia. V nei net etoi razmytosti stikhii, s kotoroi tak legko do samozabveniiia smeshat'sia sirotlivomu telu strannika. Amerikanskii prostor ogromen, no chetko vyleplen,” 24). Epstein goes on to elaborate this idea of American spatial differentiation by citing a few examples, not only from the domain of nature but also from that of culture. American nature, asserts the author, doesn't smell; in a sense, there are no displaced smells of, say, decay, smoke, etc. The forest smells of freshness, as if deodorized. Smells do not mix, as if trying to stay contained within their borders. A similar situation one could observe in American culture that doesn't

appreciate, what Epstein subtly sniggers at – “smellism.” Americans, similar to elements of nature, prefer to stay fresh, use deodorant but no perfume so as not to violate somebody else’s space by way of an olfactory aggression.

The idea of spatial categorization and differentiation also echoes in the essay “On Land” (“O zemle”). Epstein casually observes that, unlike in Russia, in America land doesn’t stick to one’s shoes: “ [...] but in America neither do shoes leave traces on land, nor does land stick to shoes, - a mutual freedom, if not to say indifference” ([...] a v Amerike ni botinki ne ostavliaiut sledov v zemle, ni zemlia ne pristaet k botinkam, – vzaimnaia svoboda, esli ne skazat’ ravnodushie” 28). Epstein sees this phenomenon as a product of civilization with its superior infrastructure and perpetual culturalization of natural space. As a semiotic extension of this “natural” phenomenon, the author considers Americans’ democratic relationship with ‘high’ and ‘low.’ Here the spatial democracy manifests itself through the everyday behavior that would be deemed inappropriate in Russian culture (for example, sitting on the floor, walking barefoot) due to a very rigid relationship between ‘low’/ ‘bad’ and ‘high’/ ‘good.’ In America, Epstein speculates, this relationship is often suspended precisely because ‘earth,’ ‘land,’ and whatever else that can be looked at as ‘lowly’ is profoundly cultivated by and integrated into the democratic civilization that ultimately renders the opposition irrelevant, i.e. semiotically barren (31).

Thus, on the one hand, Epstein clearly welcomes the American democracy of space compared to Russian more extreme spatial symbolism. Nonetheless, the subtle undertones of the critique suggest that the benefits of civilized American spatial democracy come hand in hand with very rigidly marked personal boundaries that guarantee personal freedom, not without side effects. In the brief passage quoted above

describing the metaphoric relationship between the shoes and the land, Epstein notes that it's the relationship "of mutual freedom" and hastens to add: "if not of indifference."

Therefore, the author seems to suggest that the rigorous culturalization of nature creates a more integrated homogeneous environment based on mutual freedom, which in its extreme, can be interpreted as a lack of adequate personal engagement, i.e. indifference.

In yet another text from the section on nature Epstein adopts a rather fretful tone when discussing a case of intense personal engagement – ecological alarmism. The essay "The Green and the Brown" ("Zelenoe i korichnevoe") briefly touches upon the conflict between nature and civilization. Epstein's major assumption in this text is that at some point ecology and nature were considered to be apolitical, asocial, and non-ideological, - a harbor offering refuge from the civilization (31). But by the end of the twentieth century, at the time of the crisis of major ideologies, ecology, according to Epstein, has become a "new super-ideology" in the West ("novaia sverkhideologiia," 32). Epstein sees the agenda of this new ideology, fighting overpopulation along with technological development, as essentially being anti-civilization and anti-human. Citing the Soviet experience of uncivilized mistreatment of nature, the author goes on to argue that "it's not the civilization but the lack thereof that is harmful to nature" (35). To support his argument, Epstein refers to some economic statistics suggesting that American technological progress in fact contributes to less intense exploitation of nature and its resources. Thus Epstein arrives at a rather disconcerting vision wherein the masses, indifferent to the reasonable and civilization-friendly forecasts of American mathematicians and economists, follow a group of overly zealous American ecologists to destroy the headquarters of major American industrial corporations. The ultimate fear for

Epstein then is the transformation of ecology into a radical ideology and ecological activism into “ecofascism” (hence the color brown in the title of the essay hinting at the brown color of the German fascist uniforms). Epstein presents ecology infused with radical ideology as an extreme opposite of the Soviet ecological devastation and negligence.

The reflection on the peculiarity of the American practice of integration of nature into culture and civilization leads Epstein to transpose his discussion from the spatial to the temporal axis. In the essay “On the Passage of Time” (“O khode vremeni”), the author comments on Russian, European, and American perception of time as conditioned by these cultures’ attitude towards history. For Europe, burdened by history, and Russia, burdened by the envy of European history, time passes slowly, as it gets boosted or delayed by events of history. America, however, is a “country of nature and technology where there is no room for history. The civilization in America creates a natural and stable environment. It doesn’t have this nervous fidgeting, a pathetic break with nature as in European history” (“[...] strana prirody i tekhniki, v kotoroi dlia istorii ne ostaetsia mesta. Tsvivilizatsiia v Amerike obrazuet estestvennuuu i pokoiashchuiusia sredu, v nei net etogo nervnogo podergivaniia, pateticheskogo razryva s prirodou, kak v evropeiskoi istorii,” 40). The lack of history, then, allows America to move adroitly, and develop gradually and perpetually, without astounding qualitative leaps that in Europe follow quantitative, i.e. historical, accumulations.

Epstein, then, arrives at a seemingly paradoxical conclusion suggesting that the perception of time in America is almost suspended precisely because of the intensive and steady rhythm of its civilization¹⁰. He refers to this temporal suspension in America as

idyllic (42). But this idyll has an oxymoronic touch of melancholia: “The civilization blends with the landscape into such a soft and sad idyll that no wind of remote European history can disturb it” (“Tsivilizatsiia slivaetsia s landshaftom v takoi miagkoi i grustnoi idillii, kotoruiu ne smutit nikakoi veter dal’nei evropeiskoi istorii,” 42). Thus, while marveling over the happy fusion of nature and civilization liberated from history, Epstein hints at a certain degree of uneasiness that marks this otherwise idyllic relationship.

Thus in most of Epstein’s texts the nexus of Nature, Culture, and Civilization forms the backbone of his comparative analysis of Russia and America. Within Epstein’s analytical framework, Russia’s relationship with Nature, Culture and Civilization axiologically seems to occupy the ground zero. Yet, although America’s relationship with this triad is more advanced – following, as it were, the right trajectory – it is nonetheless unsatisfactory; it represents the other extreme. In these texts Russia is presented as an environment burdened by the envy of European history that is responsible for stalling progress. The fledgling civilization, without an overdue human investment, morphs with nature to form a primeval symbiosis unaffected by constructive cultural intervention. America, on the other hand, is a space where the lack of social history led to a swift progress of civilization, and profound culturalization of nature. As a result, America has become too culturalized, i.e. culturally constructed. (Epstein’s America thus resembles the “most deliberate city in the world” (“*samyi umyshlennyi*”) – Dostoyevsky’s St. Petersburg).

In his book *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication*, 1999, Epstein offers a somewhat less poetic and much more

analytic and concrete view of the ideas invoked in the essays from the *On the Borders of Cultures* collection:

Life in the West is so rigorously categorized that the dispersion of signs and vagueness of meanings are regarded as anomalies and disturbances and tend to be eliminated as soon as possible. [...]. For example, in American national parks or wilderness areas the boundary between culture and nature is drawn very strictly. There are special trails that delineate the route of penetration of culture into the domain of nature. But neither cultural nor natural areas in themselves create the feeling of ordinariness that is the erasure of structural oppositions, the zone of semiotic silence or whisper where the flow of information is interrupted and superseded by a natural noise. "Natural" not in a sense that nature is opposed to culture but natural in the sense of ignoring or transcending this opposition.

In Russia, the insufficiency of mapping, of cultural demarcations, makes life more dangerous and uncomfortable than in the West. You don't know where you are, on the edge of a forest or on the site of a future building: Nature is polluted and culture is diffused due to neglect and devastation. But this is what creates ordinariness; Russia is perhaps the largest ordinary place in the world. [...]. Russia is the land of boredom, carelessness, and wasting of time, whereas in the West even wasting time is usually framed as a form of relaxation or entertainment. Hence the feeling of reality is lost in the West, which is one of the main points of post-modern theory: Everything is culturally produced, semiotically constructed. [...] What constitutes reality, however, is the *resistance* of things to signs.... Not enjoyment of signs and simulations but a bare courage and patience to be. (110-111)¹¹

Furthermore, by ushering Russia and America (the West) into the opposite sides of semiotic transparency, rigidity, and stability Epstein suggests that even though life in Russia is significantly more strenuous and uncivilized, America could definitely benefit from some of Russia's semiotic indeterminacy, "more spontaneous confusion between labor and leisure, between nature and culture, being doing and not doing" (112).

This passage, especially the final part about what, in Epstein's view, constitutes reality, has a number of important implications for the author's agenda in this essayistic project involving analysis of the two cultures, as well as for Epstein's personal agenda as an intellectual negotiating space for the self caught between cultures. The opposition between America as a rigorously delineated and rigidly culturally constructed space and

Russia as a more semiotically diffused environment stands out as a central trope of the *On the Borders* collection.¹² Whether Epstein talks about sexuality, architecture (“On American Architecture,” 93), television (“On American Television,” 101), family and friends (“Family and Friends,” 244), multiculturalism (“Russia and Multiculturalism,” 215), or dinosaurs and natural elements, the idea of the infringement of the cultural (constructed, copied, manipulated) on the natural (authentic, historical, traditional) is consistently reiterated and refurbished.

Epstein’s investigations are replete with casual observations on the benefits and side effects of such infringements. Yet, nowhere does the author’s critique come through as too involved, forced, or particularly premeditated. Epstein’s choices of genre (*filosoficheskii lubok*) and form (free-flowing essay) allow him to present his observations in a semi-ironic, at times almost jocular tone. Irony, understatement, and poetic vagueness, which Epstein finds deficient in American culture, help him create the effect of playful yet serious indeterminacy and fuzziness. And this is where Epstein’s relationships with literary reality (tone, rhetoric, tropes) and extra-literary reality (cultural, social, and natural phenomena) begin to mirror each other. In other words, the literary agenda of Epstein’s texts faithfully follows and at the same time emblemizes the author’s ideas about culture. For Epstein’s texts in the collection *On the Borders of Cultures* demonstrate not only the author’s direct response to the immediate cultural situation but also serve as a practical example of his more fundamental endeavor that had originated a decade before the essays – transcultural theory and practice.

Advancing the idea of the necessity to reflect upon the differences between the Russian and Western/American cultures, Epstein suggests that transcultural thinking is

precisely the appropriate mode not so much for integration and reflection but also for a particular kind of creative being:

Transculture is an experience of dwelling in the neutral spaces and lacunas between cultural demarcations. Transculture is not simply a mode of integrating cultural differences but a mode of creating something different from difference itself, and one form of it is the ordinary, the formless, the random, the indiscriminate. (*TE*, 112)

This statement of Epstein's is quite consistent with the general tone and technique of his essays, which can be looked at as a transcultural project. In one of the introductory texts, Epstein speculates about what happens to a culture that forcefully assimilates the experience of another culture without due (self-) reflection; the result is the cultural hybridity and grotesqueness of the post-Soviet environment. In the essays then, the author assumes a very evasive and ambiguous position in order to outline differences between the Soviet/Russian and American cultures and invite the reader to capitalize on the difference creatively, i.e. to treat the difference as an opportunity to transcend the existing cultural forms instead of borrowing from the Other indiscriminately. For the act of transcendence is responsible for the creation of something new and for the experiencing of the extra-cultural, not inscribed in or prescribed by any given culture. The whole process of transcendence, according to Epstein, allows us to liberate ourselves from the "prison house of language," the rigidity of our identities, and the hegemony of culture. As a result, our identities become stretched and reconfigured, giving us a sense of freedom; for culture, by extension, this would entail renewal and progress.

Thus, in his essays Epstein attempts to capture the peculiarity of the post-soviet transitional cultural space, in which American codes are presented as preferable. Epstein certainly supports the transition from totalitarianism to democracy through

Western/American models. Yet, on the other hand, the author's analysis of these cultures betrays his reluctance to accept one or the other cultural form. By playing various codes against each other, by recoding American reality with Russian codes and the other way around, Epstein demonstrates the deficiency of both cultures and reveals the liberating and creative potential of such mechanism of translation and the intellectual – transcultural – space that it affirms.

Notes to Chapter One

¹ Bakhtin, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essay*, 7.

² In a way, Epstein's thinking of culture-culturology-transculture is rather similar to Iurii Lotman's ideas of code-translation/recoding and the semiosphere. The most striking difference, however, is that Epstein has little interest or concern about the mechanics of cultural interaction. Following Bakhtin, he privileges transgression of the limits of a dominant culture (dominant codes, in Lotman's terms) by way of 'being outside,' on the margins. The position of "outsideness" should be able to empower a subject by offering various, "estranged," perspectives on the other and his/her own culture. What is of lesser importance to Epstein is the mechanisms of this interaction (translation, in Lotman's terms); Lotman was interested in semiotic description of the process, while Epstein's inquiry relates more to phenomenology.

³ In the introduction to *On the Borders of Cultures*, Epstein quotes cultural critic Grigorii Pomerants referring to hyper-modernization of Russian society as "grotesqueness of social structures" ("grotesknost' sotsial'nykh struktur," 7).

⁴ In his essays, Epstein quite often makes use of alliteration and other types of sound repetition increasing the poetic effect of his writing, cf. *lakovaia naivnost' lubka i skrytoe v nei lukavstvo*.

⁵ *Balagan* is a kind of theatrical performance, typical of Russian fairgrounds, that appeared in Russia in the 18th century and later acquired resemblance to the Italian commedia dell'arte. The early performances had very little structure. Instead, they reflected, in a grotesque and satirical manner, the chaotic nature of the fair. (For a discussion of *balagan* as a form of subversive urban behavior, see Iurkov 148-56). *Iurodstvo* (or holy foolishness) is a peculiar form of asceticism in the Russian Orthodox tradition. A *iurodivyi* is a public performer feigning madness while providing the public with social critique and spiritual council (Panchenko 392-407; Iurkov 52-69).

⁶ See, for example, *Amerussia* 6, or *On the Borders of Cultures* 10.

⁷ For more on this distinction see, for example, Aleksandr Zholkovskii's "Esse." *Inostrannaia literature*. No. 12 (2008).

⁸ In Russian, the word 'opyt' means both 'experience' and 'experiment.'

⁹ The Russian word for 'mud' is 'griaz'' that in Russian means both 'mud' and 'dirt.' Thus, the Russian word signifies a much large range of pollution.

¹⁰ European observers, from W. Goethe to J. Baudrillard, have consistently made similar points on America's rhythm, dynamism, and freedom from history. See, for example, Goethe's "Zahme Xenien", 1820 or J. Baudrillard *America*, 1986.

¹¹ Quoted in Emerson, Caryl. "Slavic Studies in a Post-Communist, Post 9/11 World: For and Against our Remaining in the Hardcore Humanities." *SEEJ*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2002): pp. 462-263.

¹² At times it seems that Epstein uses Russia as an example of a traditional society vis-à-vis the Western civilization symbolized by the United States, thus offering an alternative version of the popular Western opposition between "traditional" and "Western" societies.

Chapter Two

The ‘Lyrical Culturology’ of Petr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis

Otnoshenie k Amerike – gluboko
lichnaia problema.

–P.Vail’ and A. Genis

Petr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis have written the most informative and entertaining essayistic prose about America. Both writers grew up in Riga and, while in their late twenties, immigrated to the United States in 1977. It is in the United States that their literary career got off to an auspicious start. Having settled in New York, Vail’ and Genis actively contributed to Russian émigré periodicals: *Novyi Amerikanets* (*The New American*), *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* (*The New Russian Word*), *Vremia i my* (*Time and Us*), *Sintaksis* (*The Syntax*), and others, before collaborating on their first book, *Sovremennaia russkaia proza* (*Contemporary Russian Prose*) (1982). As a literary tandem, they produced two major books about America: *Poteriannyi rai* (*The Lost Paradise*) (1983) and the collection of essays “Amerikana” (1991).

In a way, these two books frame the literary career of Vail’ and Genis as co-authors. By the time they completed their final collaborative effort, “Amerikana,” the writers were already known to the Russian reader as authors of the most unorthodox, subtle, and entertaining prose about Soviet and Russian literature and culture. *60-e. Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (*The 60s. The World of the Soviet Person*) (1988), *Rodnaia rech’*

(*The Native Tongue*) (1990), and *Rusaskaia kukhnia v izgnanii* (*Russian Cuisine in Exile*) (1987) with all their stylistic luster and daring interpretive valor suggested the obvious – that the prose of Vail’ and Genis was a truly unique phenomenon in the twentieth-century Russian literature.

Alongside the unquestionable literary talent that both authors put to good use in their collective projects, what distinguishes the prose of the writers is the idiosyncrasy of Vail’ and Genis’ perspective on virtually anything they write about. This sort of idiosyncrasy, which made the authors an easy target for both dismissive criticism and all but remissive accolade¹, is no doubt a product of the writers’ position on the fringes (spatial and discursive) of the Russian/Soviet culture. The distance, cultural and geographic, helped Vail’ and Genis develop their individual estranged perspective and personal “strong opinions” about the two cultures that simultaneously inform the authors’ cultural experience.

Thus, for Vail’ and Genis, who wholeheartedly believe in culture as a discursive practice, America serves as a vantage point from which to scrutinize their native, Russian/Soviet, culture. The native culture, then, under such a scrutiny, temporarily acquires a certain discreteness conducive to analysis. At the same time, writing from America, Veil’ and Genis attempt to renounce the dominant cultural codes of the environment in which they were writing. On more than one occasion, they stated that the cultural codes of emigration, with their staunch political, ideological, or religious rhetoric, were equally unacceptable (*Poteriannyi rai*, 185-192). Therefore, the authors consciously seek intellectual autonomy - however illusory it may be – following, as it were, the spirit of the Enlightenment. With the Kantian “*Sapere aude!*” they slam the door on the face of

practically everyone, except for the reader, take a bottle of “the cheapest brandy and a glass of coca-cola²” and retreat into the world of cultural analysis, allusions, and comparisons.

Vail’ and Genis’ entire literary output has made great use of “outsideness,” which, ultimately, can be looked at as a *technique (priem)*. This is not to say, however, that the authors had emigrated with a particular literary/epistemological goal in mind: perfecting a technique of estrangement that could bring about an epistemological shift. Clearly, it was the circumstances which helped Vail’ and Genis realize the uniqueness of their literary perspective and urged them to take advantage of it. The subject of the essays is as much the authors as America and its culture. The authorial first person (singular or plural) always opens the essays. Spaces, events, traditions, etc., start making sense only when they come into contact with the author. America is presented here precisely from the point of view of the first person, a subject.

In Western tradition, the work of Vail’ and Genis comes close to Roland Barthes’ exploration of French popular culture in his “Mythologies,” which the co-authors readily quote and otherwise acknowledge as an important text for their work. If Barthes’ project is directed at exposing the popular myths of French bourgeois culture, Vail’ and Genis’ writing seeks to recover an analysis of Soviet and Russian culture free from the yoke of the Soviet language and traditional interpretive paradigms. Vail’ and Genis, too, attempt to expose certain cultural myths; their method, however, is much less scientifically rigorous – not grounded in any branch of the humanities in the sense of Barthes’ reliance on linguistics and semiology. If Barthes’ project is rather political in that it is implicitly directed against the bourgeois French society, Vail’ and Genis seem to eschew any

ideological agendas; hence their minimal reliance on scholarly methodology and a tone that gravitates towards the spoken word and conversational intonations.

“The Lost Paradise”: setting up the project

As co-authors, Vail and Genis began their series of writing about America with an introspective extensive essay “Poteriannyi rai. Emigratsiia: popytka avtoportreta” (“The Lost Paradise: Emigration, an Attempt at a Self-Portrait,” 1983). This programmatic essay offers an estranged view of the immediate (Soviet) past and the immediate (American) present. As such, “Poteriannyi rai” represents an important juncture in the authors’ self-awareness: an attempt to come to terms with cultural and existential “gains and losses” induced by immigration. The authors divide their narrative roughly into two parts: “There” (USSR) and “Here” (USA). The comparative analysis revolves around the following themes “Objects,” “Work,” “Leisure,” “Love,” “Language,” “Mass culture” that make up symmetrical subchapters. Vail’ and Genis’ assessment of the Soviet past comes through as rather ironic. The incongruities of Soviet ideology coupled with the absurdities of everyday life in the Soviet Union, however, did not encourage them to embrace the new, American, cultural environment and way of life. The main reason for that is the authors’ disenchantment with the America they encountered in emigration. As was the case for many Russian intellectuals, America for Vail’ and Genis was a highly idealized place: “The thought of the inevitability of a geographic location where everything would be fine was obvious. Russian idealism was generating the faith in the West, and no skepticism interfered with this phenomenon” (“Mysl’ o neizbezhnosti geograficheskoi tochki, gde vse khorosho, kazalas’ ochevidnoi. Rossiiskii idealizm

produtsiroval veru v Zapad, i nikakoi skepsis ne meshal etomu fenomenu,” 92). A bit later, Vail’ and Genis begin their account of the America of emigration with the following opening statement: “There is nothing more frightening than the materialized ideals” (“Net nichego strashnee osushchestvlennykh idealov,” 101). The narrative of disillusionment then centers on the discussion of the inadequacy of the America of idealized impressions, gained through literature, media, and popular mythologies, and the America that Vail’ and Genis discovered in emigration:

Ornate and intimate is the dream of a paradise. How blindly did we believe in its realization. At first, we looked for the paradise at home – “if only Lenin were alive,” then in the West – “what a great life they must have in America.” And finally, once in that very America we lost faith in the ideal.

