

## Discretion: The Unpretentious Text in Contemporary Russian Literature

*Tine Roesen*

О, если бы весь мир, если бы каждый в мире был бы, как я сейчас, тих и боязлив, и был бы так же ни в чем не уверен: ни в себе, ни в серьезности своего места под небом—как хорошо бы! Никаких энтузиастов, никаких подвигов, никакой одержимости!—всеобщее малодушие.

Venedikt Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*

DISCUSSIONS of contemporary Russian literature and specifically its use of language tend to focus not surprisingly on obvious examples of norm-breaking and norm expansion, linguistic transgression and innovatory literary play. Meanwhile, linguistic and literary scholars have embarked only recently on the challenging task of subjecting this rich field of study to thorough analysis. In the present article I attempt to contribute to this undertaking by deliberately focusing on a group of contemporary literary works that are above all discreet both in their linguistic and in their literary devices. Introducing a new term to designate this specific category of works, I will analyse their various characteristics as *unpretentious texts*.

Mikhail Epstein has defined Russian literature of the 1990s as a literature of the “arrière-garde”: the literary process having departed from literature into non-literature—into politics, philosophy, religion, and culture—literature is left only with language, and being “equally weary of both ‘realistically’ corresponding to reality and ‘avant-gardely’ anticipating it,” this literature instead “brings up the rear, noting and sweeping up everything along the way, though already as historical rubbish.”<sup>1</sup> The prose of this arrière-garde, correspondingly, does not yield to genre defi-

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail N. Epstein, 1995, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Amherst, pp. 88–89.

niton, it is “simply prose, a flow of writing,” without plot and composition; it is, Epstein suggests, with reference to Musil, a “literature without qualities.”<sup>2</sup> While plenty of exceptions to this general characterization may spring to mind, the kind of literature that forms the subject of this article will fully corroborate it.

The response of discreet, unpretentious literary works to the landslide of linguistic norms and the freedom from literary censorship may initially be characterized as the opposite of playful.<sup>3</sup> If writers such as Viktor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Evgenii Popov may be seen frolicking, metaphorically speaking, in hitherto forbidden gardens, enjoying new opportunities to experiment with and verbalize everything, the authors of unpretentious texts have retreated indoors to their private rooms, enjoying instead the new privileges of aimlessness and intimacy. Significantly, some writers alternate between different strategies and moods in their works. I would therefore underscore that I approach my textual examples as individual texts by authors of much more complex *œuvres* that are not under consideration here. Correspondingly, the characterizations I propose do not necessarily apply to these *œuvres* and writers in general.

Despite their common characteristics, which will be my prime concern below, the three unpretentious texts that I will now present display a considerable diversity: they include both first and third person narration, while their protagonists, much like their authors, differ in age, gender and life circumstances. Liudmila Petrushevskaja's (b. 1938) *Vremia noch'* (1992, *The Time: Night*), which in a brief “editorial” preface is described as “Zapiski na kraiu stola” (“Notes From the Edge of the Table”), is constructed as the notes of Anna Andrianovna, a grandmother, text

2 Epstein, 1995, pp. 90, 92. Similarly, S.N. Nosov as early as 1992 pointed to a “bravado of vapidity” (бравлада бессордержательностью) and an apparent “taste for emptiness” (вкус пустоты) as characteristic of the new Russian literature. S.N. Nosov, 1992, “Vselennaia bezydeinosti,” *Novyi mir* 7, pp. 224–27; pp. 226, 227.

3 It is difficult to judge in fact whether this kind of text should be seen as responding primarily to the literature and language of the Soviet past or to other, contemporary kinds of responses to this past, in particular, as it were, to the more “boisterous” variants. Consequently, in the following, I will take both possibilities into consideration, without aspiring to any systematic differentiation. To the possible objection that perhaps it responds to neither, an objection that seems to be confirmed by the fact that one of the authors I mention, Liudmila Petrushevskaja, wrote similar texts before the “landslide,” I would answer that in a time of massive changes—political, social and cultural as well as linguistic—the act of ignoring these changes by abstaining from exploiting them explicitly, may itself be defined as a response.

writer and would-be poetess. In my second example, Iurii Buida's (b. 1954) short story written in the third person "Kazanskii vokzal" (1996, "Kazan' Railway Station"), we follow the elderly and vulnerable Ovsen'ka and his epileptic great-grandson on their apparently aimless wanderings around Moscow. And, finally, in Andrei Gelasimov's (b. 1965) short story "Zhanna" (2001, "Jeanne"), we hear the seemingly direct, unmediated voice of a submissive, young single mother, Zhanna, whose deprivations and lack of initiative are combined with a basic caring instinct.

As I will now try to demonstrate, these texts may be characterized as unpretentious in several ways. However, and on this question I intend to conclude, they may also harbour certain ambitions as literary projects and thus as possible commentaries on the—actual or desirable—development of contemporary Russian literature.