Nariadnaia i intimnaia mechta o rae. Kak slepo my verili v ee osuschestvimosť. Rai pomeschalsia snachala doma – “esli by Lenin byl zhiv”, potom na Zapade – “zhivut zhe liudi v Amerike.” I nakonets, my utratili veru v ideal uzhe v etoi samoi Amerike. (195)

Problems with the language, financial predicaments, the petit-bourgeois mentality of the locals, the unexpected shabbiness of New York, among many other things, became a point of frustration, critique, and an inevitable disillusionment with undertones of a looming metaphysical impasse. What does this situation leave a Russian intellectual with? Veil’ and Genis never manage to furnish a single comprehensive answer. Instead, the authors attempt to work out a unified view of the state and purpose of the Russian émigré community (read intelligentsia) in America, one that could emerge from a common goal. At the same time, Vail’ and Genis come to the conclusion that this ideal outcome is rather doubtful and that perhaps the meaning of emigration lies entirely in “pure self-expression with no historical overtones” (“chistoe samovyrazhenie bez vsiakoi istoricheskoi nagruzki,” 193).

The duality of this position is rather telling. As I hope to show below, the oscillation between expressing the group consciousness and the privileging of individual self-expression in many ways shapes Vail' and Genis' perspective on America-writing. Let us take a closer look at how these two parts of the equation correlate: the meaning and purpose of the Russian intelligentsia in America and the turn towards self-expression.

From the start the authors take a rather critical position on ideological wars and contradictions within the Russian émigré community in the United States, accusing it of extreme conservatism: “Now, for instance, it’s not easy to find a more conservative layer of American population than our “three waves.” We fight, and we fight not for but against: against Stalin, Hitler, Andropov, Reagan” (“Seichas, naprimer, trudno naiti v Amerike bolee konservativnuiu prosloiku naseleniia, chem nashi “tri volny.” My voiuem – voiuem ne za, a iskliuchitel’no protiv: protiv Stalina, Gitlera, Andropova, Reigana,” 123). For Vail' and Genis, then, the ideal Russian émigré community would be that of a traditional liberal intelligentsia, one that they invoke, albeit in a subjunctive mood: “The emigration could have become a green house to cultivate the shoots of idealism and restore the old virtues of Russian intelligentsia: tolerance for enemies, love for friends, and compassion for the weak” (“Emigratsiia mogla by stat’ zapovednikom, v kotorom tshchatel’no vyrashchivaetsia rassada idealizma. V kotorom vosstanavlivaiutsia starinnye dobrodeteli rossiiskoi intelligentsii – terpimost’ k vragam, liubov’ k druž’iam, sochuvstvie k slabym,” 127). The emissary of idealism, the Russian liberal intelligentsia – itself rather idealized in Vail' and Genis' gloss – is seen as the kernel of Russian civilization in emigration. The idealism that Vail' and Genis would like to see in the

Russian emigration seems to be closely related to the “ideologized way of life” and “intense spirituality” that the authors benevolently ascribe to Russian intelligentsia:

But we have the Russian intelligentsia complex sanctified by decades, and intensified by the gains of the October [revolution] – an *ideologized way of life*. The Russian intelligentsia strongly and passionately endows the surrounding world with ideological symbols, refusing point blank to see a book as a stack of paper in a binding, and trousers – as merchandise made of fabric. And even though in its extremes it comes down to being laughable and absurd, *intense spirituality* is perhaps the only remaining trump card that we can show to the much more pragmatic West.

No u nas est’ osviashchennyi desiatiletiiami rossiiskii intelligentskii kompleks, usugublennyi zavoevaniiami Oktiabria, – *ideologizirovannyi obraz zhizni*. Russkii intelligent napriazhenno i strastno nadeliaet okruzhaiushchii mir ideologicheskimi simvolami, naotrez otkazyvaias’ priznat’ knigu – pachkoi bumagi v pereplete, a briuki – izdeliem iz tkani. I pust’ v svoikh krainostiakh eto dokhodit do smekha i absurda, *napriazhennaia dukhovnost’* – eto, pozhalui, edinstvennyi ostavshiisia u nas kozyr’, kotoryi my mozhem pokazat’ kuda bolee pragmatichnomu Zapadu. (*Poteriannyi rai*, 128) [my emphasis]

The idealism (that seems to belong to the realm of ethics rather than metaphysics) and the “ideologized way of life” of the Russian intelligentsia are the only qualities seen fit as an offering to the new cultural environment while forming an opposition to the pragmatism of the West. In a sense, Vail’ and Genis simply transpose traditional Russian cultural hierarchical paradigms to the émigré situation. For them the West (and the United States) seems to be a rather homogeneous entity, akin to what was non-intelligentsia in Russia.

Vail and Genis’ privileging of the “ideologized way of life” as a major cultural marker of the Russian intelligentsia and its main asset in an attempt to offset Western pragmatism points to a few unsettling issues in the authors’ understanding of ideology. As we will see, on the one hand, Vail’ and Genis acknowledge the crisis and inadequacy of the ideologies that were used to shape the collective and personal identities of individuals prior to the twentieth century. On the other hand, the authors license the

“ideologized way of life” to do battle with the supposedly non-ideologized way of life of Western society.

In the introductory chapter of *Poteriannyi rai* “On the Death of the Word” (“Na smert’ slova”) Vail’ and Genis offer a brief account of the role of ideology in modern and pre-modern societies. Ideology, for Vail’ and Genis, is primarily something that gives an individual a purpose for existence: “The essential element of any historiosophic model is ideology that provides a person with a sense of purpose” (“No kakuiu by istoriosofskuiu model’ my ni vybirali, opredeliaiushchim faktorom v nei budet to, chto obespechivaet cheloveku tsel’, - ideologiiia,” 8). Furthermore, according to the authors, the twentieth century, with its major “quasi-ideologies” communism and fascism, only confirmed the already looming crisis of, one might say, the true and benevolent ideology: “A mere observation, a collective intuitive feeling, of the general trajectory of the civilization points to a gradual devaluation of the role of ideology in human’s life” (“No prostoe nabliudenie nad obshchimi primetami tsivilizatsii, kollektivnoe intuitivnoe oshchushchenie govoriat o tom, chto proiskhodit postoiannoie padenie roli ideologii v zhizni cheloveka,” 14).

Although Vail’ and Genis choose not to valorize the deteriorating metaphysical authority of ideology explicitly, the elegiac tone betrays their personal predicament with this situation, a situation in which an individual would have to “get used to non-ideological forms of life” (“privyknut’ k neideologicheskim formam zhizni,” 14). In the context of Vail’ and Genis’ appeal for the Russian intelligentsia to oppose Western pragmatism with the Russian “ideologized way of life,” their statement about the adjustment to “non-ideological forms of life” could mean a number of things. On the one

hand, the *ideologicheskii obraz zhizni* could be looked at as a misplaced anachronism; and the adjustment here would come in a form of embracing non-ideological forms of life (whatever they are) that are ostensibly Western. On the other hand, the adjustment could be interpreted as an attempt to preserve the ideological way of life while being conscious of the environment to which such form of life is alien; hence the act of conscious resistance.

Vail' and Genis use the terms 'ideology,' 'ideological forms of life,' and 'ideologized way of life' copiously. For a reader with some familiarity with theories of ideology, especially Marxist, the celebration of an ideologized way of life could signal a rather ironic if not a dismal proposition. Therefore, it would probably be more productive to think of Vail' and Genis' appeals to ideology in semiotic and ethical rather than socio-political terms³. Furthermore, what also speaks for the validity of a semiotic perspective is the authors' description of Russia/ the Soviet Union as a country that:

[...] due to cataclysms of progress became a safeguard of ideology. Not of the Marxist, orthodox, or civil, of course, but of the primordial one, the ideology that endows objects with the power of symbols, gestures – with a meaning of deeds, and acts – with characteristics of epic, although often of tragicomic, feats.

[...] blagodaria kataklizmam progressa stala zapovednikom ideologii. Konechno zhe, ne marksistskoi, pravoslavnoi ili pravozashchitnoi, a toi, pervichnoi ideologii, predaiushchei veshchi dostoinstvo simvola, zhestu – znachenie deiania, a delu – kharakter epicheskogo, khotia chasto i tragikomicheskogo, podviga. (15)

Here, Vail' and Genis see Russia as a space that due to its historic and geographic isolation developed a uniquely intense semiotic activity, which they call 'ideology.'

The following gloss is also meant to contrast the intricacy of Russian/Soviet signification practices and their rather elementary American counterpart: "Obviously, a Western person also possesses a stock of ideologically meaningful signs – Marilyn

Monroe, cocaine, 1936 “Ford.” But he would never understand the semiotic value of the Soviet way of life” (“Konechno, zapadnyi chelovek tozhe obladaet zapasom ideologicheskii znachimykh primet – Merilin Monro, kokain, “ford” 36 goda. No emu ne poniat’ znakovuiu tsennost’ sovetskogo obraza zhizni,” 16). Then the “ideologized way of life” that is meant to contrast the pragmatism and rationality of the West is the product of this superior semiotic hyperactivity as well as the result of privileging particular codes that are part of this activity (“*intelligentskii kompleks*”), e.g. intelligentsia’s adherence to semiotic codes of high culture.

“Non-ideological forms of life,” to which, according to Vail’ and Genis, a Russian *intelligent* has to adjust, are found in more open cultures with less intense semiotic activity, i.e. Western democracies, and especially the United States, where cultural hierarchies are not as rigid and codes are abundant and heterogeneous. Moreover, following the semiotic rationale, the crisis of ideology that Vail’ and Genis obviously lament certainly did not begin in the twentieth or nineteenth century but in the Renaissance. It reached its peak during the period of the Enlightenment, a critical period, as Iurii Lotman notes, when: “social institutions are discredited and the very idea of a society is perceived as a synonym of oppression, a cultural system comes to the fore the organizational principle of which is the urge for desemiotization” (“sotsial’nye instituty diskreditirovany i sama ideia obshchestva vosprinimaetsia kak sinonim ugneteniia, vznikhaet sistema kul’tury, organizuiushchei osnovoi kotoroi iavliaetsia stremlenie k desemiotizatsii,” *Semiosfera* 410).

This does not mean, however, that Vail’ and Genis are underestimating the semiotic complexity of the culture whose codes they have yet to discover. Rather, Vail’

and Genis' outline of the semiotic predicaments that Russian intelligentsia faces in America in part serves as an explication of the authors' personal existential and epistemological dilemmas which they are trying to work out in their America-conscious narratives.

Yet, although the authors are obviously aware of the power of external, foreign and native, codes, Vail' and Genis seem to deny them ultimate control over the individual:

And finally we arrived at a sad realization, which sooner or later dawns on wise men, ascetics, and drunkards, – man is alone, and he alone answers for himself. Neither five-year plans nor dissidents, nor American democracy can help or prevent man from being himself; it always happens inside, not outside.

I nakonets my prishli k tomu gor'komu vyvodu, k kotoromu rano ili pozdno prikhodiat mudretsy, askety i p'ianitsy, – chelovek odin, i tol'ko on otvechaet za sebia. Ni piatiletki, ni dissidenty, ni amerikanskaia demokratiia ne mogut ni pomoch', ni pomeshat' cheloveku byt' samim soboj – eto vseгда proiskhodit vnutri, a ne snaruzhi. (196)

And further:

Geography has reached its limit; what begins now is a long and complex process of remodeling of the soul. And there is only one direction: from the Soviet person to the person as such.

Geografiia zakonchilas', nachalas' slozhnaia i dolgaia nauka perestroiki dushi. I put' tol'ko odin: ot sovetского cheloveka – k cheloveku prosto. (197)

These sudden epiphanies that appear on the last pages of “Poteriannyi rai” seem to advocate a striving for a certain kind of personal autonomy and, by extension, authenticity that allows an individual “to be himself” and safeguards the transition to “the person as such.” However, this sort of *perestroika* of the Russian/Soviet émigré into the “person as such” is difficult to imagine if we take seriously Vail' and Genis' earlier appeal for Russian intelligentsia to hold on to their wild card of the “ideologized way of life.” For, in order to become a “person as such” one would have to either completely

withdraw from the social circuit (so that “neither five-year plans nor dissidents, nor American democracy can help or prevent a man from being himself”) or make do with an illusion of such a state of individuality through adopting a set of personal codes to resist the external codes that prevent one from becoming a “person as such.” Although they did escape the Soviet environment, complete withdrawal from the social circuit was not an option for Vail’ and Genis. For them, the process of producing and reflecting the change towards “the person as such” comes in the form of essayistic writing following on the authors’ own plea for “self-expression” as perhaps the only viable purpose of existence in emigration (193). Textual experience becomes identified with the process of “being oneself” as it simultaneously highlights the freedom of the creative individual, not constrained by censorship or by a fixed range of topics, and allows one to express subjectivity through introspective narration and cultural play.

From Enlightenment to “Lyrical Culturology”

“Lyrical culturology” is the term that Aleksandr Genis once used to describe the genre of his essayistic prose. This description seems rather appropriate if applied to most works that Vail’ and Genis wrote together and separately. The ‘lyrical’ part here is roughly synonymous with ‘subjective,’ and in a sense ‘phenomenological.’ This is so in part because most of the essays are written in the first person and often feature the narrators as protagonists with their pronouncedly subjective attitude towards cultural phenomena. The ‘culturological’ part is represented by elements of ethnographic study and of analysis that borrow methodological snippets from various academic approaches to culture: linguistic, semiotic, philosophical, and so on. The final product appears rather

eclectic, with a number of important points sketched out and gravitating towards a certain theme. Vail' and Genis' "lyrical culturology" emerges as a kind of prose about culture that combines personal impressions with a medley of interpretive paradigms, or sets of codes, from various branches of knowledge. A private and openly subjective practice, it does not aim at a systematic study of culture in the sense that it does not necessarily attempt to situate the analyzed data within a larger theoretical scheme. What it demonstrates is the ability of an individual, an intellectual, to engage with culture analytically and, empowered by the knowledge of how culture operates, claim certain personal autonomy within it.

Commenting on the tendentiousness and inadequacy of Soviet studies in America, Vail' and Genis note:

We are not invited to join the Sovietologists. But that's not important. What's important is to create *one's one Sovietology based on analysis rather than accusation*. How much longer do we have to complain about that fact that Simonov wasn't really a good person, and that he had eight summer homes in Koktebel? It's much more important to take time and caution to try to understand why the war theme is being so persistently popularized in the USSR.

Nas ne zovut v sovetologi – i ne nado. Nado drugoe: sozdat' *svoiu sobstvennuiu sovetologiiu: ne razoblachitel'nogo, a analiticheskogo kharaktera*. Skol'ko mozno setovat' po povodu togo, chto Simonov byl ne ochen' khoroshii chelovek i imel vosem' dach' v Koktebele? Gorazdo vazhnee spokoino i obstoiatel'no razobrat'sia, pochemu s takoi nastoichivost'iu tirazhiruetsia v SSSR voennaia tema. (128) [my emphasis]

The style, methodology, and agenda of the 'personal Sovietology' that the authors propose here, in *Poteriannyi rai*, and later exhibit in such works as *60-e. Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (1988) and *Rodnaia rech'* (1990), is similar to their approach to the personal Americanology in what became their major work related to American culture and civilization – "Amerikana" (1991).

The true subject of the essay: “lyricism”

“Amerikana” is certainly the most buoyant, witty, and subtle collection of texts related to America since the 1936 travelogue by another pair of authors – Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov’s *Oдноetazhnaia Amerika*. Vail’ and Genis’ collection is made up of fifty-seven short essays on a range of topics: from the “meaning of America” to “nude Madonna.” The theme of each text, just as in Mikhail Epstein’s collection *On the Borders of Cultures*, is reflected in its title: “O pive” (“On Beer”), “O Belom dome” (“On the White House”), and so on, and is consistently introduced by the preposition ‘O...’ that can be translated into English as “On...” or, in a more archaic style, “Of...” This manner of presentation aligns Vail’ and Genis’ work with the essayistic tradition that started with Michel de Montaigne, and his followers, such as Francis Bacon, for example. Mikhail Epstein, in his essay “At the Crossroads of Image and Concept: Essaysim in the Culture of the Modern Age,” discussing the peculiarity of Montaigne’s enunciation of the topics of his essays, notes:

“Of” is a formula peculiar to the genre, proposed as an angle of vision, invariably somewhat skewed, which presents the theme almost as a byproduct. Appearing, as it does, in a prepositional phrase, rather than in subject form, the topic of the essay is examined, not head-on, as in a scientific paper, but from the side, serving as a pretext for the unfolding of thought, which describes a complete circle before returning to itself: to the author, its point of departure and arrival.

[...] An essay is always “of,” because its actual, if not necessarily *ostensible* topic, always stands in the subject’s position: the author himself, who as a matter of principle cannot discover himself completely, since by his authorial essence, he cannot be completed. (*After the Future*, 216-217)

Similar to Montaigne’s *essais*, Vail’ and Genis’ texts inevitably point to and expose a certain aspect(s) of the authors’ individual subjectivity through an exposition of ideas related to the topic announced in the title. For example, the title of the essay “On Central

Park, an Oasis of Insanity” (“O Sentral-parke – oazise bezumiia”) already informs us that the focus of this text is not New York City’s Central park but the authors’ vision of it as an oasis of insanity, whatever that might mean. Even though some other titles may have no qualifying attributes that would directly signal the authorial perspective, almost all essays in this collection follow a similar pattern of authorial engagement, without simulating a disengaged, objectified perspective.

Despite the thematic diversity of the fifty-seven texts that make up this collection, it is fairly safe to suggest that the overwhelming majority of the essays display a rather stable, if not invariant textual structure: a) an introduction that often explains the reason for the author’s engagement with the topic; b) a body that usually defines the essay’s literary and discursive dominant; and c) a conclusion that highlights the key point(s) of the essay and comments on how this new realization correlates with the starting point of the author’s inquiry.

The opening section of the essays usually contains a rather personal, often anecdotal, section that outlines the authors’ relationship with the object of the essay. It can come in a form of self-ironic passage (that echoes Montaigne’s confessions of ignorance) as in the essay “On Musical Civilization” (“O muzykal’noi tsivilizatsii”): “There are very few things in this world that we understand worse than music. Not often, but rather intensely do our relatives suffer when we sing. But our well-established ignorance in this matter doesn’t bother us” (“Malo v mire est’ veshchei, v kotorykh my by razbiralis’ tak plokho, kak v muzyke. Redko, no sil’no ot etogo stradaiut nashi rodstvenniki – kogda my poem. No khorosho proverennoe otsutstvie znaniia po etomu voprosu nam ne meshaet,” 303). The authors then proceed to vent their annoyance with

the omnipresence of portable music in New York, and then reflect on the role of music in contemporary society.

The opening can be much more succinct and a bit less playful as in the essay “On the White House” (“O belom dome”) that focuses on the issue of America’s slavish imitation of Europe: “A European on a tour of the White House ends up being perplexed” (“Evropeets, popavshii na ekskursiiu v Belyi dom, prikhodit v nedoumenie,” 287). Thus, in just a few words Vail’ and Genis manage to introduce their personal perspective and the main conflict of the essay: European – perplexity – the White House.

An exordium can be in the form of an intriguing, if not outright baffling, passage that hints at a discursive connection between seemingly unrelated events – public and private: “There are two absolutely incommensurate events. The first is the well-known crash of the “Challenger” space shuttle. The other is the purchase of bookshelves by one of us known only to those few participating in the deal” (“Dva absolutno neravnoznachnykh sobytiia. Pervoe – katastrofa kosmicheskogo korablia “Chellendzher,” o kotoroi izvestno vsem. Vtoroe – pokupka odnim iz nas knizhnykh polok, o chem izvestno tol’ko neposredstvennym uchastnikam sdelki,” 390). Thus opening the essay “On the Label ‘Made in U.S.A.’” (“O iarlyke ‘Made in U.S.A.’”), Vail’ and Genis focus on factors they consider responsible for the deteriorating quality of American-made products: from basic furniture to state of the art technology. The authorial attitude can also be expressed by a simple attribute, for example ‘strange,’ attached to factual narration, as in the essay “On the Woodstock Generation” (“O pokolenii Vudstoka”): “America celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Woodstock festival in a rather *strange* way” (“Amerika otmetila 20-letnii iubilei Vudstoka dovol’no *stranno*,” 526). Overall, the

authors display remarkable creativity, inasmuch as there are no two similar openings in the entire collection. The diversity of the openings also points to the variety of personal motivations and circumstances that inspired the authors to present their experiences in textual form.

The essay may be regarded as a literary genre that transcends rules and regulations of literary composition, inasmuch as it complies only with the whim of the author who hopes to be understood by the reader. Thus, the middle part, or the body, of the essay, in which the author sketches out his/her thought related to the topic, is the most unpredictable and unrestrained.⁴ The object of the essay may in fact be just an excuse for the author to approach the object's domain and then focus on something entirely different by way of digressions, which sometimes may make up the bulk of an essay. Vail' and Genis' texts are no exception. The authors continuously shift between different literary modes: descriptive passages interrupt narrative ones and then give way to discursive digressions mixed with lyrical detours, along the way utilizing an arsenal of stylistic and rhetorical devices. In addition, what enhances the discursive and descriptive effect of Vail' and Genis' texts is the extensive use of quotations from sources as different as Soviet newspapers and French anthropologists. As a result the essay turns into a complex conglomeration of personal responses, the unique combination of which in each case forms a kind of matrix, a 'bundle of distinctive features' of subjectivity. Let us now take a closer look at one of the essays that, in my view, exemplifies Vail' and Genis' essayism quite well.