### *Unpretentiousness*

In terms of both style and content the unpretentiousness of the group of texts in question takes the form of a simplicity—they are unsophisticated, naive, and everyday—and at the same time, a modesty—they are unassuming and timid. In some cases humility also applies, in the meekly resigned, submissive variants. Although great existential themes are evoked in these works, such as life and death, love and despair, parenthood and lifesaving friendships, what is immediately presented to the reader are simple lives and small worlds, the narrow outlook of isolated human beings and consciousnesses.

Regardless of the type of narration, the unpretentious text is always based on a particular character's narrow perspective and individual outlook. Thus, in third person narratives, the only indications of a narrator are the grammatical person (the third) and the use of tense (the past); everything else, including the subject matter, vocabulary, judgments, and deictic words, point to the hero.<sup>4</sup> This personality-dominated style could well be studied under the broadly defined notion of *skaz*;<sup>5</sup> however, what

4 Cf. the series of traits by which a narrator's text or character's text may be distinguished as suggested by Wolf Schmid, 1986, *Der Textaufbau in den Erzählungen Dostoevskijs* (Beihfte zu Poetica 10), Amsterdam, pp. 41–42.

5 See e.g. the definition by A.P. Chudakov and M.P. Chudakova in *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, ed. A. Surkov, Moscow, 1971, p. 876: <Сказ>—особый тип повествования, строящегося как рассказ некоего отдаленного от автора лица (конкретно поименованного или подразумеваемого), обладающего своеобразной собствен-

distinguishes the unpretentious text as a specific category of text is not the relation between narrator and character, nor its oral, unedited character, but the very *narrowness* of the perspective.

In essence, the unpretentious text tends toward the naked chronotope of here and now, as it presents a concrete limited situation. In other words, there is usually no distance between the focal character's situation and the focused situation.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the temporal and spatial deictics are relatively few, the temporal primarily because the merging of the "now" of the narration and of the narrated needs no articulation. Thus in *Vremia noch'*, the rare examples are of the type *всю ночь* ("all night"), *всю-то жизнь* ("all life long"), and *сейчас* ("now"); in "Kazanskii vokzal" we find temporal deictics only on the first two pages, where reflections on his background and habits flash through Ovsen'ka's mind as he is preparing to go out: *лет тридцать назад, в детстве, почти каждый день, с утра до вечера, вечером, к полуночи*;<sup>7</sup> in "Zhanna" we find only *сначала* and *потом* ("first," "then"). Similarly, the spatial deictics in these texts are "modest" throughout, in that they refer to the space immediately in front of the main (focal) character. Examples from *Vremia noch'* include: *из кухни* ("out of the kitchen"), *на ту же кухню* ("back into the kitchen"), *сюда* ("here"/"hither"), *в дверях* ("in the doorway"), *на лестницу* ("out onto the stairs"), *в квартире* ("in the flat"), *передо мной* ("in front of me"), *к себе* ("towards me"), *от меня* ("away from me"); from "Zhanna": *здесь* ("here"), *сюда* ("here"/"hither"); and from "Kazanskii vokzal": *в углу* ("in the corner"), *в гостиной* ("in the living room"), *здесь* ("here"), *в метро* ("in the metro"), *к окну* ("towards the window").

The lack of perspective beyond the here and now is generally motivated by the main character's "simple mind." Not in the sense that he or she is mentally retarded,<sup>8</sup> but rather someone whose mental capacities

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ной речевой манерой (Cited from Vol'f Shmid [Wolf Schmid], 2003, *Narratologija*, Moscow, p. 186). "<Skaz>—a particular kind of narration, construed as an account by someone (named or implied), who is distanced from the author and has his own distinctive manner of speaking." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

- 6 For a discussion of the various concepts of focalization, see Gérard Genette, 1980, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, New York, pp. 187–89.
- 7 Iurii Buida, "Kazanskii vokzal," originally published in *Novyi mir* 8, 1996, here cited from Elena Shubina, ed. 2003, *Proza novoi Rossii v chetyrekh tomakh*, Moscow, vol. 1, pp. 160–76; pp. 160–61. "some thirty years ago," "in his childhood," "almost every day," "from morning until evening," "in the evening," "towards midnight."
- 8 For this kind of "extreme" narrow-mindedness, see Tat'iana Tolstai's story *Noch'*

and knowledge are inadequate in relation to an often new or changing, complex reality. The shadow of a wider reality looms on the outskirts of these narrow outlooks, as something incomprehensible, inaccessible or irrelevant. While this “simple-mindedness” is evident in the case of both Buida’s and Gelasimov’s apathetic protagonists, Petrushevskiaia’s strong, intelligent and culturally enlightened Anna Andrianovna seems at first glance to be an exception. However, her kitchen-table notes do not attest so much to these sides of her personality as to the situation of a physically and psychologically isolated human being trying to cope with the basic demands of life, in particular the new conditions of family life in post-Soviet Russia.