We already mentioned that the essay "On the Musical Civilization" ("O muzykal'noi tsivilizatsii") begins with the authors' ironic confession about being

musically ignorant and inept (303). For a reader used to the idea that the author has to have some authority in the declared subject matter, such a blunt affirmation of ignorance may seem a bit perplexing. Mildly provocative, this confession is not just a display of the authors' modesty; Vail' and Genis use this declaration to claim their right to the validity of a subjective point of view, however poorly informed, that undermines the conventional assumption of the author being the authority and the source of knowledge. Thus, Vail' and Genis continue with the following playful consideration:

Instead of erudition, we've come up with a theory according to which ignorance is more productive than knowledge. No really, only the lack of special education allows one to talk about things broadly and irresponsibly, in other words - paradoxically. Only a completely ignorant person can believe that he has enough knowledge about everything. A specialist, however, is involuntarily an extremely cautious person. He protects his opinion as a major treasure, and would never let it slip out. What the specialist is afraid of the most are categorical statements. That's why his speech is full of boring phrases like 'it's hard to say' and 'the future will show.' [...] Among other things, ignorance is much more accessible than erudition. We know this from experience. The aforementioned theory allows us to write about music.

Vmesto eruditsii my pridumali teoriuu, soglasno kotoroi nevezhestvo plodotovornee znanii. V samom dele, tol'ko otsutstvie spetsial'nogo obrazovaniia pozvoliaet cheloveku obo vsem sudit' shiroko, razmashisto i bezotvetstvenno, to est' paradoksal'no. Tol'ko kruglyi nevezhda schitaet, chto on obo vsem raspolagaet dostatochnymi svedeniiami. Togda kak spetsialist – ponevole chelovek predel'no ostorozhnyi. Svoe mnenie on berezhet, kak glavnoe sokrovishche. i nikogda ne soglashaetsia s nim rasstat'sia. Bol'she vsego na svete spetsialist boitsia kategorichnosti. Poetomu ego rech' pestrit nudnymi oborotami – 'trudno skazat' i 'budushchee pokazhet.' [...] Krome vsego prochego, nevezhestvo znachitel'no dostupnee eruditsii. My eto znaem po sobstvennomu opytu. Vysheizlozhennaia teoriia nam pozvoliaet pisat' o muzyke. (303-304)

In general, such a disclaimer can be read as ironic, given the high level of erudition that the authors never fail to display in their works. Yet, as far as essayism is concerned, and specifically the collection "Amerikana" and the essay at hand, Vail' and Genis' "theory," and especially its final part, can be read as sort of legitimization of the genre's heuristic

nature. The essayist, to a certain extent unburdened by the demands of the objectivity of knowledge and representation, is free to express his personal opinion, while being openly aware of his limitations.⁵ It is thus the personality and individuality of the author that gives value to the essay.

Along with ‘ignorance,’ the authors cite another factor that prompted them to write about music. Hatred. Vail’ and Genis then proceed with an anecdotal encounter of someone carrying an enormous stereo that fills that streets of Manhattan with extra-loud music. This circumstance irritates the authors. In a rather emphatic asyndetic passage (the absence of conjunctions connecting the simple sentences adds an emotional effect typical of oral speech) they jokingly suggest a radical solution to this problem that involves buying a machine gun in Brighton Beach:

And that’s where our acquired taste for democracy fails; here we forget the advantages of the free world over totalitarianism; here we stop thinking that one has to respond to evil with good. We immediately want to respond to terror with terror.

I tut konchaetsia nasha nanosnaia demokratichnost’, tut my zabyvaem o preimushchestvakh svobodnogo mira pered totalitarnym, tut my perestaem schitat’, chto na zlo nado otvechat’ dobrom. Nam khochetsia nemedlenno terrorom otvetit’ na terror. (304-305)

But before doing anything radically misanthropic, the authors propose to investigate whatever it is that motivates their “enemy” who insists on sharing his music with the public. And so, this proposition concludes the brief narrative part and introduces the discursive section.

Vail’ and Genis set out with an assumption that the prevailing art form of the contemporary world is music, in much the same vein as, say, painting was essential for the Renaissance, or literature for 19th century Russia. Technological progress has made

music a truly ubiquitous phenomenon that both connects people with and shields them from the environment. Thus, the authors assert, the popular lamentations about the steady decline of Art have no ground, for music is an example of the power of Art in the modern world. Having established the primacy of music, Vail' and Genis move on to offer an explanation of music's supremacy and appeal.

A brief discussion of abstraction as the essence of music leads the authors to suggest that it is the extra-semiotic nature of this art that allows it, as it were, to bypass the mind and become absorbed by the senses as a pure emotion. Hence the bonding power of music that delivers Truth through the universal language of emotion rather than philosophical dialogue. And it is this latter quality of music, a substitute for philosophical dialogism, that the authors find mildly disconcerting as they alert the reader to the fact that humanity has always strived to move from monologue to dialogue even if the monologue is irresistibly beautiful. To illustrate music's monopoly as a unifying practice, the authors cite the example of their generation [both authors were born in the mid-1950s] being able to bond perhaps only on the basis of music, and especially "The Beatles" despite the fact that they knew little or no English and had scarce information about the West:

What did we know about the West in the early 1960s? Almost nothing. But our favorite songs were "Girls" [sic!], and "Yesterday," and "She Loves You"⁶. Everybody knew that "The Beatles" were from Liverpool, and Liverpool was *our Kharkov*. The cotton turtleneck, the guitar, and Lennon's voice was all that united the world in the universal musical surge.

"Chto my znali o Zapade v rannie 60-e gody? Pochti nichego. No nashimi liubimymi pesniami byli 'Gerlz,' i 'Iesterdei,' i 'Shi lavz iu, e-e-e.' Vse znali, chto bitly iz Liverpul'ia i chto Liverpul' – eto *nash Khar'kov*. Trikotazhnaia rubakha-vodolazka, gitara, golos Lennona – vot chto ob"edinialo mir v obshchem muzykal'nom poryve. (307)

Music, then, is capable of transcending borders and languages. Music creates a world of its own, and by doing so, according to the authors, it manages to do what no religion has ever been able to accomplish – “attain the brotherhood of people” (“dostich’ chelovecheskogo bratstva,” 307).

The authors’ discussion of music reaches its apogee in their comparison of music to religion of the most ancient kind: mythology. To add validity to their assumption, Vail’ and Genis rely on the authority of Claude Lévi-Strauss: “The famous ethnographer Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote: ‘Music has preserved the totality of the representation of the world that’s characteristic of myth’ (“Znamenitii etnograf Klod Levi-Stross pisal: ‘Muzyka soxranila tselostnoe otrazhenie mira, svoistvennoe mifu,’” 307-308). Thus, musical civilization, according to the authors, seems to reject the analysis of reality by opting for its synthesis.

Having thus claimed to establish the similarity between music and myth, Vail’ and Genis proceed to sketch out the role of myth in contemporary society. Their argument focuses mostly on the all-knowing, totalizing, and liberating power of myth; ‘liberating’ in a sense that, as in a totalitarian society, the individuality entrusts its fate to a mythical institution and thus transfers onto it the pain associated with personal responsibility: “It is easier to be happy in a world governed by myth” (“V mire, gde pravil mif, legche byt’ schastlivym,” 308). And music, Vail’ and Genis assert, has become just that liberating all-knowing totality that transcends all sorts of boundaries, such as race, gender, class, nationality, and so on.

Returning to the example of “The Beatles” and music’s ability to synthesize reality, the authors suggest that music, like any myth, is more suited to creation and

affirmation, rather than rejection and destruction. Hence, the positive, affirmative program of “The Beatles”: “All you need is love.” And when it comes down to the idols of contemporary [early 1990s] music, Vail’ and Genis note that they have already gone much further than “The Beatles.” “They represent an already realized ideal of the musical civilization” (“Oni predstavliaiut soboi uzhe realizovannyi ideal muzykal’noi tsivilizatsii,” 309). The authors name the two Kings of Pop, Michael Jackson and Prince, as responsible for not only eliminating boundaries between countries and their people, but also for diffusing biological distinctions, such as race, age, and sex. The diffusion of sexual distinctions seems to be of significant concern for the authors as they invoke the opinion of sociologists on this issue:

[...] many sociologists believe that a new sexual revolution is underway here, a revolution that would destroy the last traces of inequality between people. Instead of the interaction of sexes – a pure, abstract sexuality fixated onto itself.

[...] mnogie sotsiologi dazhe schitaiut, chto zdes’ nachinaetsia novaia seksual’naia revoliutsiia, kotoraiia unichtozhit poslednie sledy neravenstva mezhdud liud’mi. Vmesto vzaimootnoshenii polov – chistaia, abstraktnaia seksual’nost’, zamknutaia na samoi sebe. (309)

By this point the authors’ tone seems to become more emotional; the sentences get shorter, more concise, almost aphoristic, signaling the approach of the most crucial discursive part of the text.

Thus, Vail’ and Genis point out that music brackets even the attitude to money. Hence the audience’s paradoxical acceptance of the contradiction between the celebration of indifference to money in the lyrics of rock and pop stars and the enormity of their personal fortunes. This is so because the Stars are dissolved in the myth of music; they are sort of devoid of corporeality. By standing between the great myth of music and the people, they do not belong to themselves but to everyone. Stars are the prophets of music

who unite people in an attempt to save them. And to reach the unity one does not need to have any special skills or knowledge. One just needs to let the emotions join the hypnotic musical current. Vail' and Genis, then, point out the following characteristics of music as the "new cult": "[...] music is self-valuable, it is both the end and the means, it's a syncretic truth accessible only to a personality dissolved in the myth" ("[...] muzyka samotsenna, ona i tsel' i sredstvo, eto sinkreticheskaia pravda, kotoraiia dostupna tol'ko lichnosti, rastvorennoi v mife," 310).

Once again advancing the point of emotional rather than intellectual engagement with music, the authors suggest that one does not even have to understand the lyrics, inasmuch as the words have become rudimentary in this culture. This leads Vail' and Genis to yet another and final reformulation, which at this point is becoming a bit redundant, of the meaning of music in the contemporary world:

Important are the emotions that create sound imagery and the powerful harmonic field that reconstructs our civilization: its style, its mode of living and thinking, its ways of communication and manners. And today, music is a kernel that can make humanity more uniform, which in the language of music culture would mean saving it.

Vazhny emotsii, kotorye rozhdaiut zvukovye obrazy. Vazhno lish' moshchnoe garmonicheskoe pole, kotoroe preobrazuet nashu tsivilizatsiiu – ee stil', obraz zhizni i mysli, sposoby obshcheniia, kul'turu povedeniia. I segodnia muzyka – sterzhen', kotoryi mozhnet pridat' edinoobrazie chelovechestvu. V terminakh muzykal'noi kul'tury eto i oznachaet spasti ego. (311)

This paragraph, thus, concludes the abstract discursive part of the essay. At this point, the authors return to their personal encounter with one of the representatives of the musical civilization on the streets of New York: "Let our enemy join the struggle for the new civilization. Let him dissolve in the emotional brotherhood of his allies. But what right does he have to do it so *loudly*?" ("Pust' nash vrag vkluchaetsia v bor'bu za novuiu

tsivilizatsiiu. Pust' on rastvorიაetsia v emotsional'nom bratstve svoikh storonnikov. No kakoe on imeet pravo delat' eto tak *gromko?*” 311).

To emphasize the practical implications of coexistence in the musical civilization for an individual, the authors note that the mythological world turns out to be more aggressive than the atheistic world; unwilling to recognize neutrality, it attempts to extend the universal unity no matter what. And for this matter, Vail' and Genis', by way of retracing their steps towards some radical remedies for such co-optation, humorously declare that “[...] now we are left with only one solution. And we set out towards Brighton Beach to buy an UZI machine gun” ([...] u nas ostaetsia tol'ko odin vykhod. I my otpavliaemsia na Braiton-Bich pokupat' avtomat 'uzi,”) 311).

Thus, the essay “On the Musical Civilization” has gone full circle to finish where it started. Through the investigation of music's effect on society, the authors have reached a certain understanding of what it is that motivates their noisy fellow New Yorker. At the same time, as the closing remarks demonstrate, Vail' and Genis clearly express their personal predicament precisely with that source of motivation, i.e. music's mythological co-optimative, almost totalitarian power. The conclusion of the essay then, as is often the case in “Amerikana,” inevitably summarizes the authors' personal response to the object of the essay. The accretion of such personal responses that produce a kind of matrix of subjectivity is an essential characteristic of the collection “Amerikana.” America, then, is not a direct but an indirect object, so to speak, of the authors' essays. And it is not accidental that Vail' and Genis called their collection ‘Amerikana’ providing a Webster's dictionary definition of this word in the epigraph to the collection: “Americana – sobranie materialov, imeiushchikh otnoshenie k Amerike, ee kul'ture i

tsivilizatsii. *Tolkovyi slovar' Uebstera.*" ("Americana – materials concerning or characteristic of America, its culture, and [or] its civilization. *Webster's Dictionary,*" 200).

"Culturology" and discursive play

If the subjective treatment of themes in Vail' and Genis' essays reminds us of Montaigne's tradition, the ironic and humorous tone of narration brings to mind the work of Il'f and Petrov. Unlike canonical travelogues gravitating towards ethnography, like *Odnoetazhnaia Amerika*, "Amerikana" does not follow the tradition of a "grand tour" or an "odyssey" where an author attempts to visit and write about as many places as possible⁷. While Il'f and Petrov are driven by geography, covering the territory of the United States from coast to coast, Vail' and Genis choose to focus mostly on cultural icons, spaces, and phenomena in no particular order – logical, chronological, or spatial, even though a number of their essays do deal with geographic locations: New York, New Orleans, Vermont, the South, California, New England, Hawaii. The authors of "Amerikana" select the themes that interest them the most. One could say that Il'f and Petrov's project was connected to creating a sort of holistic image of the United States to foster interest in this country:

The Soviet Union and the United States is a massive topic. Our notes just reflect our travel observations. We simply wanted to increase awareness of America in Soviet society and to stimulate exploration of this great country.

Sovetskii Soiuz i Soedinennye Shtaty – eta tema neob"iatnaia. Nashi zapisi – vsego lish' rezul'tat dorozhnykh nabliudenii. Nam prosto khotelos' by usilit' v sovetskom obshchestve interes k Amerike, k izucheniiu etoi velikoi strany. (*Odnoetazhnaia Amerika*, 409)

Vail' and Genis go in a different direction, or rather in no direction at all. Their collection approaches America through the analysis of discrete phenomena, the unity of which is determined only by the authors' personal preference. After all, for these co-authors it is not just about cultivating the readers' awareness of the United States but displaying their own *personal experience* of America through a cultural analysis of the phenomena that interest them the most; as the authors put it: "Otnoshenie k Amerike – gluboko lichnaia problema" ("The attitude towards America is a profoundly personal issue," *Amerikana*, 202). To put it in yet different terms, the trajectories of Il'f and Petrov's literary journey may be replicated (and they have been⁸), whereas Vail' and Genis' literary and analytical meanderings are quite unique in their randomness.

Even though Vail' and Genis' *Amerikana* is not on a track of attempting to be holistic in any way, the fifty-seven essays of this collection cover a rather substantial range of themes related to American culture and civilization. The themes could be roughly organized in the following groupings:

Places and spaces: New York; New Orleans; Vermont; the South; California; New England; Hawaii; Manhattan; Central Park; the White House; the Cathedral of Learning (Pittsburgh); Florida and Disneyland; Brighton Beach; ruins of Manhattan (the Bronx); New York subway.

Celebrities: Andy Warhol; Charlie Chaplin; Steven Spielberg; and Duke Ellington.

Holidays: Independence Day; Thanksgiving; Halloween; Christmas; and St. Valentine's Day.

The Arts: James Bond; a small theater in New York; pop music; Westerns and Thrillers as genres; architecture.

General cultural topics and everyday life: advertisement; beer; portable philosophy; American Slavists; friendship with Americans; censorship; the yellow press; American smile; cars; homeless people; law; drugs; weather.

The assortment of these themes reflects, first and foremost, the sphere of the authors' intellectual interests. The selection does not aim at a balanced representation of the United States, nor is it intended to try to accommodate the potential diversity of interests of a hypothetical general reader. Vail' and Genis almost entirely ignore a number of topics such as sports, youth culture, the cultures of minorities, regular undistinguished Americans, politics, education, intellectual life in the United States, and many others. On the other hand, the authors also avoid very personal topics related to their family life, for example. Moreover, Vail' and Genis display no interest in things/objects/phenomena in themselves; the authors see them only in a cultural, discursive context, as products of culture.

Inasmuch as the authors' inquiry is not shaped by any kind of grand narrative or theory, the mode of exploration in *Amerikana* is heuristic rather than rigidly methodological, premeditatedly instructive or explicitly educational. The heuristic mode of exploration of America's cultural space is directly related to Vail' and Genis' discussion, in *Poteriannyi rai*, of the purpose and meaning of the Russian intelligentsia in the United States and of the prospect of the necessary adjustment to "non-ideological forms of life." *Amerikana*, then, is a practical follow-up on this discussion, the essence of which is laid out in the introductory essay "O smysle Ameriki" ("On the Meaning of America"). The essay is written in the form of a dialogue between two interlocutors: A. and B., where B. is "some abstraction, practicing a healthy love for the New World that is

devoid of the exaltation of a neophyte” (“nekaia abstraktsiia, ispoveduiushchaia zdorovuiu liubov’ k Novomu Svetu, no lishennaia vostorgov neofita,” 203), and A. is allegedly Vail’ and Genis or a collective voice of a particular type of intellectual. (The authors consistently use the first person plural “we” that often refers to a number of subjects: emigrants, Russian (*rossiiskaia*) intelligentsia, and the co-authors themselves). Some of A.’s main points of contention include: the lack of a unifying goal of America (205); the chase after profit (208); the predictability of life due to economic prosperity (210); and the spiritual barrenness of American life, devoid of the “core of culture” (*sterzhen’ kul’tury*), i.e. high culture (213).

B.’s apologia rests on the claim that A. is not equipped to talk about America because of A.’s lack of proper knowledge of the country and of its language (203). B.’s response to the ‘unifying goal’ argument is based on claims that “the belief in a common goal always leads to totalitarianism” and that “America rests on the individual’s freedom” (“Vera v obshchuiu tsel’ vseгда privodit k totalitarizmu” [...] “Amerika stoit na svobode ot del’noi lichnosti,” 206). B. refutes A.’s arguments by citing examples of the much-coveted capital being used for cultural and spiritual needs (208), followed by examples of average Americans leading unusual lives that do not fit the “predictability” stereotype (212). And finally, B. counter-attacks A.’s worship of high culture as a form of escape for Russian intellectuals from an oppressive environment; while American culture, B. asserts, is based on the “worship of a free creative individual” (214). America, B. concludes, “is not a country but a civilization,” the diverse and contradictory nature of which ushers in a “new quality of life.” As soon as A. again brings up America’s “petit-bourgeois mentality” (*meshchanstvo*) sending the debate full-circle, Vail’ and Genis

choke the dialogue with an ellipses to reveal the identity of A. and B. in the final paragraphs. A., we are told, stands for the co-authors. But then so does B. What we have here then is the internal dialogue of the narrator/-s; as the authors hasten to add that “[i]n emigration the split personality is not an extraordinary but a normal condition” (“[v] emigratsii razdvoenie lichnosti ne iskliuchitel’noe, a normal’noe sostoianie,” 215). This dialogue, if considered in the context of Vail’ and Genis’ discussion of Russian intelligentsia’s transition to “non-ideological” being, demonstrates a probable outcome of such transition, which is a certain coexistence of idealism and pragmatism.

Thus, the essay “O smysle Ameriki” alerts us to an important tension. On the one hand Vail’ and Genis’ essays, as we discussed, are framed as cultural observations driven by a set of individual factors (for example, thematic preferences based on personal interests and circumstantial encounters) that hint at the heuristic nature of the authors’ inquiry. On the other hand, the authors’ approach to America seems to have a discursive framework that demonstrates their vacillation between two types of objectified rhetorical formations outlined in the introductory essay. (The authors objectify these two types of critique by presenting them as belonging to two abstractions: A. and B., whose critique cannot be reconciled). Thus, what Vail’ and Genis seem to showcase in “Amerikana” is an intellectual’s ability to recognize and come to terms with the multiplicity of discourses that make up a cultural environment and one’s subjectivity, thus emphasizing the discursive nature of culture and of the self. Let us now take a closer look at some of the texts in “Amerikana” in an attempt to reconstruct the discursive tension mentioned above.

Among the essays that represent Vail’ and Genis’ interpretation of American cultural phenomena, there are a few texts that comment on the authors’ predicament of

finding an appropriate and fulfilling environment for a Russian intellectual in America. The authors contemplate a number of alternative spaces and discuss the peculiarities of life in those spaces from the point of view of a Russian emigrant intellectual. The essay “On the Pioneers of Our Days” (“O pionerkakh nashikh dnei”) sees the authors set out to celebrate the New Year’s holidays with their reclusive friend. A Russian emigrant, Andrei, leads a rather secluded but fulfilling life in the countryside, in Maine. For Vail’ and Genis, Andrei represents an ideal case of adjustment to the American environment. His enactment of individual freedom, self-reliance, and explorative spirit allow the authors to see a true Russian Henry Thoreau in him. Andrei’s success story is quite unique, inasmuch as Vail’ and Genis do not offer any other examples of thriving emigrants who are completely in harmony with their environment. It is not incidental, then, that Andrei’s success is presented as being contingent on withdrawal from the social circuit. The potent irony of Vail’ and Genis’ conclusion summarizes their personal situation in America:

But our lot is eclecticism. Uprootedness. An existence between the two worlds. Yet, we too try and do transform nature: the snowman that we made on New Year’s morning on the bank of the Delaware river melted only in March. It [the snowman] was taller than any of us, had a red Russian nose made of a carrot, and green American eyes made of avocado.

A nash udel – eklektika. Neukorenennost’. Sushchestvovanie mezh dvukh mirov. No i my staraemsia i tozhe preobrazuem prirodu: tol’ko v marte rastaiala ta snezhnaia baba, kotoruiu my vozdvigali novogodnim utrom na beregu Delavera. Rostom vyshe liubogo iz nas, s krasnym rossiiskim nosom iz morkovi i zelenymi amerikanskimi glazami iz avokado. (270)

For the authors, despite the apparent success of Andrei’s American natural experience, rustic, asocial existence, although alluring and potentially fulfilling, does not seem to be a preferred alternative to integration in the American society.

As a middle ground between the hermetic alliance with nature and assimilation to American civilization the authors contemplate the idea of provincial life in the essay “On the Leaf Fall in New England” (“O listopade v Novoi Anglii”). Paying tribute to the natural beauty and the power of national traditions of New England, Vail’ and Genis note that the traditional suburbia (*provintsiia*) is a kind of compromise in the conflict between Nature and Civilization. Suburbia, then, according to the authors is the main secret of this country, it is what makes America what it is: “Around the world, the very word ‘America’ produces completely false images borrowed from sci-fi novels of the time of industrial enthusiasm” (“Samo slovo ‘Amerika’ vo vsem mire porozhdaet sovershenno lozhnye obrazy, zaimstvovannye iz nauchno-fantasticheskikh romanov vremen industrial’nogo entuziazma,” 446). And thus, Vail’ and Genis suggest, the traditional spirit and the lifestyle of suburbia make it unsuitable for a Russian emigrant, who is brought up on completely false images of America; as a result, he is unable to penetrate the national ideal of this country and successfully assimilate. The authors find provincial life somewhat strange and exotic, inasmuch as it is too traditional and too “normal,” especially if compared to life in New York: “Perhaps the reason why it is so nice to come and marvel at the autumnal leaves in New Hampshire is because you get here from New York – a city that lives despite the norm” (“Mozhet byt’, potomu tak priiatno liubovat’sia osennimi list’iami v N’iu-Gempshire, chto priezhaesh’ tuda iz N’iu-Iorka – goroda, zhivushchego vopreki normy,” 447).

The suspension of the norm is what attracts the authors to New York. This city and its everyday life is featured in almost every other text of “Amerikana” not only because the authors found their physical home here, but also because New York has

become a symbol of the only mode of existence that Vail' and Genis find acceptable and worthwhile. In the essay "On New York" ("O N'iu-Iorke") the authors bring up the issue of migration of the middle class, including Russian emigrants, to the suburbs in pursuit of happiness in the form of comfortable living. Emphasizing the utilitarian aspirations of emigrants, Vail' and Genis suggest that suburban life caters perfectly to that utilitarianism:

The American village (even though it's funny to call it that) exploits precisely this utilitarian approach. Life in the suburb rests on the idea of a rational, and therefore predictable, human being. Here, *the spiritual and material values replace personality*. The suburb is a machine of happiness production. [...] In reality, though, it is just comfort for the time being. And people easily agree to this kind of substitution.

Amerikanskaia derevnia (khot' i smeshno ee tak nazyvat') ekspluatiruet imenno etot utilitarnyi podkhod. Zhizn' v prigorode postroena na predstavlenii o cheloveke razumnom, a znachit, predskazuemom. *Mesto lichnosti zdes' zanimaiut dukhovnye i material'nye tsennosti*. Prigorod – eto mashina dlia proizvodstva schast'ia. [...] Na samom dele eto eshche tol'ko komfort, a ne schast'e, no na praktike chelovek legko soglashaetsia na takuiu podmenu. (618) [my emphasis]

The appeal of suburban life, according to the authors, negatively affected the city. Most cities in the United States, with a few exceptions, look similar inasmuch as they look deserted. The only truly unique city, an embodiment of civilization, that shelters one from the boring monotony of provincial life is New York. The authors point out the following distinctive features of New York: exceptional uniqueness with no parallels in Europe or in history (623); the privacy of the city and of its layout that excludes expansive ideological spaces, like the main square, and ideological monuments (624-625); the natural growth of the city (624); New York as the manifestation of human nature that includes all extremes: positive and negative (625); the absence of a common denominator that makes it easier to become oneself (626); and so on. In the final part of the essay, the

authors turn to a critique of the cult of the normal, healthy, rational, and predictable life in Europe and the United States. In this context, Vail' and Genis refer to ideas of a 19th century Russian conservative religious philosopher Konstantin Leont'ev concerning the decline of the aesthetic life. Leont'ev, the authors note, was among the first to start hating the average normal person, if only because all average people are alike. Leont'ev also found little consolation in the ideas of equality, happiness for all, and the striving for comfortable living:

Leont'ev used to say: "It will never get better for everyone. For some, it will get better, for others, it will get worse. Such a state, such oscillations of sadness and pain, is the only imaginable harmony in this world." Only such frightening harmony produces beautiful life.

Leont'ev govoril: "Vsem luchshe nikogda ne budet. Odnim budet luchshe, drugim stanet khuzhe. Takoe sostoianie, taki kolebaniia gosti i boli – vot edinstvenno vozmozhnaia na zemle garmoniia." Tol'ko takaia ustrashaiushchaia garmoniia i proizvodit krasivuiu zhizn'. (626)

Yet, Vail' and Genis note, already during Leont'ev's time Europeans developed the ideal of the average rational person so much hated by the philosopher, who actually predicted the future triumph of this sort of individual. And these predictions, according to the authors, came true for America as well. The only alternative that America left for a creative, marginal, or otherwise non-traditional personality is New York, "the city of outcasts" ("*gorod otverzhennykh*," 627). In their final speculation, Vail and Genis suggest that Leont'ev would most certainly curse America but would inevitably fall in love with New York: "[t]he city that challenges everything rational, logical, and healthy; the city where good and evil, while remaining on opposite poles, deliver the supreme creative tension" ("V gorod, kotoryi protivostoit vsemu razumnomu, logichnomu, zdorovomu, v

gorod, gde zlo i dobro, ostavshis' na svoikh poliusakh, rozhdaiut velichaishee tvorcheskoe napriazhenie," 627).

Thus, having examined the three different modes of living in the United States – rustic, suburban, and urban – the authors express clear preference for the urban, or rather the mega-urban, environment of New York. The critique of these spaces and modes of living yields a rather eloquent commentary on the authors' self-perception vis-à-vis American spatial sociality. At the same time, these texts highlight the essential tenets of Vail' and Genis' critique of American culture and civilization. By siding with Leont'ev, the authors make no big secret of the philosophical legacies that partially inform their views of the United States.

In general, the authors readily fall back on the authority of speculations of Russian and European idealist and religious thinkers about, among other things, the cultural decline of democracy bound and technology-frenzied Western civilization. For example, in the essay "On the Label 'Made in U.S.A.'" ("O iarlyke 'Made in U.S.A.'"), Vail' and Genis set out to explore the correlation between American economic prosperity and "spiritual life" ("*dukhovnaia zhizn'*," 398). Two symbolic events set the discussion in motion: the crash of the space shuttle "Challenger" and the travesty of purchasing hopelessly damaged bookshelves by one of the co-authors. These and other examples of poor-quality goods and services lead Vail' and Genis to conclude that the American economy of recent years has significantly devalued the label "Made in U.S.A." (which is an ultimate sign of quality in the Soviet mythology). The reasons for this the authors attribute to two major factors: excessive reliance on technology and the "lack of a healthy spiritual core" ("*otsutstvie zdorovogo dukhovnogo sterzhnia*," 399). The latter condition

Vail' and Genis elaborate in detail with a number of references to Hermann Hesse and his ideas about spiritual decline of Western civilization⁹:

An idealist, Hesse thought that when people read only graphic novels, watch only action films, and value only the kind of intellectual activity that brings immediate profit, it all leads to the death of not only refined culture but of civilization in general. What he considers to be the condition for survival of humanity is not a strong army or robust economy, but the existence of *aristocrats of the spirit*, who could spend their lives writing a dissertation on "Peculiarities of Latin Pronunciation in Institutions of Higher Education in Southern Italy of the Late 12th Century."

Buduchi idealistom, Gesse schital, chto, kogda liudi chitaiut tol'ko komiksy, smotriat tol'ko boeviki i tseniat tol'ko tu intellektual'nuiu deiatel'nost', kotoraia prinosit nemedlennye baryshi, delo konchaetsia gibel'iu ne tol'ko utonchennoi kul'tury, no i voobshche vsiakoi tsivilizatsii. Usloviem vyzhivaniia chelovechestva on schitaet ne sil'nuiu armiiu i ne krepkuiu ekonomiku, a sushchestvovanie *aristokratov dukha*, sposobnykh potratit' zhizn' na dissertatsiiu o "latinskom proiznoshenii v vysshikh uchebnykh zavedeniakh iuzhnoi Italii kontsa XII veka." (398) [My emphasis]

The reverence for the "aristocrats of spirit" ensuring the survival of civilization and the onslaught on mass culture as a product of democracy echo ideas of Nikolai Berdiaev, a Russian religious and political philosopher and an immensely popular figure among the Russian intelligentsia. In his 1911 treatise *The Philosophy of Inequality (Filosofia neravenstva)*, Berdiaev is being very critical of the influence of democracy on culture:

Your democracy is extremely virulent for the spirit of creativity. Not only does it fail to open new avenues of creativity, it thins out all avenues and constricts all creative impulses. The most creative epochs in the life of the humanity are aristocratic rather than democratic. Your democracy is intensely virulent for high culture.

Gluboko vrazhdebna vasha demokratiia i dukhu tvorchestva. Ona ne tol'ko ne raskryvaet putei dlia tvorchestva, no suzhevaet vse puti, sdavliavaet vse tvorcheskie poryvy. Samye tvorcheskie epokhi v zhizni chelovechestva – aristokratichny, a ne demokratichny. Vasha demokratiia gluboko vrazhdebna vysshei kul'ture. (144)

The notion of the “aristocrat of the spirit” (*aristokrat dukha*) also receives much prominence in Berdiaev’s work (for example in the chapter “On Aristocracy” of the aforementioned volume). Thus, Vail’ and Genis’ distress about American civilization in this anecdotal essay invokes both European and, implicitly, Russian critique of modernity and mass society (*massovoe obshchestvo*) incriminating them for making imminent cultural entropy.

In the final paragraph of the essay the authors offer a passage that serves as a conclusion and a disclaimer of sorts:

We understand that such view of America is tendentiously one-sided; that the world’s best museums, orchestras, and publishing houses prosper here; that all Nobel Prizes flow here from Stockholm; that here exists a very refined esoteric culture... Yet every time we turn the TV on, every time there is a report of a plane crash, every time we buy a hotdog, every time we see a line for some “Star Wars,” every time we look through a list of bestsellers, we remember what a gloomy idealist, Hermann Hesse, said in the not-so-jolly 1943 about the role of spiritual culture in the society.

My ponimaem, chto takoi vzgliad na Ameriku tendentsiozno odnostoronen. Chto v etoi strane protsvetaiut luchshie v mire muzei, orkestry, izdatel’stva. Chto siuda svoziat iz Stokgol’ma vse Nobelevskie premii. Chto zdes’ sushchestvuet utonchennaia ezotericheskaja kul’tura... No kazhdyi raz kogda my vkluchaem televizor, kazhdyi raz, kogda soobshchaiut ob aviakatastrofe, kazhdyi raz kogda my pokupaem khot-dog, kazhdyi raz, kogda my vidim ochered’ na kakie-nibud’ “Zvezdnye voiny,” kazhdyi raz, kogda my prosmatrivaem spisok bestsellerov, my vspominaem, chto skazal o roli dukhovnoi kul’tury v obshchestve ugriumyi idealist German Gesse v neveselom 1943 godu. (400)

It becomes quite obvious that the authors’ critical stance here closely resembles that of a certain type of intellectual (whom the authors objectify as an ‘A.’ in their earlier mock debate), whose invectives against America are wedded to ethical idealism, and whose critique of American civilization is rooted in the aristocratic ideals of European culture and its contestation of modernity.¹⁰ Although the authors do acknowledge the tendentiousness of this kind of critical perspective on American culture, they nonetheless

consistently invoke and endorse the tenets of this critique in most of their texts. The cultural phenomena that stimulate the authors' critical verve are those that can be interpreted from the perspective of such a critique. The topics concerning "refined esoteric culture," the Nobel Prize laureates, "the world's best museums and orchestras" mentioned by Vail' and Genis in passing do not seem to engage the authors in the same way as do the matters of popular culture, television, cinema, or fast food. Some phenomena simply fall out of the discursive field of "Amerikana" inasmuch as they have little to offer that can be debunked.

For the most part, the essays of "Amerikana" are based on reflection and elucidation of a certain inconsistency of American semiotic space, its conflicting ideological layout, so to speak. As such, Vail' and Genis' project displays some affinity with Roland Barthes' exploration of the popular myths of 20th century French bourgeois culture. There is however a significant difference between these two projects. As 'mythologist,' Barthes uses meta-language to uncover the extra layer of signification (myth) created and affirmed by culture. For example, Barthes shows how the idea of 'goodness' of French wine is constructed; he demonstrates that certain characteristics of an object or a phenomenon are not what they are considered to be and why. To do so a mythologist grounds himself in morality, language, and reality stripped of myth¹¹. Thus, while Vail' and Genis' cultural analysis is also very attentive to a web of signification attached by American culture to its objects, spaces, or phenomena, the authors' judgment is grounded in discourse rather than language and in aesthetics rather than morality. In other words, if Barthes, using meta-language, seeks to expose the way reality is coded,

Vail' and Genis use a different set of codes to expose and critique the cultural phenomena they target.

This kind of approach is evident in the authors' immanent analysis of American culture, the analysis that seeks to deal with an internal logic of cultural phenomena without explicit references to an interpretive framework and underlying theory. In the essay, "O reklame" ("On Advertisement"), Vail' and Genis express annoyance with advertisement as a ubiquitous and unavoidable phenomenon of American mass society: "In America we hate very few things as much as we hate the advertisement" ("Malo chto my tak nenavidim v Amerike, kak reklamu," 221). After a few notes on dissimilar aspects of advertising's effect on emigrants and Americans, the authors attend to a detailed analysis of the power of commercials over individuals based on the premise that "one has to relate to it [advertisement] as to a work of art" ("k nei [reklame] sleduet odnositsia kak k proizvedeniiu iskusstva," 223). Further on, the authors offer a brief historical survey that ties together the benevolent role of advertisement with the economic and demographic progress of American society. This connection leads Vail' and Genis to develop the idea of elitist art surrendering its ideological power to mass culture and advertisement with their perpetual and total amelioration of reality. And finally, the authors conclude that advertisement has become an "art of organizing being" ("iskusstvo organizatsii bytiia") that instills in individuals its utopian image of life: "It bestows a homogenous structure on the society, while creating universal ideals and behavioral stereotypes" ("Ona [reklama] pridaet obshchestvu gomogennuiu strukturu, sozdavaia universal'nye idealy i povedencheskie stereotipy," 234).

In the essay “On Censorship” (“O tsenzure”), Vail’ and Genis with bitter irony attack the incongruous, in their opinion, decision of various District School Councils to withdraw American and English classics, such as Salinger, Chaucer, and Twain from school libraries. The authors deride such forms of public activism, while also offering a few caustic remarks about the institution of the public sphere as such:

Actually, the public [sphere] is a disgusting phenomenon; it almost entirely consists of pensioners without a serious hobby. On its long way from infusoria to Einstein, evolution hasn’t created anything more repulsive than a retired colonel with no passion for fishing.

Vooobshche-to obshchestvennost’ – iavlenie otvratitel’noe. Pochti tselikom ono sostoit iz pensionerov, ne imeiushchikh ser’eznogo khobbi. Na vsem svoem puti ot infuzorii do Einshteina evoliutsiia ne sozdala nichego gazhe, chem otstavnoi polkovnik, ne pristrastivshiisia k rybalke. (340)

A healthy alternative to the pragmatism and positivism of American every-day life Vail’ and Genis locate in the uncanny world of the Yellow Press. In the essay “Of a Woman In the Embrace of a Crocodile” (“O zhenshchine v ob”iat’ iakh krokodila”), the authors cite some captivating headlines from such publications as *The Sun* and proceed to explain the phenomenon of the Yellow Press as a reintroduction of the miraculous into the minds of modern skeptics.

In the essay “Of Drugs” (“O narkotikakh”), the writers explore the issue of drugs and drug dealing in New York and particularly in the area where they live, Washington Heights. In the tradition of a journalistic investigation, the two authors relate their adventures in the drug-dealing neighborhood, supplying vivid descriptions of different types and prices of available drugs, common ways of dealing and buying them, and even the effects that smoking marijuana had on them. Humorous and informative, the authors’ account also offers a few meditations on the role of drugs in contemporary American

society and on various, ineffective, ways the public (*obshestvennost'*) and law enforcement confront drug dealing and drug abuse. The authors note the anti-social nature of drug use and connect it to the anti-social environment of American mass society. Moreover, Vail' and Genis take the opportunity to contemplate the diffusion of moral and aesthetic categories in the modern world that makes it difficult to orient oneself in the society. Thus the authors offer their own criterion for categorizing the social space by way of dividing people (and cultures, by extension) into 'people' and 'people with a superobjective' (*so sverkhzadachei*):

Happy are those who live with a sense of superobjective. But the numbers of those so preoccupied, dignified, and party-minded decline steadily. One needs to change, to doll up one's unpleasant self-image in order to accept one's self. And for that end all means are good, aren't they?

Schastlivy te, kto zhivet s oshchushcheniem sverkhzadachi, – no i ikh, ozabochennykh, vazhnykh, partiinykh, stanovitsia vse men'she. Sobstvennyi nepriiatnyi oblik neobkhodimo izmenit', priukrasit', primirit' sebia s soboi. Dlia etogo khoroshi liubye sredstva, ne tak li? (554)

The journalistic investigation into the New York drug scene thus concludes with a kind of aesthetic and teleological social critique of modern society.

The themes of decorative representation of patriotism and sexuality mark the essay "On the Statue of Liberty and the Sexual Revolution" ("O statue Svobody i seksual'noi revoliutsii"). Vail' and Genis share their impressions of the celebration of the Statue of Liberty anniversary in New York. Walking around the Greenwich Village and Soho, they encounter thousands of replicas, and various representations of the Statue on all imaginable objects: shirts, drums, pencils, napkins, and so on. Amidst the flow of patriotic imagery, one particular replica attracted the attention of the authors: a twenty-inch tall plastic Statue of Liberty holding a phallus instead of a torch. Interpreting this

composition as an expression of healthy non-dogmatic thinking, the authors are startled, nonetheless, by the fact that the local passersby seemed to pay no heed to what can be perceived as “blasphemous” pastiche. To investigate this sort of apathy the authors turn to the discussion of the sexual revolution in America. Their conclusion suggests that sexuality itself has not undergone any significant changes throughout the twentieth century. What did change, however, is the representation of sexuality. Thus the “sexual revolution” is a process that refers not to sexuality but rather to its representation, which by the end of the 20th century has become ubiquitous and unrestricted. Therefore it is not all that surprising that the combination of clichés of patriotism – Miss Liberty – and of sexuality – phallus – is not perceived as perversion but rather as a daring ironic statement. Finally, Vail’ and Genis conclude their more or less disengaged analysis of American cultural symbolism with a rather involved statement criticizing the hyper-active discourse of sexuality. The authors observe that in the context of the all-around freedom and carefree attitudes, the ubiquity of conversations about sexuality and the mass-produced representations of sex have robbed sex of its “mysterious appeal.” In the same vein, speculate the authors, the “beautiful and extremely fertile Russian *mat* turned into some gray and gloomy stylistic figure in emigrants’ writings” (“prekrasnyi bogateishii russkii mat prevratilsia v udruchaiushche seruiu stilisticheskuiu figuru v emigrantskikh pisaniakh,” 509)¹².

The essay “On the Woodstock Generation” (“O pokolenii Vudstoka”) is yet another variation on the theme of freedom and mass culture. Inspired by the celebration of the twentieth anniversary (1969-1989) of the Woodstock festival, Vail’ and Genis focus on the fate of the now middle-aged and well-established generation of the people

who made Woodstock what it was then, in 1969. The authors offer a quick sketch of American counter-culture of the 1960s noting that by the end of the decade, protest, including the Woodstock festival, already took on a peaceful and apolitical shape. The keyword of the festival thus becomes “Freedom” and not some concrete freedom but freedom in general: of speech, love, protest, and so on. And it is of this total freedom that the now-aged Woodstock generation is ashamed. The freedom of love became compromised by the later realization of the danger of AIDS. The freedom of protest became tainted by the fact that some of the most radical Woodstockers subsequently voted for the Republican Party. The freedom of being (*svoboda povedeniia*), the carefree attitude to life expressed, among other things, by drug abuse, led to disastrous consequences, when in the 1970s one after another Woodstock heroes began to die – for example, Janis Joplin, Al Wilson, and Jimmy Hendrix. In the end, it is this remorse for the freedom-induced questionable actions of youth that Vail’ and Genis read in the faces of some of those Woodstockers who drove their “Jaguars” and “Volvos” to the 20th anniversary of the festival.