The narrow, personal perspective of simple minds links the unpretentious text of the 1990s to the so-called *malenkii chelovek* (the little man) tradition in Russian literature. This tradition is generally accepted as including nineteenth-century classics by Pushkin, Gogol and Dostoevsky, as well as stories by Vasilii Shukshin from the 1960–1970s. From the viewpoint of unpretentiousness, the list may be supplemented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s low-voiced *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha* (1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*), and by Venedikt Erofeev’s painfully intimate underground classic *Moskva-Petushki* (1970/1977, *Moscow Circles*), whose call for faint-heartedness I quote in my epigraph.<sup>9</sup> If we extend the list to include world literature, an obvious predecessor is Albert Camus’ *L’étranger* (1942, *The Stranger*), a masterpiece of detachment and alienation, but also, as it were, of unpretentiousness. In this connection, it is worth noting that unlike much other contemporary Russian literature, the unpretentious text features almost no intertextual references.

It is characteristic of the unpretentious text that it seems to disregard, or at least play down, almost all the characteristics traditionally regarded as defining literary prose composition. As I will now demonstrate in more

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(*Oktiabr’* 4, 1987), about the adult Aleksei Petrovich still living with his “mama”—yet another unpretentious text.

9 “Oh, if only the entire world, if everyone in the world were like me right now—timid and shy and as unsure of everything as I am: of himself, of the seriousness of his place under the heavens—how good it would be! No enthusiasts, no heroic feats, no obsessions!—a universal faint-heartedness.” Translation (slightly amended) cited from Mikhail Epstein, 1999, “Charms of Entropy and New Sentimentality: The Myth of Venedikt Erofeev,” *Russian Postmodernism*, eds. M.N. Epstein, A.A. Genis & S.M. Vladiv-Glover, New York & Oxford, pp 423–55; p. 435.

detail, what is immediately most remarkable about this kind of text, with regard to both narrativity and fictionality as well as to aesthetic function, including its qualities as language art, is what is missing. However, as in the case of the great tradition that it continues, and in spite of the seeming literary modesty of this kind of text, the relation between the words and the reality portrayed is not necessarily simple at all, nor can the aesthetic impact be disposed of easily.

### *Unmediated communications*

Storytelling is generally weak in unpretentious texts, from the view-point of both classical and structuralist narratology. In *classical narratology*, narrativity is defined by the presence of a narrator.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, the main characters of the first person texts discussed here are, technically speaking, simultaneously narrators; on the other hand, they do not really narrate, in the sense of telling a story. Rather, they communicate, without any introduction or conclusion, their immediate, decontextualized and unstructured observations and thoughts. Since the narrator of Buida's third person text is limited to a mediating voice (established by the categories of person and tense), the observations and thoughts of his characters confront the reader in the same unstructured form. All three texts begin *in medias res*:

#### *Vremia noch'*

Он не ведает, что в гостях нельзя жадно кидаться к подзеркальнику и цапать все, вазочки, статуэтки, флакончики и особенно коробочки с бижутерией.<sup>11</sup>

#### "Kazanskii vokzal"

Он оделся потеплее, проверил, все ли пуговицы застегнуты, достал из стоявшего в углу старого валенка спрятанную от внучки бутылку водки и осторожно приоткрыл дверь.<sup>12</sup>

10 In the following, the basic concepts and distinctions between classical narratology and structuralist narratology are based on Schmid, 2003.

11 Liudmila Petrushevskaia, 1992, "Vremia noch'," *Novyi mir* 2, pp. 65–110; p. 65. "He can't understand that when you're out visiting you don't just rush up to people's dressing-tables and start grabbing things, all the little vases and knick-knacks and scent bottles, and especially the little jewellery cases." Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, 1994, *The Time: Night*, trans. Sally Laird, New York, p. 1.

12 Buida 2003, p. 160. "He dressed up warm, checked that all his buttons were fastened,

“Zhanna”

Больше всего ему понравилась эта штучка. То есть, сначала не очень понравилась, потому что он был весь горячий, и у него температура, а эта штучка холодная—он даже вздрагивал, когда ее к нему прижимали.<sup>13</sup>

Petrushevskaiia’s Anna Andrianovna does at one point sum up the story of her present life, but this happens in real life, in one of her rare dialogues with another person, and not in her notes, where she records the incident *post factum* and self-critically, as the “beggar’s story” she once delivered to a privileged, generous woman she had met:

—А я на пенсии,—говорю я,—вот выйдет книжка моих стихов, мне пенсию пересчитают, буду получать больше. Пока что мы с Тимой живем Бог знает как, и маму вот из больницы выписывают, и дочь по уходу за двумя детьми только алименты, а сын инвалид (перечисляю, как нищий в электричке).<sup>14</sup>

Evidently the beggar’s story is a ready-made genre forced upon Anna by her circumstances—for she is, in fact, a beggar on the train. Such stories are not characteristic of her notes, where she keeps this kind of reality and summing-up perspective at a distance. The low level of story-telling in Petrushevskaiia’s prose in general has been observed by several critics.<sup>15</sup> The narrator in Buida’s third-person story is likewise discreet. The

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got out the bottle of vodka which he had hidden from his grandchild in an old felt boot standing in the corner, and carefully opened the door a crack.”