Thematically diverse as they are, all these texts, by treating small, anecdotal, almost incidental occurrences, inevitably expose a larger narrative that feeds the authors’ perspective on American culture, and modern culture in general. If stripped of the volatile products of humor, irony, and arbitrary facts, each essay would yield very concrete points of critique. For example, Vail’ and Genis build on their speculations about the “none-ideologized” way of life in America while detecting the power of ideology in advertisement, cinema, and music that work towards the homogenization of the society. Nonetheless, these forms of ideology seem to fail to provide people with an elevated

sense of purpose or a common goal. Thus the absence of a superobjective in mass society leads to alienation of individuals; drug abuse is seen then as one of the side effects of this situation. In the essay on censorship, the authors express their intolerance of the infringement of the public on the aesthetic sphere. The authors' critique of mass society and mass production, that is responsible for the devaluation of mass reproduced objects, is central to the essay on the Statue of Liberty and sexuality. In the text about Woodstock, Vail' and Genis hint at how inconsistent and easily corrupted the ideology based on complete freedom (liberalism) can be in mass society. In addition, the authors see the consumer society, with an ideology rooted in tactics and pragmatics, as a society of alienated skeptics whose appetite for the mysterious and the uncanny is satisfied only by the sensationalism of the cinema and the yellow press.

In general, one can identify a number of different sources that may have informed the authors' critical stance displayed in "Amerikana," from the liberal philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset whose critique of mass-society privileged high culture (and whom the authors quote on one occasion), to the cultural aristocracy-minded philosophy of Nikolai Berdiaev, or the critique of mass society by the Frankfurt school rooted in the analysis of the ideological powers of the culture industry. The common denominator of all these critical approaches, however, is the conflict between the creative individuality, which had been the central discourse of the Russian intelligentsia from the mid-19th century until, perhaps, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the homogeneity of mass (capitalist/democratic/consumer) society, in this case symbolized by America.¹³

Notes to Chapter Two

¹ See Mikhail Edelshtein's article on Genis available at: http://old.russ.ru/krug/20031030_me-pr.html (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

² See Ivan Tolstoy's interview with Genis available at: <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2003/2/tolst.html> (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

³ One could also reconceptualize Vail' and Genis' appeals to and discussion of ideology by referring to it as discourse. The term 'discourse,' however, due to theories of Michel Foucault and his followers, has acquired a very particular meaning that is tightly connected with power. In fact, discourse is just one of the constructs through which power circulates. For our purposes, we would like to adopt the term 'code' that refers to signification practices that Vail' and Genis discuss in this particular context.

⁴ In an interview with Sergei Shapovalov, Genis draws the following distinction between an article (*stat'ia*) and an essay (*esse*): "[T]he article explicates a thought and the essay sketches it out." *Kul'tura*. No. 33 (7594). August 23-29, 2007.

⁵ In his 1982 "Essay on Essay," Mikhail Epstein notes the following about the eclectic nature of the essay: "The essay is the product of a convergence of poor unsystematic philosophy, bad and fragmentary literature, and an inferior and insincere diary. However, it is just this sort of hybrid and bad pedigree that has given the essay its flexibility and its beauty. Like a plebeian who is not burdened by traditions of nobility, the essay easily adapts to the eternal flow of the everyday life, the vagaries of thought, and the personal idiosyncrasies of the writer. The essay, as a conglomeration of various deficiencies and incompletions, unexpectedly reveals the sphere of a totality normally hidden from the more defined genres (such as the poem, the tragedy, the novel, etc.); determined by their own ideal of perfection, these genres exclude everything that cannot be encompassed by their aesthetic ideal" (*Amerussia*, 486; translation by Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover). Thus, the essay's eclectic nature, already packed in the genre, helps identify various connections between different spheres of life, which otherwise may be overlooked in a more focused/scholastic inquiry.

⁶ As is evident from the Russian text, the authors use the titles of the songs in Russian transliteration indicating that these are the titles as they knew them then, or how they even perhaps misunderstood the songs, for "The Beatles" never wrote a song with the title "Girls." Perhaps the authors refer to the 1965 song "Girl."

⁷ See, for example, Mark Teeter's analysis of *Odnoetazhnaia Amerika*.

⁸ In 1961, two Soviet journalists Boris Strel'nikov and Il'ia Shatunovskii followed the route of Il'f and Petrov and subsequently produced a travelogue: *Amerika sprava i sleva* [*America on the Left and on the Right*]. Moskva: Pravda, 1961.

⁹ James Ceaser, in his essay "The Philosophical Origins of Anti-Americanism in Europe," notes that European thinkers' critique of America is not so much concerned with the country, its people, and/or its political system but with "a set of ideas related to a critique of modernity" (48). Here, too, Vail' and Genis' critique of the U.S. draws on European idealist critique of modernity, of which America, extreme West, is looked at as emblematic.

¹⁰ Russell Berman in his study of anti-Americanism in Europe call this kind of critique "predemocratic" as it "expresses an aristocratic (or imitatively aristocratic) disdain for the life of democracy, deemed to ordinary, banal, and lacking in quality" (*Anti-Americanism in Europe* 42).

¹¹ See "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, especially pp. 156-159.

¹² The authors' argument about mass-produced images of sexuality closely resembles R. Barthes' discussion of the desexualizing power of striptease in his essay "Striptease." (*Mythologies* 84-87).

¹³ Nikolai Plotnikov in his essay "Ot 'individual'nosti' k 'identichnosti'" offers a cogent historical overview of the use of the term *tvorcheskaia individual'nost'* in Russian culture. *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 91 (2008): 64-83.

Chapter Three

‘Amerika’ and Personal Mythologies

America for Russians is not much a political science issue as a psychoanalytical problem. It is dear to me personally as a constant source of thoughts about it.

— Igor Shevelev

On the whole, in principle, there’s no real need to travel to America now in order to know everything you need to know about it.

—Dmitrii A. Prigov

Opportunities for extensive travel along with considerable changes in socio-cultural and political spheres in the last decade of the 20th century reinvigorated the never fading interest of Russian literati in the United States. As a result, the last few decades have witnessed the emergence of a significant number of literary accounts in diverse genres with America as their object, thus continuing Russian intellectuals’ long-standing tradition of narrative representation and critique of the United States. Amid these hyper-active attempts at America-writing in recent years, two interrelated literary projects appeared on the Russian literary scene that deserve special attention.

One such project is a series of essayistic variations on a theme: “America in my life” in the Internet magazine of literary essays *In My Life (V moei zhizni)*, administered by the Online Almanac of Contemporary Russian Literature *Vavilon*.¹ Russian authors of diverse literary backgrounds such as Linor Goralik, Oleg Dark, Sergei Zav’ialov, Dmitrii

Prigov, Vadim Kalinin, Eduard Kulemin, Alexei Tsvetkov Jr., Dmitrii Kuz'min, and Max Frai, share their reflections on the physical and intellectual place America occupies in their lives. In the words of the organizer, Dmitrii Kuz'min, the intention is "[...] following the path of least resistance, to take the fully shaped (and the most notorious) socio-cultural myth and immerse it into the multiplicity of private mythologies" ("[...] putiom naimen'shego soprotivleniia, vziav gotovyi (i samyi gromkii) sotsiokul'turnyi mif, okunut' ego v raznolike zavodi chastnykh mifologii").²

The second project is the collection of literary essays "Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States," the underlying theme of which is a question from the solicitation letter to the writers co-authored by the editor of the collection, Mikhail Iossel, and the initiator of the *In My Life* project, Dmitrii Kuz'min: "What do you think of when you hear the word *Amerika*?" And the writers are advised to respond with a short prose work either specifically written for the occasion or submitted as part of previously published material.³

There are a few factors that make these projects stand out amidst the America-writing endeavors of the last decade. First, the texts of these collections represent private views of the authors not so much on America but on their own perception of America. The writers do not seem to be too concerned with the idea of affirming cultural differences between America and Russia, nor do they attempt to create some kind of collective image of the United States (as did some Soviet authors in their travel prose (*putevaia proza*)). Their relationship with the object, America, links them more with the modernist project centered on presentation of reality as a mode of auto-representation. Thus, apart from the texts that aim to educate the reader by presenting some information

about the United States (often along with subjective interpretation) these works assert the individuality of the author's relationship with America. In other words, the type of gaze the authors adopt is not that of a researcher interacting with an object, subjecting it to various experiments and recording the effects to contribute to the cumulative knowledge of it. Rather, the gaze is directed at the viewing of the experience itself. This kind of meta-perspective allows the writer a) to transcend literary inhibitions, one way or another imposed by the previous tradition of writing about America, and b) to make a personal statement that privileges individual subjectivity (and is not sensitive to a true or false test). What these projects set out to do is underscore the individuality of an author's personal estranged aesthetic perception of the object that precariously exists at the intersection of public and individual discourses. Given this framework, the immediate knowledge of the United States is no longer a necessary and sufficient condition that legitimates writing about America.

Furthermore, most of the essays in the collection edited by Mikhail Iossel and Jeff Parker had never appeared in print in Russian; these texts have been translated specifically for this collection. Thus, many of these texts were written with the American reader in mind. This circumstance is quite unusual inasmuch as the purpose of official America-writing in Russia and the Soviet Union has always presupposed cultivation of the Russian reader. In this case, the texts target the American audience, and at times unambiguously address it.

The idea for the present America-writing endeavor originated during one of the Summer Literary Seminars, a program which Russian-American writer Mikhail Iossel organizes annually in St. Petersburg. The Seminars bring together a number of young

Russian and foreign writers and poets to share the experience and perspectives on creative writing. As part of the program, the organizers invite prominent Russian and foreign authors to offer readings from their work. In the summer of 2003, one such guest speaker was the prominent American poet Robert Creeley, whose work had been virtually unknown in Russia. Inasmuch as the visit and the reading of a poet of such stature as Creeley did not elicit any notable response from the media and/or of the Russian literary community, the issue of awareness of contemporary American (“high”) culture in Russia surfaced continuously during the sessions of the seminar. Realizing that entertaining this issue in written form could in itself be a worthwhile literary endeavor, Mikhail Iossel and the Moscow poet and literary critic and organizer Dmitrii Kuz’min solicited contributions from Russian authors, both well-known as well as aspiring, for the would-be anthology of literary essays – “Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States.” Since the organizers managed to amass an amount of texts far exceeding the number originally planned for publication, Dmitrii Kuz’min used a selection of essays from the entire submitted corpus to initiate the online literary project *In My Life*. The latter appeared under the auspices of the Online Almanac of Contemporary Russian Literature *Vavilon*.

By the time the *In My Life* project arrived on the *Vavilon* scene, one could already talk about some sort of a Vavilonian culture/community with its regular contributors and an aesthetic that emphasizes dialogism, individuality, and innovation. Originally (1989) conceived as a union of young writers, and later (1997) as an Internet forum for young literati to introduce their work to a broader reading public, *Vavilon* was the first online literary anthology that aimed to represent the contemporary Russian literary process in all

diversity of forms, genres, and poetics.⁴ In addition to being an online depository of texts and information about their authors, *Vavilon* hosted a number of literary projects that served as an “open tribune for professional literati,” who wished to contribute literary criticism, literary texts, polemical narratives, analytical essays, poetry, etc. for discussion by fellow-writers⁵.

In the words of the chief Vavilonian, Dmitrii Kuz'min, the project *In My Life* emerges “[...] against the backdrop of incessant interest in non-fiction on the one hand, and in the ways of actual presentation of personal experience by an author, on the other” (“[...] vznikhaet na fone obshchego ne issiakaiushchego interesa k non-ficiton s odnoi storony i k sposobam neposredstvennogo pred”iavlennia literatorom svoego chastnogo opyta – s drugoi”).⁶ Unlike the rest of Vavilon’s literary ventures, *In My Life* is fairly programmatic, given that the writing revolves around pre-set themes. The latter mostly limited to the objects and phenomena of everyday life, the participating authors offer their reflections on such quintessential elements of everyday life as ‘table,’ ‘cell phone,’ ‘rain,’ ‘bus,’ etc. (This sort of essayistic activity resembles the collective improvisations that Mikhail Epstein used to organize in the early 1980s). At a glance, what strikes one as an oddity in this otherwise not atypical paradigm of the everyday is the inaugural theme of this project – “America”. So what makes America a legitimate everyday-life phenomenon worthy of an introspective literary exercise?

Along with public debate and confrontation, invasions – cultural, political, or military – also invite introspection (Bolton 3). The cultural vacuum that formed after the implosion of the Soviet system saw the post-Soviet environment getting inundated with American culture and information about America gained through travel, media, internet,

and so forth. All of a sudden, America became ubiquitous. Russian social and private life was now instantaneously saturated with things American or related to the United States: from politics and economics, to entertainment and consumer goods. Such an intense presence of another culture soon acquired the status of an invasion. In its turn, the perceived invasion generated and reactivated a myriad of competing discourses targeting the relationship between America and the West vis-à-vis Russia. The United States, often stripped of physicality, soon became a sort of intellectual common space, a discursive construct. And unlike its status as a mythical but homogeneous and monolithic embodiment of anti-Soviet discourses, America now is a highly contested and contradictory embodiment of the West.

For most intellectuals, it has not been easy to reconcile this shift of discursive paradigms around America: once a romanticized and unattainable ideal and later an invasive cultural and political presence, albeit no less unattainable. What further complicates the reconciliation is the powerful Russian public and official rhetoric and the European critique of America that have been in flux. It is thus not particularly surprising that the discursive and symbolic nature of America in contemporary Russian society tipped off the format of the two projects *America in My Life* and “Amerika” towards introspection and individuality.

America as a Text

A number of essays reflect the authors’ sad predicament of having to form their personal opinions about America through other people’s impressions. For example, Olga

Ilnitskaya (b. 1951) opens her essay “Goodbye, America! And – Hello!” with the following provocative confession:

I’m sad today – I’ve never been in America. I’ve never seen how the New York freeways bend, “like a woman having an orgasm,” and I’ll never see how “the phalluses of the World Trade Center rest in the American sky. Now the American sky has terrorists that are mobile and elusive, like spermatozoa, and with whom it’s necessary to contend. Because now, everywhere and always, there is war.” (76)

To clarify the peculiarity of such vision, she continues with a disclaimer: “The erotica of the first paragraph is not accidental – it’s the consequence of someone else’s perception, for I don’t have my own” (76). As main sources of her knowledge about America Ilnitskaya lists American films, literature, and correspondence with friends who live in the United States. To mock the inadequacy of such knowledge, Ilnitskaya offers an ironic reading of a typical American film replete with cultural stereotypes and iconic imagery. At the same time, the author comments on how often incomprehensible the problems and emotions of her Russian-American friends are. Acknowledging her son’s attachment to a little elephant calf with an American flag on its rear end, Ilnitskaya suggests that the flag is actually one of the reasons her son is so attracted to America. And so is she, for she is interested in concrete things rather than images. Yet, this attraction, she notes, is one-sided, for she has never had a chance to establish a personal relationship with America. And a personal relationship here means being able to free oneself from secondhand impressions in favor of one’s own:

Yet I would indeed love to go there. To gaze about, to touch things, to get acquainted, to rejoice at the realization that nothing of that is true, what I’ve written here under the influence of American films, literature and other people’s letters ... and my own ... aberrations... [...] I would want to arrive and start with doing just that – saying good-bye, you see, to the America of other people’s impressions – incorrect, stupid, beautiful or ugly. Goodbye! [...] And say with a broad smile: “Hello, my America! So this is what you’re like!” But this would have been “before.” And now, today, America is also... (79)

What Ilnitskaya means by “before” are the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The collage of quotations from her American friends’ testimonies of pain, grief, heroism, and disbelief caused by the attacks leads the narrative towards yet another confession: “After *this* day, September 11, for all of us, American and non-American foreigners, America – bitter, bright, free, frightening, helpful and interested – became more comprehensible, and it became closer. Even more so than ever. How sad it is, that for so many it has only happened after *this* day” (81). Thus, the sadness in Ilnitskaya’s text underlines the unfortunate inevitability of having to substitute the authenticity of personal experience of America with an empathetic emotional response.

Along similar lines, in his essay “Forever and the Earth,” Stanislav Lvovsky (b. 1972) reflects on the derivative nature of his life-long experience of America. Lvovsky begins truly at the beginning – his date of birth falls on July 2, just two days short, as he notes, of Independence Day. The author’s narrative chronologically follows through a series of events that affected his perception of the United States: Nixon’s visit to Moscow, the 1973 détente, the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting in Reykjavik that was partially responsible for his father’s lay-off at the defense industry, and the celebration of Independence Day at the America Chamber of Commerce in Moscow that made the author appreciate Americans’ love for their country. Further on, Lvovsky reflects on his intimate relationship with American literature (Thomas Wolfe, Sherwood Anderson, J. D. Salinger), music (Ella Fitzgerald), and film. A virtual romance with an American girl and a frail connection with his former colleagues and now-emigrants are the only human ties the author has with the United States. And finally, Lvovsky reveals the fact that he was denied an entry visa at the United States Embassy but refuses to concentrate on bitterness.

Instead, he offers a list of things, words, names, and symbols, literary allusions, and snippets of personal codes that signify his experience of America:

“If there ever was something that I wanted to write about, it would only be about love, longing, separation, about *a stone, a leaf, an unfound door, a lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost* (Thomas Wolfe), that today is *a perfect day for bananafish*, and ‘*pozhaluista, priezzhai v Boston,*’ please come to Boston, and *New York says to Moscow: Moscow, Moscow, take me with you*, so it goes, *not a word about love and death*, just as I promised [...] (128).

Commenting on the peculiarity of this kind of experience, the author notes: “And so it remains derivative, vicarious, this American experience of mine: nothing but words, tiny little symbols” (126).

The inaccessibility and denial of an authentic exploration of America is also central to Aleksandr Levin’s (b. 1957) essay “When I Think of America...” The starting point of the essay is the author’s account of the humiliating experience of visa denial: “When I think of America, I think of how I have never been there. At that I think right away of the man who denied my wife and me our tourist visas, the man who wanted none of my explanations, but who announced instead that the rejection was final” (116). Levin notes that the encounter at the consulate made him relive the degrading experience of dealing with the Soviet bureaucratic machine. What follows then is the list of non-materialized activities that the author would have done while in the United States:

I am sad I did not get to America to visit with college friends, to read them my new poems and sing them new songs. [...] Sad to have missed New York’s museums – after Parisian, Roman and Florentine ones, I had wanted to go there especially. Sad that I could not drive across all of America with my friend, who had planned to take me on my own road movie. Sad especially that I don’t know precisely what else I don’t know about America. (116-117)

This list is particularly expressive, as it speaks not only of the author’s unfulfilled expectations but also of his status as an accomplished traveler, a poet, a person who

appreciates American culture and has close friends in the United States; and thus, the denial seems to be more unjust, absurd, and perplexing.

Thus the essays by Ilnitskaya, Levin, and Lvovsky, while being distinctly private and subjective, point to a common sentiment shared by all these texts: the sadness and often bitterness that result from denial of empirical experience of America and that shape the inevitability of having to treat America as a text. And yet, America still retains interest for these authors. This is so because for them America is not connected to a certain one idea, ideology, or a symbol. America for these authors is a different place about which they have been hearing all their lives but never had a chance to experience directly. It is not being overly romanticized anymore; the authors seem to be perfectly aware of the *reality* of American life, as the references to the September 11 attacks attest. These essays reflect the image of America as a distant and attractive place. And the writers' relationship with it is similar to the relationship of a reader with textual reality. Insofar as the reader's impressions of reality are mediated by the text, so the impressions, rhetoric, and opinions of other people shape the authors' perception of America. In the long run, America is perceived by the author as a sort of compendium of representations, a text *par excellence*.

America as an Outdated Text

Perhaps the most striking feature of the majority of the essays in these projects (especially in the works of the literati who were born in the 1950s) is the tint of nostalgia and melancholia, along with occasional bitterness and irritation that accompanies the writers' narration of their experience of America. Such perception has to do with the fact that, while having a property of the text, America is also viewed as a *particular* text, a

utopian narrative that united a large and devoted reading community. After the fall of the Soviet Union, American popular culture offered an alternative narrative of America that many previously devoted readers were not able to reconcile with the old text. The reading community thus fell apart, and the old text got dismissed because it was compromised and thus stopped serving the purpose of unifying the audience.

Yet another essay that opens with a peculiar pastiche of stereotypes from American films is Maria Galina's (b. 1958) "Gone with the World." Like Ilnitskaya, Galina sadly acknowledges the fact that cinema is the most potent image-maker of America. Unlike, Ilnitskaya, however, Galina's narrator takes the guise of the lyrical and rather irritated "we":

Alas, our impression of America (politically correct, handgun in holster) is formed primarily from films. There are so many deserted factories and automobile cemeteries where the enemies of everything that's good abuse and torment the average, ordinary American. [...] Woody Allen doesn't count. He's practically one of *us*. We understand him. And that's frightening. (64)

What Galina finds frightening is in fact the resemblances rather than differences. The fact that America is becoming similar to Russia (or vice versa) seems to jeopardize the image of America as a promised land: "An altogether different image of America has been preserved to this time, somewhere in the mysterious recess of the soul – an image of the promised land where one could still go during one's lifetime. And then everything would be good" (64). The agents of this precarious America, Russian emigrants and "one-hundred-percent" Americans, are in Galina's view interesting, if not outright weird. The former, among other things, "demand fresh-squeezed juices and purified water" and the latter behave just like the "mentally ill": they shamelessly belch, fart, and discuss their intimate life. And the ultimate source of vexation that Galina cites is the inability to

reconcile the perception of America and Americans with the perception of American literature: “Anyone in the Soviet system with any higher education treats American literature with more than awe. Salinger is for us [and here Galina reveals the referent of the “we”/ “us” as a person with a higher education] a cult writer, Faulkner is good, Melville is a genius.” (66). Galina goes on to list another half-a-dozen famous American writers, noting that: “[a]t one time, long ago, quoting those writers served as a kind of watchword, the code of an entire generation” (66). Thus, in the context of the disenchanting and irritating incompatibility of a recently acquired perception of America and the long-standing admiration for American literature, one can sense Galina’s nostalgia for the time when America used to fulfill the role of a binding force of an imagined community within the Russian intelligentsia. And now that America and its literature no longer fulfill this function it can be dismissed:

And we all got over them. Over American writers. We got over them, patted each other sternly on the shoulders, produced our own young prose, sent a few of our scribes to America – just to show them, to even things up. Let them sit in their Harvards, let them teach American housewives how to write real Literature. They blew over the Atlantic as the distant apparition of a distant nation. They howled wildly – “Whooooo!” – and then they were gone with the wind. (66)

Galina’s text captures quite well the emotional response of many Russian intellectuals of her generation whose idealized and romanticized image of America became compromised by conflicting impressions gained through American popular culture after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The tone of mild bitterness and disenchantment (and eventually, of dismissal) is also prevalent in the essay “Worn Jeans and Banned Fruits” by Aleksey Mikheev (b. 1953), who is of the same generation as Galina. Mikheev organizes his impressions chronologically. The earliest one is based on the author’s viewing of Stanley Kramer’s

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World in the panoramic "Mir" theater in Moscow around 1964. In this connection, Mikheev points out the captivating imagery of material culture, especially cars. Later comes the "image of America as a romantic land of boundless freedom, where thanks to the *easy riders* the *Flower Power* finally prevailed" (130). The end of the 1960s represents the next stage of idealizing America as a "cross-oceanic paradise." Those who left for America during that time were considered as "lucky men, delivered forever from melancholy, dejection, and oppression" (130). In the 1980s, America, with its broadcasts on Radio Liberty and the Voice of America, was still considered as a "ray of hope" for all those trapped in the "Evil Empire." Gorbachev's, and subsequently Yeltsin's, appearance among common Americans and even in front of the United States Congress intensified the feeling of euphoria. But then, quite unexpectedly, Mikheev notes, things became more available: vodka, nice cars, etc. And this is when the image of America begins to lose its virginal delight:

Then the hangover rolled in. America suddenly materialized in the guise of McDonald's, McDucks, Madonnas and Michael Jacksons. It was as though your youthful bride, from whom you were separated for twenty years, finally showed up at your home – vulgar, loud, flabby, with dyed hair and gum in her mouth: "Hey, boy, you were *so lonesome* without me, but everything's behind us, now we will be *happy together forever*."(131)

The downpour of American popular culture presents an uncomfortable alternative to the image of America as a dream keeper of many generations of Russians. On top of disappointment, America now instills fear. After the September 11 attacks, Mikheev notes, sympathy was less prominent among Russian people than fear of American retaliation that might affect Russia as well. Mikheev concludes the exposition of the forty-year long development of his subjective image of America with the following valedictory note:

“My present attitude towards it can be expressed best by the old (mid-eighties still!) Aleksandr [*sic*] Butusov song: “They grew much too tight for me, your worn blue jeans/ for oh so long they taught us / to love your forbidden fruits!” And, of course, the refrain: “Goodbye, America, oh, where I will never be...” It looks like, indeed, I will never be there. For one thing, no one’s inviting me. Secondly, I already somehow got past the urge to go. And finally, it seems like life in Russia today is a whole lot more interesting course than it is in America – at the very least, we don’t have its paranoid political correctness and all those idiotic petty prohibitions, like the one that says that you can’t drink beer on the street. (132)

The 1985 song “The Final Letter” [or “The Valedictory Epistle”) (*Poslednee pis'mo*) by Viacheslav Butusov and the Russian rock group Nautilus Pompilius is a symbolic gesture of farewell to America as a mythical place of escape. Now that America has ceased to be the symbol of the imaginary West, counterculture, and resistance to Soviet power it has lost its appeal. Moreover, as Svetlana Boym notes in her book *Common Places*: ““Good-bye, Amerika” is a farewell to Soviet culture, both its distinctive conformism as well as its distinctive form of dissidence [...]. ‘Goodbye, Amerika’ is also ‘Good-bye, USSR’ – no more comforting homecoming to the utopian fantasyland of one’s youth” (120). Thus, for Mikheev, and for Galina as well, the dismissal of America is also a way of dealing with nostalgia for the time of their youth. Ultimately, America for these authors is an old book that at one time nourished fantasies and delusions of a very broad reading community but now has become outdated and dismissed in favor of new literature and new life.

America as Will and Representation

One can find a more circumspect response in Dmitrii Prigov’s (b. 1940) well-balanced socio-cultural/psychological essay “America as Freedom and Image.”⁷ If most authors ground the narration of their experience of America in their everyday life, Prigov

assumes a more distant perspective that is analytical rather than confessional. Prigov opens his text with a meditation on the banality of such reflective practices:

It comes to... it comes back to such banal ideas and claims: anytime we're hashing it out or figuring things out with someone else, it's the same hashing and figuring out that we have going on with ourselves and our Others and our image of the other. Especially when that sort of thing happens on our Russian turf. In other words, it's about American turf, but it's happening on Russian ideological and spiritual-mental turf. (133)

The fact that this practice involves America does not validate its originality. On a larger scale, America for Prigov is simply one of the Others. There is nothing too special about America; and the whole practice is just a form of dealing with Russian complexes, or rather European Russian complexes. For, as Prigov suggests, when the Russian utopia of successful world order moved from Europe to the United States "we dressed ourselves in something like Asiatic animal skins in defiance of European snobbery, so in opposition to feisty America we seem as if to don culture-centric European tuxes" (134). Moreover, the author comments on how Russian and American reality becomes similar especially in megapolises, and that there is perhaps more difference between centers and provinces than between Russian and American big cities.

This idea of Russian-American convergence, especially on the level of large urban centers echoes in Dmitry Bavilsky's short essay "Chelyabinsk-Moscow." Bavilsky (b. 1969), a native of the provincial city of Chelyabinsk, explains why anti-American sentiments are stronger in Moscow than in the provinces: "[...] America is closer to Moscow (I myself live in the Urals) in all senses, and not just geographically. Moscow finds itself dependent on America, even if it is only because it attempts to live and work in the same form and likeness" (14). Moscow's anti-Americanism is thus a result of jealousy, and rivalry with more successful Americans. In Bavilsky's view Moscow

relates to provinces as the United States relate to the world: “[...] metropolitan anti-Americanism is a mirror image of the Muscovite’s complexes, for they live at the expense of the rest of the country exactly the way America lives at the expense of the rest of the world” (15). America, always the center of attention in Moscow, thus is relatively speaking ignored by the periphery simply because it is twice removed and exists, as it were, in a different dimension.

But let us return to Prigov’s text. Advancing the idea of similarities, he offers a few anecdotes to suggest that the cultural ignorance so much detested by Russians is quite common in America, Europe and Russia. Thus, the author hints at the idea that the world is as different as it is similar, and experiencing America personally does not imply coming in contact with something profoundly different. Acknowledging the fact that, yes, America is indeed much more developed in some ways, Prigov notes that one doesn’t really have to travel to America to know that. By observing America from afar, one could benefit just as much:

On the whole, in principle, there’s [already] no real need to travel to America in order to know everything you need to know about it, all that’s useful to know for one’s own possibilities. And you might as well forget all that’s impossible to find out. After all, unless you completely settle there, unless you make it your home both existentially and psychologically, it will remain a utopia, a point of extrapolative running-away in the hopes of looking back to understand one’s own home. This kind of gaze is particular. This sort of looking back is amusing, shocking, and offers much to learn from. But you don’t want to come out with that *sudden hurt feeling and compensating snootiness which are so natural for little countries in their traumatic confrontation with the indifference of a great country, and just as natural to a provincial who looks upon the wished-for but unattainable capital.* (137) [my emphasis]

Thus what Prigov seems to suggest is that being in America does not necessarily add to your potential as a creative individual, whereas trying and failing to fit in may lead to constant self-reflection with a risk of developing an inferiority complex. The final

sentence of the passage above seems to be particularly revealing in the context of D. Bavilsky's speculations about the similarity of the Moscow/America and provinces/Moscow dynamic. It is thus not accidental that, according to Bavilsky's text, the provinces are more preoccupied with their love-hate relationship with Moscow rather than with America: "In Moscow, Russian politics are stewing, and that's precisely why they regard "America" more warily than we do in the provinces, where nobody cares about the Moscow BS" (14).

Prigov's advice seems to appeal to quite a few authors from the *Amerika* projects. For them, there is no need to travel in an attempt to establish a dialogue, because America as a place and space is of no interest to them. "All that's useful to know for one's own possibilities" is connected with the web of ideas and symbols that represent America. The following two essays, Dmitrii Kuz'min's "Luxembourg" and Igor' Shevelev's "America as It Is and Is Not," well exemplify Prigov's speculation about different uses for America: utilitarian/rationalist and extrapolative.

Dmitrii Kuz'min's (b. 1968) essay "Luxembourg" is one of the most eloquent and subtle illustrations of a somewhat skewed focus on America as an object, as the title suggests. The author begins his piece with the following declaration:

I must confess that America never excited me. I never really wanted to see the skyscrapers of the Grand Canyon – I was always more drawn to Europe, with its Gothic cathedrals and narrow lanes paved with cobblestones. I grew up in a superpower country, whose expanses and ambitions aroused in me deep irritation, and for this reason I was completely not attracted to another superpower with its own expanses and ambitions – I dreamed of Denmark and Luxembourg. To this day I believe that countries should be small, on scale with the life of a private individual – and then the needs and hopes of this individual in a natural way will take their rightful place at the forefront of his life" (109).

What follows then is an exposition of short anecdotes from the author's personal life in its connection, one way or another, to America: the reading of Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*; the discovery and translation of Charles Reznikoff's poetry; the authoring of a letter to the Russian government with a demand to stop instigating the anti-American hysteria during the Kosovo events [NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, 1999]; an amusing visa denial; an unexpected email from his long-lost high-school love who happens to live in Boston now; and finally a compassionate response to the events of September 11, 2001. The latter circumstance, according to Kuz'min, was decisive in changing his attitude from indifference to solidarity. The news of the attacks reached Kuz'min during a poetry reading in one of Moscow's literary clubs. Kuz'min's first impulse was to cancel the event, but then the author decided to change his mind for the following consideration:

But on the other hand, poetry (if it's real) is one of the highest manifestations of the Western intellectual tradition's concept of the uniqueness of the individual. The poet is only worth something when he is irreplaceable, when no one can say what he can. Contemporary Western society, cut to MacLuhan's specifications, is none too hot a hothouse for unique personalities, but neither history nor contemporary reality can offer us any more attractive variants: all the available alternatives (including the one that animated the 9/11 plotters) in one way or another deny individuals the right to choose, the right to their own voices. And if this is so, then at a time when this society, along with the intellectual tradition it represents, has been dealt such a horrific blow, the poet must speak, not stay silent. Even if only to speak about some other topic. (114)⁸

At another poetry reading, two months after the attacks, one of Kuz'min's fellow poets, Kirill Medvedev, was reading a poem "Text Dedicated to the Events of September 11 in New York." The poem reconstructed a state of profound confusion of a young intellectual (or *intelligent* as Kuz'min caustically remarks: "because it is precisely the Russian *intelligentsia* that this state of profound confusion behooves the most," 114) caused by the tragedy. "America fucked up with her political correctness. America fucked up with

her humanism” went the narrator’s refrain. And this is when Kuz’min, in his own words “felt something akin to solidarity with that superpower across the ocean” which he had never visited and never really aspired to do so. Noting that he does not necessarily approve of the United States policies in Afghanistan or possibly elsewhere also, Kuz’min explains his feeling of solidarity through a parallel with a hypothetical situation from everyday life:

[...] I understand that if some miserable, wretched dimwit, tanked up on vodka, breaks the glass in the entry way of my apartment building, takes a whiz in the elevator, curses after me in foul language because I have more money than he does and because I live, breathe, love, not in a way that he can comprehend; if, in the end, this dimwit gets bold and punches me in the face or demands my wallet – then however many perfectly correct arguments I could have with myself about the fact that he had a difficult childhood, or that he has an elderly mother and a young sister, both of whom adore him [...] my only true desire consists of bashing his head against a wall until he’s half-dead. Because it’s too late to reeducate him, while teach him a lesson one must. [...] That evening, to put it simply, for one minute I felt myself the United States of America. And since then, I can no longer say that I am completely indifferent to that country. Although if somehow I ever have a week or two of spare time – I dream of visiting Denmark. Luxembourg I’ve already seen, and it’s wonderful. (115)

Thus, Kuz’min equates the attacks of September 11 with an assault on Western values that celebrate liberalism, individuality, humanism, and freedom of choice. Certainly the empathy with a swift retaliation and arguably indiscriminate exercise of power could also be read as affirmation of the hegemony of the West. But what is important for us here is to demonstrate that for Kuz’min America is more meaningful as “Freedom and Image,” or rather as an image of freedom, an embodiment of certain universal principles and values that are essential to his worldview. As such, Kuz’min’s standpoint seems to be quite different from that of the Russian *intelligentsia*, which becomes a target of Kuz’min’s subtle irony in this text. For it is for the Russian *intelligentsia*, as a sort of imagined community, that America represents a complex web of ideas connected to the

Other, the imaginary West. Assuming that these ideas are essential for the *intelligentsia's* self-identification, unprecedented events, like the September 11 attacks, appear to put the complex and conflict-ridden image of the Other completely out of balance. The extrapolative self-reflection that Prigov speaks about has to be completely reconfigured; and hence the state of “profound confusion” ensues. Without going much further here into the scope of issues accompanying the precarious distinction between *intelligent* and *intellectual*, I would like to suggest that Kuz'min's attitude towards America in this piece represents a view of a Russian intellectual whose philosophical standpoint is closer to Western rationalism as opposed to the Russian humanist tradition that shapes the *Weltanschauung* of the Russian intelligentsia.

Kuz'min's view of America as a paragon of Western civilization is not just a matter of literary exercises. Essentially parallel to the production of the two projects on America, on May 6, 2003, a literary event took place in the Moscow literary club “Avtornik.” The event was a happening of sorts, with a provocative theme: “We Love America” (*My liubim Ameriku*). Such authors as Maria Galina, Maksim Glikin, Ivan Akhmet'ev, Aleksei Prokop'ev, Mikhail Epstein, Linor Goralik, and Dmitrii Kuz'min presented their poetry, essays, and poetic translations of English-speaking poets: Wallace Stevens, Charles Simic, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, and others. In the words of the organizer, Dmitrii Kuz'min:

The idea was to have a reading of poetry and/or translations either associated with America or not (the rationale behind the idea: *it's not really about America but the unity of Western civilization – the only civilization in which the central position is given to the idea of the value of the human personality* in all its uniqueness; the reflection of precisely such an idea is artistic expression, in our contemporary understanding of it. In this sense, good poetry then is by definition an affirmation of this civilized unity.

Ideia byla v tom, chtoby chitalis' stikhi i/ili perevody, vozmozhno – sviazannye s Amerikoi, a vozmozhno, i net (obosnovanie idei: *delo ne v Amerike, a v edinstve zapadnoi tsivilizatsii – edinstvennoi tsivilizatsii, v kotoroi printsipial'noe mesto zanimaet predstavlenie o tsennosti chelovecheskoi lichnosti vo vsei ee nepovtorimosti, i vot kak raz vyrazheniem etogo predstavleniia iavliaetsia tvorchestvo v ego sovremennom ponimanii; v etom smysle khoroshie stikhi po opredeleniiu iavliaiutsia vyskazyvaniem v pol'zu etogo tsivilizovannogo edinstva*⁹. [My emphasis]

Thus, Kuz'min's reasoning outside and inside the text is quite consistent. Here, too, as in his essay, the interest in America itself is rather nominal. What comes to the fore is celebration of the idea of individuality associated with Western civilization as manifested in a personal creative act. Moreover, in the context of the Russian popular anti-Americanism, the very attempt at praising America publicly becomes a symbolic act, emblematic of free individual agency (or *free will*, if you will) ascribed to the values of Western civilization.

The other text that I would like to discuss in this context is Igor Shevelev's (b. 1952) "America As It Is and Is Not." Shevelev begins his essay with an attempt to capture a common Russian sentiment in the relationship with the West: "After the fall of the "Iron Curtain" the outside world lost all its charm for me and probably for a certain number of other Russian people. From now on there was nowhere to run, except inside oneself" (140).¹⁰ If, during the Soviet time, the author notes that he felt more like a Westerner, i.e. being an individualist opposed to collectivism, "unable to say 'we' in regards to somebody else," his first trip abroad made him realize the fallacy of the perception of his subjectivity as a Westerner:

After I went abroad for the first (and last) time, I returned not so much a patriot (if, of course, one does not regard hatred towards Russia as gut love of it – which, in fact, it is), as a person who realized that there was nowhere to run. That all of our (my) characteristics are exclusively ours (mine) in their unique configuration. That dirty streets and shitty lobbies of apartment blocks (which drive a normal

liberal like me crazy), as well as the aggressiveness of people in the streets and their extreme unwillingness to give in to any discipline and accept total mediocritization, are the other side of our (my) so-called soulfulness, without which a true Western way of life seems to me (us) absolutely unbearable.” (140)

This unsettling insight developed as a result of the author’s trip, along with young Duma representatives, journalists, businessmen, and lawyers, to Western Europe: Strasburg, Cologne, Luxembourg, and some other places in Germany. On this trip Shevelev discovered that uneducated provincial Russian merchants are not the only ones who sing Russian songs in chorus in public places abroad. The most liberal and progressive Duma representatives and businessmen also lapse into this bonding ritual to compensate for the feeling of otherness. By the end of the trip, after socializing with Westerners in the context of the everyday, Shevelev discovered a range of insurmountable differences between the Russian and Western world: “They are different. They are impossible to live with. Boring. You cannot reach their soul, and the surface is nauseating. As a result, you had to reinvent your life – in Russia. Should I like a worm, begin digging an underground tunnel and a bunker in mid-Russia?” (141). In the author’s mind, this realization of complete otherness also extends to America as a model of Western civilization: “And America flaked off by itself. (It takes thirteen hours to get there! Give me a break...)” (141). At the same time, Shevelev notes that while witnessing the behavior of his compatriots abroad he recognized that this was a general trait of groups of foreigners abroad, including Americans. The author admits that his disappointment was related to human nature rather than to a particular people. Such a dejected point of view, according to Shevelev, could never fit in America, a country of cheerful optimism and enthusiasm for hard work. Contemplating the much-coveted benefits of culture, that ennobles people, in the context of everyday life in small and quiet Western towns, Shevelev realizes that

this way of life is profoundly alien and boring despite the benevolent and cultured exterior. The following passage captures the ambivalence of such perception and self-perception: “In short, America for me is one of the models of Western civilization. As such, it is much more to my liberal liking than Russia. But with my whimsical subconscious, in which emotions beat any reason, I could live there apparently with much less inner comfort than in Russia” (142).

Thus, in the Soviet context, Shevelev takes his liberalism and individualism for the signs of belonging to Western civilization. Yet, his empirical experience presents him with a more ambivalent image of the West, where “culturedness,” liberalism, and individualism are just some of the constituents of the everyday existence. The peculiarity of Russian intersubjective behavior abroad makes Shevelev realize that certain aspects of his subjectivity are perhaps not all that uniquely his own; moreover, some of these aspects, which Shevelev places in the subconscious, take an upper hand in his striving to find comfort in the West. (In tribute to Prigov’s allusion to Schopenhauer, one could say that subconscious motivation could be an answer to the 19th century philosopher’s dilemma of one’s inability to change one’s character even if one really wills it). Therefore, in his final meditation on America in the essay, Shevelev suggests a psychoanalytical interpretation of Russian’s relationship with America, based on his personal experience:

No matter how you look at it, America, both in general and in particular, is a problem of Russian consciousness. Not so much a myth as a mystification. Mass attitudes of America change very fast and depend on many factors, beginning with the price rate and pay rate in Russia and finishing with the relations with our own Russian authorities. America is our “complex.” It annoys, attracts, makes one think about it and compare it with the life here; it is a pure compensatory mechanism. America for Russians is not so much a political science issue as a psychoanalytical problem. It is dear to me personally as a constant source of

thoughts about it. Perhaps it has nothing to do with reality. But Russians do not care. (142)

What Shevelev outlines here is a quintessential image of the Other, of which Prigov speaks in his essay as “a point of extrapolative running-away in the hopes of looking back to understand one’s own home.” As a paragon of Western civilization, America is conceived of as being in a binary opposition to Russia. In order to be in harmony with America, to make the Other one’s own, according to Prigov, one needs to completely embrace it to “make it your home both existentially and psychologically.” Thus, for Shevelev, America remains as an image of the Other. Kuz’min’s text, on the other hand, displays little engagement with America as a web of ideas and myths that define it as an Other. For Kuzmin, “all that’s useful to know for one’s own possibilities” is the fact that America and its society represent a certain intellectual tradition that values and affirms the individual uniqueness of human personality.

The works of the youngest writers represented in the collection, Aleksey Tsvetkov Jr. and Linor Goralik (both born in 1975), offer a much more emotional response that follows a modality similar to the one outlined by Shevelev and Kuzmin. Through their attitude to America, the former two authors emphasize different models of the self: one based on rational autonomy and the other based on authenticity.

Tsvetkov’s essay “A Letter to Americans,” as the title suggests, is written in the form of a letter that from the outset addresses the American reader: “Dear Americans: I live in a country that is almost the same as yours. There are boarding houses and ghettos here too, supermarkets and salons, drug dealers, oligarchs and porn stars, illegal immigrants and political prisoners. Thanks for all this – if it weren’t for you, I have no idea what my country would be like. Where else would we have found a role model?”