- 13 Andrei Gelasimov, “Zhanna,” originally published in his collection *Foks Malder pokhozha na sviniu*, 2001, here cited from Shubina, ed. 2003, vol. 1, pp. 325–43; p. 325. “Most of all he liked this little thing [a stethoscope]. Well, in the beginning he didn’t like it very much at all, because he was so hot and had a temperature and this little thing was cold—he even shuddered, when it was pressed against him.”
- 14 Petrushevskaiia, 1992, p. 98. “Well I am [a pensioner]; I tell her. ‘If my book of verse comes out, the pension will have to be adjusted, I ought to get more. In the meantime Tima and I live God knows how, and now my mother’s being discharged from hospital, my daughter can’t go out to work, she’s been left with two small children on her hands and just the alimony, and my son’s disabled’ (I list all my woes like a beggar on the train).” Petrushevskaya, 1994, p. 111.
- 15 Konstantin Kustanovich has suggested that Petrushevskaiia’s prose approaches closer perhaps than any other the notion of plotless fiction: K. Kustanovich, 1992, “The Naturalistic Tendency in Contemporary Soviet Fiction: Thematics, Poetics, Functions,” *New*

observations and thoughts of the elderly Ovsen'ka and later of the young policeman, who takes care of him and also takes over the perspective for a while, are related in the voice of a narrator—consider the grammatical person and tense—but there are no indications whatsoever of this narrator structuring the story. What is described to us are Ovsen'ka thoughts and experiences as he wanders about and they occur. Similarly, in Gelasimov's story, the young Zhanna articulates her observations and thoughts, and reports her conversations in an almost demonstratively loyal—and monotonely indifferent—way:

Доктор говорит—перестань. Это кака. Отдай ее мне.  
 Я говорю— онсейчас отпустит. Ему надо только чуть-чуть ее полизать. Пусть подержит немного, а то он плакал почти всю ночь.  
 Она смотрит на меня и говорит—ты что, одна с ним возилась?  
 Я говорю—одна. Больше никого нет.  
 Она смотрит на меня и молчит. Потом говорит—устала?  
 Я говорю—да нет. Я уже привыкла. Только руки устали совсем.  
 К утру чуть не оторвались.  
 Она говорит—ты его все время на руках, что ли, таскаешь?  
 Я говорю—он не ходит еще.  
 Она смотрит на него и говорит—а сколько ему?  
 Я говорю—два года. Просто родовая травма была.  
 Она говорит—понятно. А тебе сколько лет?  
 Я говорю—мне восемнадцать.<sup>16</sup>

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*Directions in Soviet Literature*, ed. S.D. Graham, New York, pp. 75–88; p. 76. Nina Balz cites Nyusya Mil'man for having pointed out the secondary meaning of the *fabula* and the associatively presented *siuzhet* in Petrushevskaiia's stories: Nina Balz, 2003, *Zwischen Schock und Spiel: Narrative Möglichkeiten in der Kurzprosa Ljudmila Petruševskajas* (Vorträge und Abhandlungen zur Slavistik 44), Munich, p. 21.

- 16 Gelasimov, 2003, pp. 325–26. “The doctor says, ‘Stop it. It’s poo poo. Give it to me.’ I say, ‘He’ll let go in a minute. He just wants to lick it a little bit. Let him keep it a bit longer, he’s been crying almost all night.’ She looks at me and says, ‘Did you handle him on your own, or what?’ I say, ‘Yes. There’s no one else.’ She looks at me in silence. Then she says, ‘Are you tired?’ I say, ‘Not really. I’m used to it. Only my arms are tired. This morning they almost fell off.’ She says, ‘But do you really carry him in your arms all the time?’ I say, ‘He can’t walk yet.’ She looks at him and says, ‘How old is he then?’ I say, ‘Two. It’s just that there was a birth trauma.’ She says, ‘I see. And how old are you?’ I say, ‘I’m eighteen.’”



Thus, in all three examples of unpretentious text, we are faced with a narrative medium in its most minimalist form. In Lubomír Doležel's terms, this is pure character text. The low degree of "narrator's narrativity," combined with the frequent dialogues, brings about an effect of dramatic illusion, which allows us to characterize it along with Seymour Chatman, as showing rather than telling; or in Plato's words, as mimesis rather than diegesis. We could also describe the narration of these texts in more modern terms as cinematographic, a word that has already been used in relation to Gelasimov's stories.<sup>17</sup>

In *structuralist narratology*, narrativity is defined by eventfulness, and a narrative is regarded as principally a sequence of events.<sup>18</sup> Some narratologists demand of this sequence that it be both temporal and causal; others point out that while it must be temporal, it does not have to display causality. There are degrees of eventfulness, according to various criteria, of which Schmid lists five: the relevance, unpredictability, consequences, irreversibility, and unrepeatability of the events.<sup>19</sup> A low degree of eventfulness brings a text closer to description than narration. In unpretentious texts the degree of eventfulness in the narrated, or diegetic, story varies, but all share an extremely low degree of eventfulness on the level of the *narration* of the story, that is, in the exegetic story.<sup>20</sup> In Gelasimov's "Zhanna," in Buida's "Kazanskii vokzal" and in Petrushevskaja's *Vremia noch'* the detached, registering outlook of the focal characters places not only big events on a level with small events, but also sometimes events

17 Iuliia Belozerova, 2003, "Budem kak deti," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 6 October, URL: <http://www.knigoboz.ru/news/news1068.html> (accessed 08.02.2006).

18 Schmid, 2003, pp. 11–21.

19 Schmid, 2003, pp. 16–18.

20 Вообще можно полагать, что описательные тексты имеют тенденцию к нарративности по мере выявленности в них опосредующей инстанции. Разумеется, это нарративность, характеризующая не описываемое, а описующего и его акт описывания. Повествуемая здесь история является историей не диегетической (т.е. относящейся к повествуемому миру), а экзегетической (т.е. относящейся к акту повествования или описания), излагающей изменения в сознании опосредующей инстанции. Schmid, 2003, p. 20. "Generally it may be assumed that descriptive texts tend towards narrativity in direct ratio to the explicitness of their mediating agency. Of course such narrativity concerns not the depicted but the depicting agency and the act of depiction. The story being told here is not the diegetic story (i.e. the one concerning the narrated world) but the exegetic story (i.e. the one concerning the act of narration or depiction), which expounds the changes occurring in the mind of the mediating agency."

with non-events. Thus, Zhanna reports her mother's death in much the same way as she comments on other practical worries in her daily life. Similarly, Ovsen'ka does not raise an eyebrow when he is assaulted and beaten up. And Anna Andrianovna only leaves her coolly registering position at the kitchen table after the battle known as family life is over, when everybody has left her alone and everything is finished.<sup>21</sup> The last words of her final, unfinished sentence are: простите слезы.<sup>22</sup>

As I have suggested, the linguistic evidence for the minimalist narration and the generally low degree of eventfulness in these texts is, on the one hand, the *in medias res* beginnings and endings and, on the other, the infrequent temporal deictics and the consequently unarticulated temporal and causal sequences presented in one long present "now." Given this admittedly weak "positive" evidence, I would like to highlight what distinguishes these texts by taking a look at similar, but in terms of narrativity more "pretentious," texts in contemporary Russian literature. Although many literary texts have both *in medias res* beginnings and unassuming protagonists, the first few lines often reveal signs of a temporal, and perhaps even causal perspective, and of storytelling ambitions. An obvious example is Tat'iana Tolstaia's third person story "Vyshel mesiats iz tumana" (1987, "The Moon Came Out"). It is a story about and from the viewpoint of Natasha, whose modest, indeed uneventful life is over before it has begun. The narration of the story, however, adds temporal—and narrative—perspective from the very start, in a sweeping overview of her age, expectations, and disappointments:

Родилась—лет пятьдесят назад; назвали Наташей. Имя обещало большие серые глаза, мягкие губы, нежный силуэт, веселые волосы с искорками. А вышло—толстое, пористое лицо, нос баклажанчиком, унылая грудь и короткие, крутые велосипедные икры.<sup>23</sup>

21 Cf. Kustanovich, 1992, p. 87: "Petrushevskaia creates a horrible world, the main horror of which is that its inhabitants perceive it as normal."

22 Petrushevskaia, 1992, p. 110. "Forgive my tears."

23 *Krest'ianka* 4, 1987, pp. 32–35; p. 32. The story was republished in *Ne kys'*, 2004. "She was born about fifty years ago; they called her Natasha. Her name promised large grey eyes, soft lips, a delicate silhouette, and lively, sparkling hair. But what came out was a fat, porous face, an aubergine-like nose, a sad bosom, and short, round cyclist's calves."

A second anti-example is Mikhail Elizarov's story (*povest'*) "Nogti" (2001, "Nails"), a first-person narrative, the memoir of a humble, hunch-backed orphan, who is, however, a gifted musician—and clearly also a gifted storyteller. The mere eight words of the opening sentence offer both temporal and spatial perspective as well as an introduction to the main theme: Bakhatov and I; what we hear is a purposeful narrator's voice: Я познакомился с Бахатовым еще в Доме малютки.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of narrativity the unpretentious text may be characterized in short as mimetic rather than diegetic, and as descriptive rather than sequential. It is, to repeat Epstein's words, "simply prose." However, its modesty as a narrative gives way in turn to the strong impression of a spontaneous, unmediated personal perspective and voice. This impression is enhanced by a similarly discreet fictionality.