(143). Tsvetkov admits that he is one of those people who are pleased with similarities between Russia and the United States. Further on, the author reminisces about his childhood dream of being a communist in New York, the city that brings together everything and everyone and lets their individuality flourish. Tsvetkov notes that, unlike in New York, being a communist in the Soviet Union meant “don’t think, agree with everything, trample everything around you that’s incomprehensible, have a stupid face”

(144). The prospect of being a communist in the USSR, thus, did not attract the author, even though, as he admits, he did like the ideas and the dialectics. At the present moment, though, when life in Russia is essentially the same as in the United States, being a communist has become possible for Tsvetkov: “Being a communist now means: think, agree with nothing, foster everything around you that’s incomprehensible, have a profound face” (144). Thus, the diversity of culture, less obstructed avenues towards personal sovereignty, and the opportunity for social activism have made Russia as attractive as the United States. Furthermore, Tsvetkov notes that he feels well connected to American culture while being in Russia: “I write books which generous critics compare to your Burroughs, Hakim Bey, Chuck Palahniuk, Richard Brautigan. Russian names almost never come up in the comparisons” (145). Tsvetkov mentions that he also publishes American authors such as Jerry Rubin, [Abbie] Hoffman, Hugh Houghton, and others. Finally, Tsvetkov elaborates his personal attitude noting that he has no regrets about anything, whereas in Russia everyone regrets things “rather than getting out of their chairs. I don’t regret anything because I’m a dialectician, not a moralist. Do I need to explain that last sentence? A dialectician sees in everything his own and the other side, trying to strengthen his own and diminish the other, while a moralist just ‘likes’ or

‘doesn’t like’ them. Why should I immigrate? We have our own Bukowski, Britney Spears, Charlie Manson” (145). Thus, Tsvetkov seems to suggest that thanks to America Russia has become a less radically dogmatic, more heterogeneous society with room for alternatives and various forms of marginality. As such, contemporary Russian life allows Tsvetkov to be what he wants to be, or what he would be if he lived in the United States.

A radically different point of view is voiced in another address to Americans – Linor Goralik’s essay “A Real American Girl.” If the rationality of Tsvetkov’s perspective on America could be roughly aligned with Kuz’min’s, Goralik’s attitude comes close to Shevelev’s “subconscious” rejection of the West. Furthermore, when Prigov suggests that the only way to make America real, to divorce it from utopia is to “make it your home both existentially and psychologically,” Goralik’s narrator aggressively rejects such a possibility:

Steek your grincart up your ass. My perfikt hi-tek profeshin? Take it and hang in it, push your visa in your mousth – I don’t need it. You think I want come to your Amerika, live in your Amerika, be immigrant in your very big, free, smoking-no, drugs everyver, many refugee Imperia Good you protect so good from bad people like we dreaming all time to take place in middle its big, soft, warm nyanya black tits? Oh you think I want be happy refugee and get my sitzenship in five years that’s all, and not show my accent never, and tell my kits: “Bebe, mama and papa not Rusheen, they Rusheen-Amerikeen!”? Bite me. Fuck you. I don’t want any of these. (73)

In this English version of the essay, translated by the author herself, Goralik uses a sort of linguistic pidgin concoction that stands for the language of a hypothetical immigrant who attempts to assimilate. However, in the Russian version that appeared as part of the *In My Life* project, Goralik makes her linguistically afflicted and supposedly misplaced narrator employ numerous calques from English in her Russian speech, thus signifying the disintegration of the narrator’s Russian self as represented by the language:

Sun'te svoiu zelionuiu kartu vverkh svoei popy, voz'mite moiu perfektnuiu khaitek professiiu i povest' te seb'ia na nei, tolkaite vashu rabotaiushchuiu vizu vniz vashego gorla, - ia ne nuzhdaius' etogo. Vy dumaete, ia khochu idti k vashei Amerike, zhit' v vashei Amerike, byt' immigrant v vashei Amerike, v vashei ogromnoi, svobodnoi, kuren'ie-chistoi, narkotiki-tekushchei, bezhentsy-prinimaiushchei Imperii Dobra vy zashchishchaete tak zhestko ot vmeshatelei tol'ko mechtaiushchikh o zanimat' mesto mezhd' ee bol'shie, miagkie, teplye chernye niania tit'kami? Okh vy dumaete ia khochu byt' schastlivym beshentsem i khochu poluchit' moe vkrutuiu zarabotannoe grazhdanstvo vsego v piat' let, borot' moi aktsent, govorit' moikh detei: "Malyshka, mam i pap ne russkie, oni russkie amerikanskie"? Kusaite menia. Trakhaite vas. Ia ne khochu eto.¹¹

In fact, one could say that these two versions represent a different lyrical subject¹²: the former is aggravated by the inevitable imperfection of the new American self, and the latter – by the disintegration of the Russian self. Nonetheless, the main idea of this belligerent opening is the inability to preserve or gain authenticity of the self after emigration/immigration. What follows is the presentation of another lyrical subject, an unreal subject that could be, a subject that is “authentically” American, in the author’s subjective understanding of this status. In the Russian text this authenticity is signaled by a gradual transformation of the subjects discourse from standard Russian to fluent colloquial English. In the English translation, this transformation is rendered through a change in the typeface of the English text, wherein the italicized font denotes colloquial English:

I want to be a pretty different thing – an American Girl, a real American Girl – but it’s totally impossible, unreal, unthinkable – and not because I’m unable to mimicrate, to lose my accent (“Oh, oh, wait your pronunciation ... South New Jersey?”), to learn how to wear anything – from GAP clothes to a diamond necklace – with my sneakers, to drive a car, to tell a highway from a freeway, to give the finger. I can do all that. I really can. It doesn’t seem difficult to me. (73)

Ia khochu byt' sovsem drugoi shtuchkoi – ia khochu byt' amerikanskoi devochkoi, nastoiashchei amerikanskoi devochkoi, no eto zhe sovershenno nevozmozhno, nereal'no, iskliucheno, - ne potomu, chto ia ne smogu mimikrirovat', izbavit'sia ot aktsenta (“O,o, stoite, vash vygovor ... Iuzhyi N'iu-Dzhersi?”), nauchit'sia nosit' chto ugodno – ot gepovskikh sviterov do brilliantovykh kol'e – s

krossovkami, vodit' mashinu, pokazivat' tretii palets. Ia mogu vse eto, ia mogu, ia umeiu, eto ne predstavliaetsia mne trudnym.¹³

What the author lists here are in fact the exterior qualities of an American, an immigrant. Furthermore, she notes that all these attributes are not difficult to acquire along with a green card. Nonetheless, all these qualities are not sufficient to make the narrator feel authentic, because all these qualities are too typical of jingoistic immigrants who are excessively exalted by being given a chance to live in this country.

And I don't want any of these, I want to be a Real American Girl who reads carefully the one-hundred-dollar note and asks: "*Benjamin who? ...*" I want something that neither a green card, nor language, nor your little blue passport (I already have one little blue passport),¹⁴ nor the Fourth of July fireworks and hot dogs can grant me. I want my mother to give birth to me in *a Saint Louis hospital*, because all the women in my dad's family gave birth in *that Saint Louis Hospital*, and I want my dad to watch me from behind the glass – sobbing, dropping his tears on his *New Yorker*, which he reads to distract himself from fear and to wash away the awful taste of *instant coffee*. (74)

A ia ne khochu etogo, ia khochu byt' amerikanskoi devochkoi, pri vnimatel'nom prochtenii stodollarovoi bumazhki sprashivaiushchei: "Franklin who?" Ia khochu togo, chto mne ne mozhet dat' ni grinkard, ni iazyk, ni vash malen'kii sinii pasport – u menia uzhe est' odin malen'kii sinii pasport, ni feierverki i sosiski na palochkakh imeni chetvertogo iulia. Ia khochu, chtoby mama rodila menia v Saint Louis Hospital, potomu chto vse zhenshchiny papinoi sem'i vseгда rozhali v Saint Louis Hospital, i chtoby papa smotrel na menia iz-za stekla i rydal, roniaia slezy na New-Yorker, kotorym vse eto vremia pytalsia otvlech'sia i perebit' vkus chudovishchnogo refill coffee.

As the exposition of American "authenticity" progresses, infrequent English words in the Russian text gradually overtake the narrative:

[...] I want to find out my husband is having an *affair* with a shopgirl from *Barnes and Noble*. I want to start dieting and *to become anorexic* in three months. I want to be hospitalized and I want a shrink in the hospital to explain that *I simply don't love my husband anymore*. I want *to have an ugly divorce*. I want *to start really thinking about my career*. I want *to become a partner at the age of just thirty-three*. I want *to have breast cancer and write a book about all the nastiness of my chemical therapy – "for all other women to know: they can make it!"* I want *to wear a pink ribbon on every and each Kids Cancer Day and to*

donate one hundred dollars to Kids Cancer Organizations each and every year.
(74-75)

Ia khochu obnaruzhit', chto u muzha affair s odnoi prodavshchitsej is Barnes and Nobles. Ia khochu sest' na dietu i za dva mesiatsa to become anorectic. Ia khochu lech' v bol'nitsu i chtoby psikhoanalitik ob"iasnil by mne, chto I simply don't love my husband anymore. Ia khochu to have an ugly divorce. Ia khochu to start really thinking about my career. Ia khochu to become a partner in the age of just thirty three. I want to have a breast cancer and write a book about all the nastiness of my chem therapy – "for all other women to know: they can make it!" I want to wear a pin ribbon on every and each Kids Cancer Day and to donate a hundred to Kids Cancer Organization each and every year. [...]

This transformation from linguistic incompetence to fluency, in addition to the verisimilitude of the description of private life, works to emphasize the desired "authenticity" of American existence. It is worth noting that the English text is meant to be as competent as possible. In the Russian version of the essay there are a few English expressions that are not quite grammatically or pragmatically correct. Thus, the author, or the editor of the collection changed the 'anorectic' of the original Russian text to a more familiar 'anorexic.' Also in the Russian version the author has 'in the age of just thirty three' but in the American edition it appears with a corrected preposition and an inserted hyphen: 'at the age of just thirty-three.' This minor editing testifies to the fact that the metamorphosis of the narration indeed attempts to represent the "authentic" American subject based on linguistic competence.

Closer to the end, the narration once again shifts from English to literary Russian signaling the return from the hypothetical "authentic" American discourse to the affirmation of Russianness:

And you can give me nothing of that. You can't give me such a childhood, you can't give me that Christmas and a sock by the fireplace, and Truth or Dare, and Batman when I could still believe in him, and real headbands for working out, and the belief that we have no villains that we can't destroy, and the right to say: "We, Americans." So – stick your green card up your ass, hang yourself on my hi-tech

profession, eat your working visa. Leave me living in the world, where money is green and salaries are “black.” Where faces have nationalities. Where building number six can be eight miles away from building number eight on the same street. Where my son is going to die at the music hall, poisoned by military gas. Where there is four times the literature, three times a year, two times a day, one time a life.

And everyone wants to spend it in America. (75)

And you can give me nothing of that. You can't give me such a *detstvo*, you can't give me that *Rozhdestvo i nosok u kaminnoi polki*, and *Truth or Dare*, and *Betmena*, *kogda ia eshche mogla v nego verit'*, and *nastoiashchie poviazki na golovu dlia zaniatii sportom*, *i veru v to, chto u nas net neodolimykh vragov*, *i vozmozhnosti govorit'*: “*My, amerikantsy.*” *Poetomu – zasun'te svoi grinkard sebe v zhopu, podavites' moei prekrasnoi khai-tek professiei, s'esh'te na zdorov'e vashu rabochuiu vizu. Daite mne zhit' v mire, gde den'gi dolzhny byt' zelenymi, a zarplaty – chernymi. Gde litza imeiut natsional'nost'. Gde mezhdum domom nomer shest' i domom nomer vosem' mozhet byt' rasstoianie v chetyre kilometra. Gde moi syn umret v m'iuzik-kholle ot otravleniia gorchichnym gazom. Gde chetyre vremeni literatury, tri vremeni goda, dva vremeni dnia, odno vremia zhizni.*

I vse khotiat proversti ego v Amerike.

The essay ends with a rendition of the opening paragraph (“*Steek your grincart...*”/ “*Sun'te svoiu zelenuiu kartu...*”) in colloquial Russian with an addendum that invokes the sad reality of Russian life. The closing remarks then target the popular myth of America as a place of inevitable happiness. Realizing the impossibility of feeling authentically American, the narrator foregrounds the importance of coming to terms with her own identity to preserve the integrity of the self, as represented in the language and the immediate reality.

America as a Space and Place

The authors of the works that we have looked at so far either have never traveled to America (except for D. Prigov) or have chosen not to focus on this circumstance in their texts. These writers approach the United States as a theoretical construct, an (im)possibility, a text, and a web of ideas. There is another group of authors, however,

who have visited the United States and for whom America is not just an intellectual but also a physical space and place. Their narratives very much follow in the line of travel notes (*putevye zametki*) with ethnographic reflections on various encounters with real people in a “very real country that people visit and return from.” As a result, these authors are less prone to treat America as a discrete phenomenon.

In his essay, “A Semester in Texas,” Andrey Zorin (b. 1956) relates a few rather very subtle anecdotes/vignettes based on his interaction with Texans during his semester-long tenure as a visiting professor in San Antonio, in the fall of 1996. The author introduces the first episode with a following note:

“America” had already managed to lose a large part of its magic from Soviet times and was transformed into a very real country that people visit and return from. Nevertheless, even against this background, Texas, which had entered into our cultural consciousness through cowboy films and figures from jean labels of the ‘70s, was able to retain its aura. The state, where it is accepted practice to shoot without warning, was scary, intriguing and bewitching” (154).

What follows then is an account of the author’s first day on the University campus that greeted him with a “No weapons on campus premises” sign. Later that day Zorin was trying to return some library materials but discovered that the library was closed because somebody had been shot there. The secretary of the Department where the author taught assured him that things like that don’t usually happen there. “And sure enough,” Zorin concludes, “I was never witness to a shooting no matter how often I went to the library” (155). Another episode involves two lectures that the author was giving to two very dissimilar groups of people: a unit of soldiers and a medley of Texans interested in Russian literature. Zorin describes the intensity of the first lecture, as he thought that the soldiers did not understand him well, and his relief at the end when he heard a long round of applause. The punch line at the second lecture came from a traditionally dressed Texan

who surprised the author with an elaborate question on Dostoyevsky's poetics and who turned out to be just a local farmer. One more anecdote has to do with Zorin's trip to the Alamo, which he thought was nothing special until he saw a confederate flag being ceremoniously flown between the National and Texan flags. A colleague of his who had moved to Texas from Pennsylvania hastened to explain: "Well, they behave as if they won the Civil War," Bridget moved closer to whisper to me, 'But that is not true, we won it'" (158). This circumstance left a profound impression on Zorin; from then on the museum looked interesting to him: "For the first time I felt the live breath of history behind the cardboard model of the mythological narrative. And, as is always the case, the narrative itself came live in this breath, fed by its traditional diet – the creative forgetting and poetic combining of the non-combinable" (158).

The hero of another story is a German lawyer-turned-bartender by the name of Humbert, who is the husband of a Russian-language instructor by the last name Rouble. After a few drinks and amicable exchanges about soccer and WWII at Humbert's place, Zorin, to his shock, found himself all of a sudden involved in the following conversation with Humbert:

"We were set off against each other," said Humbert, "but we should have been together. We would have showed them then."

"Who 'them'?" I asked, stunned.

"Them," he said, pointing in the general direction of his wife, "the Americans, the British and the French. They think they are the masters of the world, but the world should belong to us Germans and Russians."

"I am a Jew," I said, solely with the aim of breaking up this intended Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

"All the better," said Humbert decisively.

I did not try to find out the reason for which this was all the better. My head was ringing and I could not clearly understand what I was seeing: the sudden breaking out on the surface of family complexes or geopolitical paranoia. It is very possible that these are one and the same thing. (161)

And the last anecdote has to do with the mysteries of one's genealogy. While in Texas, Zorin received a surprise phone call from a person who turned out to be his uncle twice removed. The author then relates a story of the convoluted search his relatives had to go through to locate him in Texas. In this context, Zorin offers another equally fascinating family story related to him by one of his colleagues from the Department. The hero of that family saga is a professor who was brought to America from Poland. He was raised in a very strict Catholic household. Later he married a Jewish woman and converted to Judaism, much to the chagrin of his parents. After his mother's death, however, looking through some family photos, he realized that his parents were Jewish. The most interesting thing in this story, Zorin notes, is the fact that the hero's daughter was black. What fascinates the author is the "combination of Jewish, Catholic, African-American, American, and Texas traditions she would have to forge the mosaic of self-identity from" (163). Zorin concludes his essay with the following note: "When I tell my friends in different American universities that I fell in love with Texas, they are surprised and ask me the reason why. Have I been able to explain?" (163)

Thus, Zorin's essay that starts off with a brief note about stereotypes and preconceived notions about America and Texas turns into a collection of unique encounters with Texans in their amazing diversity. The author's representation of Texas demonstrates his genuine engagement and fascination with people's individual histories and mythologies, as well as the history and mythology of the space itself. This space comes through as conflicted as the stories of its inhabitants and the detailed narrative anecdotal presentation emphasizes the subtlety of this conflict. Moreover, as Zorin's final note suggests, his account seems to work to debase certain myths and stereotypes

associated with Texas not only among Russians (gained through cowboy films and jean labels) but also among Americans. Yet, the discursive elements of the text are subdued in favor of a more implicit and subtle expression achieved through the compositional arrangement.

In another text that displays the author's engagement with America as a space, Mikhail Aizenberg (b. 1948) shares his impressions from his visit to Ann Arbor, Michigan. Aizenberg opens his essay, "Mistakes in the Guidebook," with an episode of humorous misunderstanding that would foreshadow his experience in Ann Arbor. Shortly after the arrival he was asked what he thought of America. When the author replied with tongue-in-cheek ambiguity that he saw America as "country of unlimited possibility," his interlocutor tried to persuade him in all seriousness that he was a "victim of ideological brainwashing." This exchange led Aizenberg to make a mental note regarding American humor: "It seemed to me that this was a good joke, but America, obviously, has a different psychological climate" (3). What follows is a discussion of the power of stereotypes and generalizations that one has to reconcile with concrete experience: "With each day, my definition of America became more and more broad and indistinct. Any collective generalization is usually stupid. The more extensive my personal impressions, the more exceptions have stubbornly showed up to undermine the rule" (3). The author then goes on to lists a number of such generalizations, such as perpetual smiling, non-smoking, the lack of spiritual dimension, and so on, and offers his own impressions as counter-examples. For example, to question the validity of the assumption that Americans do not read poetry, Aizenberg wonders why there are fifty poetry reading in New York every day and why certain bookstores are so well-stocked with poetry books.

Incidentally, the bookstore Aizenberg mentions is located in Ann Arbor, the city that the author has always associated with the “Ardis” publishing house well known in the Soviet Union for publishing works of censored Russian authors, and where the author “passed the greatest part of [his] time in America” (4).

Refusing to follow the recommendation of one of the “experienced New Americans” to use Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* as his guide book, Aizenberg notes: “When you look through a lens like that, observations of the subject immediately appear along fascinatingly familiar, gracefully rollicking, humorous lines, attached to no reality (except that of Nabokov’s prose)” (4). The author then goes on to sketch out the portraits of a few people whom he met during his tenure at the University. Most of these sketches describe female graduate students whose looks in combination with intelligence obviously captured the author’s imagination quite a bit: “I am confident that you will all become fine Slavic scholars. In your eyes there was so much open, honest attention that nothing else, nothing extraneous, could find room. No outside interest at all, alas. No sly scintillation, no special electricity, no pointed discharges of a kind so familiar you take them for granted, and so, when you have come to live for a while in a different erotic climate, you begin to sense it as a shortage of oxygen” (5). The final part of the essay focuses on the events of one evening – Aizenberg’s poetry reading at a Chinese restaurant. To alleviate the tension and discharge the atmosphere “prickling with electricity” the author tried his hand at humor, which eventually resulted in a faux pas.

When the author was about to read a poem, a latecomer walked in who was announced by the hostess as a Professor Rabinowitz. In an attempt to make the audience smile once again, Aizenberg commented that the professor arrived just in time to hear a

poem about him. The audience, along with Rabinowitz, became more attentive. The poem that the author read humorously touched on the Jewish theme. The joke apparently did not cause even a faint reaction, making the author realize his ethnic slur didn't go unnoticed. In the end, Aizenberg notes:

I think my surname saved me. Softened the blow, so to speak. By the end of the reading (about forty minutes later) the audience had swallowed my little joke. Some questions followed, finally they handed around the promised cake, the guarantee of naturalness... The unwilling hero of the evening approached for clarification: "Does anybody still write poems in Moscow? Do they give readings?" I can understand that he found it hard to believe. All the same a sensation of terrible awkwardness stayed with me. Something tossed and turned in my soul. It oppressed me, "as does, in retrospect, a blunder we have made, a piece of rudeness we have allowed ourselves, or a threat that we have chosen to ignore" (*Pnin*, really). (7)

Framed by the theme of the precariousness of humor, Aizenberg's account certainly points toward cultural differences: be it in the sense of humor or the interaction of sexes. At the same time, the author underscores the value of personal engagement with the environment even if only to compare it with a novel as a guide book and suggest some amendments.