### *The art of artlessness*

The mere fact that the copyright of Petrushevskaiia's, Buida's and Gelasimov's texts belong to declared writers tells us that these texts are fiction, and consequently we read and understand them as autonomous literary realities, as artistic constructions of possible worlds. Nothing in the texts contradicts this approach. On the other hand, it is not explicitly corroborated either, for any indication of fictionality is played down, first of all in the subject matter of the text, where no obviously fictitious elements occur—everything is one hundred per cent realistic, but also in the presentation of the story, where neither the modelling of the fictional world nor any hypothesizing on the part of the author are highlighted.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the indicators of fictionality are discreet in what Gérard Genette calls the paratexts: prefaces, footnotes, titles, chapter titles and so forth.<sup>26</sup> The texts by Buida and Gelasimov are, of course, brief texts in which one would not expect to find chapters, but even Petrushevskaiia's text has no subdivisions. It has an introduction, in which the well-known device of

24 Mikhail Elizarov, 2001, "Nogti," *Nogti*, pp. 65–140; p. 65. "I got to know Bakhatov already in the children's home."

25 Cf. Jean-Marie Schaeffer's description of fiction as being characterized by the acts of both modelling and pretending (or hypothesizing), and in the case of literary fiction by a specific intentional stance; in Schaeffer's pragmatic approach the question of fiction is a question of the author's relation to his material and to his reader. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, 1999, *Pourquoi la fiction?*, Paris.

26 Introduced in Gérard Genette, 1987, *Seuils*, Paris.

the “found manuscript” simulates authenticity but in fact indicates fiction. Apart from this device, the fictionality of the text in Petrushevskia’s case is indicated only by the title, as it is in Gelasimov’s, where “Zhanna” introduces the person speaking to us in the text and thus simultaneously marks her as the author’s invention.

In discussing fictionality it is interesting to take another brief look at Venedikt Erofeev’s semi-biographical *Moskva-Petushki*. This so-called “poema” has chapter divisions and titles, but the latter are throughout names of stations or places, as they might be in the notebook of a real-life traveller. Moreover, Erofeev wrote the text in his own name, in the first person and incorporating elements of his own biography. The deliberate blurring in this work of the distinction between fiction and reality—more precisely between fiction and non-fiction, since we know that we are not actually on the train with him—is central to the creation of the myth of the writer “Venichka” Erofeev.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, it has consequences for *Moskva-Petushki* as a work of fiction, not least in contributing, I would argue, to its artless, unpretentious character: “It’s no big deal, it’s just me,” Erofeev seems to be telling us. Buida’s “Kazanskii vokzal” obviously wishes to demonstrate, in its title as well as in its theme, a kinship with Erofeev’s classic, but despite the title—which could well be the title of a factual, physiological sketch—the fictionality is somewhat more apparent in Buida’s case: first, because of the third-person, past-tense narration, a standard model of literary fiction, and second, because he also provides the protagonist with a name other than his own.

Giving characters names, even symbolic ones, is an obvious opportunity to mark them as fictional. Not surprisingly, the unpretentious text also holds back in this respect. Just as there is no presentation of the story as a story, there is no presentation of the characters as characters. Of their name, prehistory, age, looks, profession and the like, we learn only what is communicated through their rare self-reflections or dialogues with other people.<sup>28</sup> This anonymity invokes the broader frame of the human condition, or at least the Russian condition, as such. The protagonists of

27 Mikhail Epstein has analysed this myth in Epstein, 1999.

28 As regards the lack of outward definition, or finalization of the characters, the unpretentious text would no doubt have appealed to Mikhail Bakhtin, who emphasized and praised this characteristic of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel in his monograph *Problemy tvorchestvo Dostoevskogo* (1929).

these texts could be anybody; they are not individual destinies in so far as they represent modern Russian man or woman. It is worth noting that in *Vremia noch'* Anna fights against this anonymity and general condition by herself pointing demonstratively to her name and its likeness to that of Anna Andreevna Akhmatova. However, her attempts to establish a similar—cultural and “superior”—identity remain a postulate, for she never composes any poetry, never transcends her graphomaniac note-writing, a fact which explains why, when she finally takes leave of the people around her, she includes an “Anna,” that is, Akhmatova.

The names that do occur in these texts are often diminutives, nicknames and pet names. This contributes to the impression of a narrow outlook and of intimacy—in Anna Andrianovna's case an intimacy she tries to conjure, so that a happy family might arise from the existing battlefield of her flat. But the diminutives also mark these characters as unpretentious, timid fictional characters. We do not expect heroic deeds from someone called Ovsen'ka—or Venichka<sup>29</sup>—we do not even expect them to be responsible grown-ups. Ovsen'ka's name in fact puts him on a level with his great-grandson Mishutka, a helpless young boy, deaf-mute and epileptic. Ovsen'ka does not object when his (unnamed) granddaughter, in reproaching him for his passivity and resignation, points out to him that if all he has got is a nickname, he might as well not have existed: «Ты потому такой, что у тебя ничего своего нету, кроме прозвища!—в сердцах заключала внучка.—И не было». Овсенька легко согласался: и не было.<sup>30</sup> The existence of Ovsen'ka's friends seems just as fragile, the prostitutes Pizza, Barbie, and Cindy being clearly defined as (Americanized) consumer objects. Gelasimov's Zhanna, in contrast, has always been teased because of her pretentious name. Her story, or rather the slice of her life presented in the text, deals primarily with the gradual eradication of her mother's unrealistic ambitions for success and emigration, right down to the complete *tabula rasa* of an empty flat and a life without prospects.