Lest one should think that Russian literati come to America only to teach Russian literature at local universities, let us consider an essay by the poet and mathematician Evgeny Bunimovich (b. 1954). The text entitled "Spaces and Places" is an account of the author's impressions of Atlanta, Georgia, with one brief episode being set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Bunimovich sets out to describe a hypothetical American city that, according to the author, seems "to be especially constructed so as to rid a Muscovite of his complexes" (22). The author notes the provincial feel of the city with its "bucolically guileless, smiley" population and reminds the reader that "[a]s every one knows, there is nothing at all, alas, to look at in a provincial America; geography takes the place of

history” 22). Despite this sentiment, Bunimovich offers a selection of “several subjectively chosen exhibits of possible travel destinations” (22).

The number one destination on the author’s list is “The Epstein Residence.” Bunimovich draws a quick sketch of the living situation of “the principal ideologue of our literature’s *new wave*” and finally discloses the name of the city of his travels – Atlanta. Quite matter-of-factly Bunimovich, probably by contiguity, ridicules Slavists’ inability to recognize a quotation from Venedikt Erofeev’s novel, often being ignorant of who Erofeev is. Destination number three is Margaret Mitchell’s home. In the author’s mind it becomes associated with Mikhail Bulgakov’s apartment in Moscow that was rescued from demolition but never restored. Another place of interest on the author’s list is the office of the founder of the Coca-Cola Company that Bunimovich describes through a comparison with Lenin’s museum, thus emphasizing the comparable ideological significance. The final place of interest in Atlanta is Martin Luther King Memorial Complex, the general aura of which the author compares to that of the memorial at Lenin’s house in Shushenskoe. In this context Bunimovich also offers a few comments about the progress of racial equality that culminates with ‘political correctness,’ albeit inconsistent and superficial. “[I]n circumvention of American geography for the sake of a more complete picture,” the author places his final “exhibit” in Pittsburgh. The exhibit is in fact an event, which the author not without irony calls “the most important holiday” in this city – the finals of a river regatta. Bunimovich gives a rather detailed description of the festivities that involved some three hundred thousand spectators and exuberant fireworks, the splendor of which, he notes, “combined everything at once – both our Russian might and the French refinement” (26). And yet,

the most striking thing for the author were not the festivities themselves but what followed after: “Three hundred thousand residents of the glorious city of Pittsburgh simultaneously got up, left their places and went toward the entrance by a single tapering road, between two rows of stalls loaded with food” (27). Bunimovich then goes on to describe in detail the peaceful and very respectful manner in which the crowd was clearing the venue. What struck the author the most is the mindfulness of the individuals who were taking care of the elderly and handicapped and who secured safety for children. Drawing some parallels with similar circumstances in Russia, Bunimovich acknowledges the efficiency and civility of the local police and the democratic character of the procession:

They all went together – young and old, black and white, rich and poor, leftist and right-wingers, invalids in wheelchairs and metalheads in studs, babies in strollers and old ladies in shorts.

The American people.

Whom now, it seems, it is considered bad form to admire.

And I am not admiring.

I am just giving them credit.

And then we took an hour and a half to leave the fifth floor of a ten-story parking garage, but that’s already another story. (27)

Thus, Bunimovich’s representation of America takes the form of a peculiar catalogue of places or, as the author prefers to call them, “exhibits.” The subjective selection and interpretation of these exhibits reveals the idiosyncrasy of the author’s perspective on America. Bunimovich is quite consistent about recoding the selected exhibits with the codes that underlie Russian/Soviet reality. More specifically, the author uses Russian codes to establish cultural analogies and employs Soviet codes to express his critical perspective on a certain phenomenon. For example, Bunimovich compares Coca-Cola to Russian *kvas*. At the same time, to emphasize the ideological power of Coca-Cola, or

rather capitalism, Bunimovich creates the analogy between the founder of the Coca-Cola company and his living environment and the figure of Lenin and his style of living: “As is the case with V.I. Lenin, in the city there is a Museum of Coca-Cola [...]” And further: “The founder’s office is austere and lofty, and does indeed remind one of our own founder’s office in the Kremlin [...]” (24). For Bunimovich, the omnipresence of coca-cola as a symbol of capitalism is analogous to the ubiquity of representations of Lenin as a symbol of communism. Another example is based on the author’s visit to MLK’s museum. The display of MLK’s personal belongings also reminds the author of Lenin’s memorials. By extension, Bunimovich comments on devaluation and social enforcement of political correctness making it resemble the shallowness and publicly cultivated authority of socialist ideological discourse: “Nowadays everything is different, everyone is “politically correct,” which some cynics, recalling the old Soviet days, suggest be translated into Russian as *ideologically uncontaminated*.” And further, noting the enforcement of political correctness at the work place being in sharp contrast with the attitudes to political correctness in the private sphere, Bunimovich observes: “Ideological control, like a Bolshevik Party cell, is premised on people’s behavior at work” (25). Yet, perhaps the most striking feature of Bunimovich’s account of American places and spaces is the contrast between the static display of the four “exhibits” in Atlanta and the engaging fluidity of the Pittsburgh experience. The value of this experience is signaled by the disappearance of Soviet parallels. This time, Bunimovich unfavorably contrasts Russian social behavior with what he saw in Pittsburgh.¹⁵

Different as they are, what these “travel narratives” demonstrate one way or another is how much more contested and discursive America turns out to be if one

approaches it as a space, a dynamic, rather than a static place (Certeau 117).

Preconceived notions, generalization, stereotypes, maps, guidebooks, and myths all seek to stabilize the space, to make it discrete and easy to understand. In their texts, authors like Zorin, Bunimovich, and Aizenberg demonstrate how America, if taken as a space that perpetually transforms due to being practiced by people, resists forceful attempts at stabilizing it. At the same time, these authors show that America, like any environment, vacillates between being perceived as a place and a space. And it is this vacillation that is responsible for the conflicting and contradictory image of America.

Commenting on the peculiarity of writing about America, in his essay “Chelyabinsk-Moscow,” Dmitry Bavilsky notes: “That which is greater than us (a feeling, a city, a country) cannot be described adequately. In fact, any such portrait is the description, not of an object, but of the one describing” (14). The America of the Russian writers in this collection is precisely the kind of object Bavilsky talks about. Overall, the writers are not concerned with the essence of the object as it really is or, perhaps, as it should be. This kind of America-writing does not attempt to explain or analyze America like the “culturological” projects of, say, Epstein or Vail’ and Genis. The genre of subjective essay completely shifts focus from the object to the subject. The focus of writing here is not America but the self-examination of an author’s idiosyncratic experience of it. Metaphorically speaking, the writing experience becomes, in the words of Sergei Kostyrko, a sort of a “phenomenological exercise,” in which America as a reality is of little importance.¹⁶

These two projects seem to offer what has been deficient in the relationship of Russian intellectuals with America – a personalized response. As Mikhail Bakhtin wrote

half a century ago: “human agency and constructive change in this [Russian/Soviet] society come about through an accretion of tiny personalized responses¹⁷.” Bringing the image of the other into the personal realm of the everyday and writing about it in a way that immediately connects it to the ‘I’ of the author affirm that ‘I’ as a “responsive I” (“*otvetstvennoe ‘Ja’*”). This way an individual kind of affixes, what Bakhtin calls in *Toward a Philosophy of Act*, the personal “signature” acknowledging that the “experience is theirs.”

Notes to Chapter Three

¹ http://www.vavilon.ru/inmylife/all_issues.html (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

² <http://www.vavilon.ru/inmylife/01america.html> (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

³ For the essays that appeared in printed form I will assign a page number reference based on the 2004 Dalkey Archive Press edition of “Amerika: Russian Writers View the United States.” The works published on line as part of the “...in my life” project I will supply with appropriate URLs.

⁴ In 2003, the Almanac semi-officially closed although it remains available on line. According to its curator D. Kuz'min, at some point *Vavilon* stopped serving its original purpose as a forum for aspiring writers. Many authors who had started publishing their work under *Vavilon* since grew into professional poets and writers with the audience of their own.

⁵ See, for example, the project *Literaturnyi Dnevnik* (*The Literary Diary*) available at: <http://www.vavilon.ru/diary/index.html> (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

⁶ http://www.vavilon.ru/inmylife/all_issues.html (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

⁷ As part of the online project *V moei zhizni* Prigov's text appeared in Russian under the title “Amerika kak volia i predstavlenie” (“America as Will and Representation”). It is not obvious why the translator opted for a different translation ignoring the apparent allusion to Schopenhauer's treatise *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, known in English translation as *The World as Will and Representation*. For a detailed discussion of translation issues of this and other essays from the *Amerika* collection see Iuliia Idlis' review in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (71): 2005. Also available at: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2005/71/idl27-pr.html> (last consulted on July 1, 2009)

⁸ For a more detailed description of this event, see Dmitrii Kuz'min's entry in *Literaturnyi Dnevnik*. September 23, 2001. <http://www.vavilon.ru/diary/010923.html> (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

⁹ See D. Kuz'min's Livejournal entry at: <http://dkuzmin.livejournal.com/38391.html> (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

¹⁰ Cf. for example P. Vail' and A. Genis' similar meditation related to the traditional Russian placement of hopes for the better future into America: “Geography has reached its limit; what begins now is a long and complex process of remodeling of the soul. And there is only one direction: from the Soviet person to the person as such” (“Geografiia zakonchilas', nachalas' slozhnaia i dolgaia nauka perestroiki dushi. I

put' tol'ko odin: ot sovetskogo cheloveka – k cheloveku prosto"). "Poteriannyi rai" ("Paradise Lost"). In *Collected Works*, V. 2: 197.

¹¹ <http://www.vavilon.ru/inmylife/01goralik.html> (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

¹² I am indebted to Iulia Idlis for this observation.

¹³ <http://www.vavilon.ru/inmylife/01goralik.html> (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

¹⁴ Linor Goralik was born in Ukraine and immigrated to Israel in 1989. Thus, "blue passport" may refer here to an Israeli passport, which is blue in color.

¹⁵ Nonetheless, Bunimovich is being cautious not to lavish too much praise on Americans. The author's obvious admiration seems to be in conflict with a certain accepted attitude to America that precludes excessive plaudits. This kind of reaction is strikingly similar to a sentiment expressed in Vladimir Maiakovskii's 1925 poem "Brodvei" ("Broadway"): "I'm ecstatic/ over the city of New York./ But I shall not/ tip my hat./ Soviets have/ their own pride:/ We look down/ on the bourgeois./" ("Ia v vostorge/ ot N'iu-Iorka goroda./ No kepchonku/ ne sderu s viska./ U sovetskikh/ sobstvennaia gordost':/ Na burzhuev/ smotrim svysoka//").

¹⁶ In "WWW-Obozrenie Sergeia Kostyrko," *Novyi Mir*, (7) 2005. Also available at: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2005/7/kost18.html (last accessed on August 10, 2009)

¹⁷ Quoted in, Emerson, C. "Keeping the Self Intact During the Culture Wars: A Centennial Essay for Mikhail Bakhtin" (114).

Conclusion

Due to historical and personal circumstances, for some Russian intellectuals America stopped being an unreachable, completely alien other. For one group of authors, which includes Epstein, Veil', and Genis, upon immigration America took place of their native environment as a living space. Whereas for the authors from the *Amerika* and *V moei zhizni* essay projects, America, a once alien and essentially unattainable other, became a more accessible travel destination and a ubiquitous presence in their daily lives due to the influx of its representations in the public sphere. In fact, the public sphere now became inundated not only with diverse representations but also with various conflicting discourses, both native and Europe-distilled – nationalistic, liberal, anti-Western, anti-capitalist, anti-democratic, panslavic – that turned America into a highly contested intellectual common place. Both scenarios can be seen as a certain disruption in the relationship of an individual with a cultural other. In case of the immigrant writers, the alien (*chuzhoe*) was now becoming potentially one's own (*svoe*), and for those who stayed in West-bound Russia, one's own became infused with the alien. Thus, both groups of authors were facing an unfamiliar development in the dynamic with the other – which was rapidly infringing on the native territory – that called for an active reevaluation of one's personal investment in this relationship. And it is this individual process of reevaluation (even in the case of Epstein, where the individual is construed as the collective) that the essays reflect. Furthermore, this reflective process, tied to the

essay genre, can be seen as empowering and liberating inasmuch as the authors are able to come to terms with and stabilize the image of the other and, by extension, reconfigure the image of their new self through the relationship with the other.

Another possible way of conceptualizing this situation is by looking at it from a semiotic point of view. In semiotic terms, the essential mechanism of this liberating interaction with the other has to do with various ways of translation, or encoding that individuals use to interpret the other. This translation, however, comes not in the form of a simple search for equivalents of the foreign in one's own, but rather in the form of creative transformation of foreign codes with one's personal codes. From this point of view, the authors of the texts that I analyze in this study become engaged in such process of recoding, which they then broadcast in the form of the essay. To offer one possible reading of the latter dynamic I outlined above, I would like to turn to Iurii Lotman's semiotic theory of culture and the self that not only illuminates the peculiarities of personal engagement with America as the other in the text, but also hints at a possible explanation for the idiosyncratic view of America by Russian intellectuals.

Lotman's idea of how the self constitutes and redefines its identity is based on his concept of 'autocommunication.'¹ Starting with a premise that "in the cultural mechanism, communication is carried on by at least two differently constructed channels," Lotman builds on Roman Jakobson's basic model of communication, which involves the transmission of a message from an addresser (subject) to an addressee (object), and proposes a model of communication wherein the sender and the receiver of a message can be the same person (*Universe of the Mind* 20). In the first model, which Lotman calls

the 'I-s/he' communication, the code and message are invariable, whereas the addresser and the addressee are variable and can switch places. But in the second system, the 'I/I' communication, the sender and the receiver of the information remains the same, whereas the message becomes reformulated and "acquires a new meaning during the communication process." This transformation is a result of "introducing of a supplementary, second code; the original message is recoded into elements of its structure and thereby acquires features of a *new* message" (22). Examples of such codes can be poetic rhythm, or peculiarities of first-person narration in a lyrical poem, a diary, or a memoir, i.e. structures and devices that we perceive as aesthetic. Furthermore, Lotman notes that the qualitative transformation of information in the 'I/I' system leads to a restructuring of the 'I,' the subject, itself:

In the second system, while communicating with him/herself, the addresser inwardly reconstructs his/her essence, since the essence of a personality maybe thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes, and this set changes during the act of communication. (22)

Lotman explores a number of implications of this system of communication for art and literature, while acknowledging the fact that texts and even literary genres usually vacillate between two systems but can also privilege one or the other. However, what is important for our discussion is the idea that the self has a capacity to receive messages and recode them in the process of 'autocommunication' that leads to restructuring of the self.

Extending this idea to a larger context of culture as a whole, Lotman asserts that cultures can be divided into those where the 'I-s/he' model of communication is the dominant mode, and those oriented towards autocommunication as a dominant (33). Thus, he singles out Modern European culture as being consciously oriented

towards the 'I-s/he' model, noting that this kind of culture – oriented towards the message – enjoys mobility and dynamism that warrant rapid increase of knowledge through the increase in the number of texts. The downside of this orientation, however, is that the consumer of such culture becomes an ideal addressee, as s/he receives prepackaged information in the form of messages from without; hence there is a sharp divide between the active transmitters of information and passive receivers. Although Lotman does not offer an explicit example of a culture oriented towards autocommunication, his examples of the kind of texts that such culture produces and consumes – fairy tales, myths, and rituals – suggest that he has in mind a traditional or a premodern society. The consumer of culture in such a society is semiotically more alert as s/he has to “transform the standard story s/he is acquiring into texts of his/her own consciousness” (35). As a result, this type of culture is capable of greater semiotic activity but is less dynamic inasmuch as its semiotic creativity is not recorded and thus cannot circulate to proliferate knowledge.²

The Soviet environment, especially by the 1980s, was an extremely active semiotic space, in which personal (often subversive) recoding of myths, rituals, and official discourses of Soviet life was critical for cultivation and preserving the integrity of the self. Due to the risk of repression, the recoding remained mostly part of the lore and oral culture of everyday life with a few written attempts that became part of underground literature and private writing – diary, memoir, autobiography – not intended for circulation. Thus, the intense semiotization of space evolved into one of the main characteristics of Soviet culture. (Reflecting on this aspect of Soviet life, Vail' and Genis, for example, call this semiotic intensity the “ideologized way of life”

(“*ideologizirovannyi obraz zhizni*”) and refer to the Soviet Union/Russia as a space that “[...] due to cataclysms of progress became a safeguard of ideology (“*zapovednikom ideologii*”). Not of the Marxist, orthodox, or civil ideology, of course, but of the primordial one (*pervichnoi*), the ideology that endows objects with the power of symbols, gestures – with a meaning of deeds, and acts – with characteristics of epic, although often of tragicomic, feats” (*Poteriannyi rai* 15). This Vail’ and Genis’ description of Soviet reality with its “primordial ideology” very much echoes Lotman’s account of semiotic interaction in a premodern society. The semiotic alertness of the Soviet/Russian intellectuals has been a significant factor in their reception of America, as one of the most persistent socio-cultural myths. In a sense, America (or rather the representations and the discourses that orbit it) has served as a source of stories, mentioned by Lotman, that Russian cultural readers, in an act of autocommunication, “transform into texts of [their] own consciousness.”

I suggest that the essayistic treatment of America in the texts that I have analyzed in this dissertation can be looked at as gravitating towards autocommunication. The writer, by receiving information about America from outside, recodes it with his/her personal codes, while his/her identity becomes restructured in the process. The essay thus serves, among other things, as a form of broadcasting of this process of restructuring of the self into the social sphere (and in doing so, the essay resembles artwork in general). The distinctiveness of this procedure, which is also responsible for the great diversity of the texts, obviously depends on the kind of incoming message and the personal codes that the author uses to recode the message, whereas the peculiarity of reception and recoding is largely

determined by the fact that the authors of the essays grew up in an environment that is particularly semiotically alert. At the same time, the process of reception and recoding depends on the authors' personal circumstances that determine the sources of incoming messages and tactics of their recoding.

Thus, Mikhail Epstein's essays written in America, as it were, on behalf of "Russian social consciousness" display the author's ability to recode American reality with his personal codes, which he claims to be those of an average Russian. Yet Epstein analyzes not only American culture, he also directs his gaze back at Soviet/Russian reality to stage a cultural encounter. Now for interpretation of the "home" culture the perspective of "Russian social consciousness" alone is no longer possible, because while recoding American reality, the author's identity underwent some change. That is why Epstein's analysis of Russian/Soviet environment is affected by a new set of personal codes. Thus, for example, Epstein is able to talk about how Russian environment is infused with dirt and mud only after commenting on how clean and odorless its American counterpart is (23). The intensive recoding process ultimately results in a sort of complication of one's identity that is now made up of a significant pool of codes. And it is this complication that Epstein nurtures and celebrates by advocating staying on the borders of cultures, i.e. giving no privilege to any one code. Staying on the periphery of cultures, Epstein suggests, warrants a more intense process of recoding that conditions personal progress, creative change, and a sense of liberation from [a] culture. And that's why Epstein singles out the essay genre, due to its ability to bring together an array of codes from different aspects of life, as an ideal testing ground for trying out different ways of recoding incoming and messages and, ultimately, encoding reality.

In a similar vein, Vail' and Genis approach various phenomena of American culture/ everyday life not as messages but as codes that require perpetual semiotic intervention via recoding. In *Poteriannyi rai*, the authors confess that after immigration, they realized that America was a very different place from what they had imagined. Facing the necessity to completely reconfigure their attitude, the writers find the external codes readily available to them to aid in this process unacceptable:

And finally we arrived at a sad realization, which sooner or later dawns on wise men, ascetics, and drunkards, – man is alone, and he alone answers for himself. Neither five-year plans nor dissidents, nor American democracy can help or prevent man from being himself; it always happens inside, not outside. (196)

Thus, in *Amerikana* Vail' and Genis make use of the essay not just to share enlightening information about America and American culture by simply resubmitting the messages coming from outside. The authors utilize this space also to negotiate their intellectual autonomy by playing various codes (both internal and external) against each other. From the outset, the authors conceive their collection of essays as discursive by identifying two sets of codes that inform their approach to America. As a result, most of their essays appear to display a discursive tension that points to the authorial vacillation between different codes. This vacillation, as Vail' and Genis note, is a normal condition of immigration, inasmuch as recoding is a normal response of the self seeking to reinvent itself in a new environment.

Thus, the immigrant writers – Epstein, Genis, and Vail' – treat America as a set of various codes. By capitalizing on their superior semiotic inventiveness, the authors confront these codes with their own array of coding material and thus manage to negotiate and maintain some sort of intellectual autonomy. On the other hand, most authors of the essays in the *Amerika* and *In My Life* collections approach America as a

myth, the interpretation of which has been significant to the process of reflecting on the changes to their identity. These writers extract certain parts of the myth and infuse them with meaning that has relevance to their personal lives. Moreover, they use the essay to reflect on their long, often life-long, experience of this kind of recoding that in the end can be read as a record or a report of changes the author's self has undergone over a certain period of time. Thus, the entire body of the essays can be looked upon as a depository of written accounts of the writers' attempts at self-reinvention.

Notes to Conclusion

¹ For a detailed discussion of the conception of the Self in Lotman's work, see Andreas Schönle "Social Power and Individual Agency: The Self in Greenblatt and Lotman." *SE EJ*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2001): 61-79.

² Lotman's hypotheses about the semiotic passivity of the Modern European culture and the greater semiotic activity of traditional societies should not be taken too categorically, for Lotman conceives of these distinctions more in terms of dominants. Even though it is not very clear if Lotman indeed believed that the entire Modern culture was semiotically less active than other cultural time periods and environments, curiously, in *Universe of the Mind* he claims that a reader of a modern novel is much more passive than a hearer of a fairy tale (35).

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