29 Cf. Epstein, 1999, p. 431.

30 Buida, 2003, p. 161. “That's why you're like this: because you have nothing of your own, except a nickname!”—his granddaughter furiously concluded. ‘You might as well not have existed.’ Ovsen'ka readily agreed: he might as well not have existed.”

*Simplicity and silence*

Anonymity and artlessness likewise characterize the unpretentious text as language art. It displays no apparent linguistic sophistication, while imagery—in the form of metaphors, similes or eloquently elaborated motifs—is completely absent. On the other hand, these texts do not violate, as is quite common in contemporary Russian literature, the classical and Soviet linguistic norms through excessive use of vulgar language or loanwords. They are built upon a less offensive variant of simple spoken language or unpolished notes; not only are they free from eloquence, euphemisms and stylistic polish, they are also free from provocative demonstrations of substandard vocabulary. Everything in their language and style is ordinarily concrete and practical.<sup>31</sup> All in all, the manifest aesthetic qualities are not impressive. Still, I would argue, this kind of text is capable in fact of triggering the reader's aesthetic orientation by its sheer simplicity. Even if we are not immediately impressed by its qualities as literary language, we find ourselves (at least I find myself) gradually tuning in during our reading to this "quiet" kind of aesthetics and appreciating its consistency. Similarly, the lack of narrativity gives way to another kind of suspense, one that is born of our initial interest in establishing where the story-line is, and is activated along with the plot we ourselves read into the text.

On the level of the textual tactics, that is to say the way in which these texts are constructed, I believe it is appropriate to talk of an aesthetics of simplicity and concreteness; however, if we turn to their textual strategy, to the intended effect of this construction, things are less simple.<sup>32</sup> As an illustration of these different levels of analysis I would like to point to a passage in "Kazanskii vokzal." Ovsen'ka and Mishutka have gone for a ride on the metro:

31 Cf. the initial accusations against Petrushevskaia of "linguistic naturalism" and "stylistic incompetence," listed by Balz, 2003, p. 31. Cf. also Epstein (1995, p. 90) on the style of the *arrière-garde* as "maximally weakened, flabby, boneless."

32 I take the terms textual tactics or tactics of the text (*тактика текста*) and textual strategy or strategy of the text (*стратегия текста*) from G.A. Zolotova, N.K. Onipenko & M.Iu. Sidorova, 1998, *Kommunikativnaia grammatika russkogo iazyka*, Moscow, pp. 445ff. Here is a short definition (p. 446): Если выявление тактика текста показывает, как строится текст, то выявление стратегии текста отвечало бы на вопрос *зачем, для чего* этот текст создается. "If the exposure of the textual tactics shows *how* a text is constructed, then the exposure of the textual strategy would answer the question *why, or for what purpose* this text is created."

Старик плохо разбирался в хитросплетении линий и переходов метрополитена, но твердо знал главное: вернуться надо на «Комсомольскую». Оба любили подолгу ездить в поезде, станцию «Площадь революции» с ее бронзовыми ружьями, курами и пограничными собаками—и не любили эскалаторы, на которых у старика кружилась голова, а Мишутка, когда лестница шла вниз, ни с того ни с сего начинал мычать и хвататься за Овсенкино пальто.

Они вышли на «Тургеневской»: старику захотелось по нужде.<sup>33</sup>

The names of the metro stations are presented here as purely practical signs in Ovsen'ka's and Mishutka's small world: they help them to orientate themselves so that they can return to their starting point after hours of aimlessly travelling around. To the reader, however, it seems significant that the station where everything begins and ends is *Komsomol'skaia*, suggesting that Ovsen'ka continues to be not only a child, but a child of the communist society in which he grew up, a context which is otherwise conspicuously absent from the text; furthermore, that the details the old man and his great-grandson contemplate with disinterested pleasure decorate the station of *Ploshchad' revoliutsii*, pointing to the historical past which is also *not* thematized in Ovsen'ka's limited perspective; and, finally, that the station where they surface so that the old man can relieve himself is—*Turgenevskaia*, a reminder, it would seem, of a classical (and exquisite) literary style which is *not* reflected in this text.

This kind of two-fold communication, which serves to further emphasize the limited perspective of the characters, is quite rare in the unpretentious texts. Their aesthetics as works of art is perhaps best characterized as silent, in the sense that the author's design is rarely detectable other than in the basic unity and interaction of form and content. Nevertheless, this is still a literary and artistic strategy, and one that is not necessarily more easily mastered than strategies that are linguisti-

33 Buida, 2003, p. 163–64. “The old man had a bad grasp of the artful design of the metro's lines and pedestrian walkways, but he knew for sure the most important thing: they must return to ‘Komsomol'skaia.’ They both liked long rides on the train and the station called ‘Ploshchad' revoliutsii’ with its bronze rifles, chickens and frontier dogs—and they didn't like the escalators, where the old man always felt dizzy and Mishutka, when they were going downwards, for no reason would begin to howl and hang on to Ovsen'ka's coat./ They got out at ‘Turgenevskaia’: the old man had to relieve himself.”

cally and stylistically “richer.” There are certainly risks and pitfalls involved in exploring the lower limits of what constitutes a literary hero, a literary text, and literary language. And, from the opposite perspective, in exploring the upper limits of unmediated realism. Seen in this light, an unpretentious text may well be an ambitious work of art.<sup>34</sup>

*In conclusion: sentimentalism and seriousness*

I believe that an important and strong conclusion may be inferred from the linguistic and literary characteristics that I have identified and described above. In my view, these texts insist on the freedom *not* to use grand and pretentious words, the freedom *not* to tell great stories of superior truths, the freedom, as it were, not to tell any stories at all.<sup>35</sup> Against the background of the Soviet and socialist-realist systems of euphemization, stereotypification and ideologically defined realities and plots, and contrary to more offensive contemporary ways of coming to terms with the past, the unpretentious text calls for caution and reticence in the re-evaluation and reactivation of Russian language and literature.<sup>36</sup>

34 Petrushevskaiia's critics have gradually learned to appreciate this. Cf. Petrushevskaiia's own comment (1992–93) on her reception: “The thing is that my work is of no use to stupid or evil people—they hate it, reject it, see only the bare facts I present and not what surrounds them. They don't understand the game I'm playing.” Cited from Sally Laird, 1999, *Voices of Russian Literature*, Oxford, p. 33.

35 Cf. what one critic writes of Gelasimov's “Nezhnyi vozrast” (2001, “A tender Age”), yet another unpretentious text: Рассказ как бы пробует на себе версию о значимости умолчания, когда затекстовый смысл воплощается через отказ от слов. Для современной литературы, умудрившейся, благодаря своему неумеренному речевывержению, во многом девальвировать слово вообще, этот опыт представляется весьма продуктивным. Mariia Remizova, 2002, “Svezhaia krov,” *Novyi mir* 6, URL: [http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi\\_mi/2002/6/rem.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2002/6/rem.html) (accessed 08.02.2006). “The story seems to try out a version of the significance of silence, where the extratextual meaning is realized through a refusal to use words. For a contemporary literature which—through its excessive outpourings of speech—has managed to seriously devalue the word in general, this experiment appears to be quite productive.”

36 Cf. Vuida's description of his relation to contemporary Russia (1999): На то, что происходило и происходит в России, я стараюсь смотреть глазами профессионального журналиста, призванного информировать общество, а не устраивать революции. Cited in Valentin Kurbatov, 1999, “Doroga v ob'ezd,” *Druzhiba narodov* 9, URL: <http://magazines.russ.ru/druzhiba/1999/9/kurb.html> (accessed 08.02.2006). “I attempt to look at what has been happening and is happening now in Russia with the eyes of a professional journalist, dedicated to informing society, and not to organizing a revolution.” Cf. also Epstein's (1999, p. 450) prediction that the twenty-first century in Russia will be “a century of timidity and delicacy, and of the sensitive hangover.”



Caution and reticence are also characteristic of the subject matter of all these non-stories, the modest climax of which is characteristically a moment of happiness and personal integrity experienced through the sheer intimacy between a mother and her child, a grandparent and grandchild, or between a drunkard and his friends. The grand teleological principles of Soviet ideology—education, political schooling, and work—and their implicit metaphysical pretensions, most importantly the romantic idea of a happy humanity, are replaced by brief, isolated and, as it were, coincidental experiences.

Brief as they may be, these emotionally charged incidents help us to place these texts within a sentimentalist trend in contemporary Russian literature. In the texts by Gelasimov and Buida, sentimentalism is enhanced by the fact that their endings feature such incidents, which are thus allowed to round off the text thematically. Ovsen'ka and Mishutka find temporary shelter with the conscientious and unselfishly caring young police officer Alesha, and both Alesha and Ovsen'ka are allowed their moment:

Жена во сне всхлипнула, забормотала, и сердце Алеши болезненно сжалось от любви и жалости к ней, к Мишутке, к дураку Овсеньке, к себе, наконец— к миру, которому уже не дожидаться Спасителя... [...] Старик поправил одеяло и посмотрел на Мишутку. Мальчик улыбался. Овсенька знал, что Мишутка улыбается только во сне, и никому об этом не рассказывал: это была его тайна. Он лег, вдохнул запах детских носочков («Пора мыть мальчика...») и закрыл глаза.

—Первый снег, значит,—пробормотал он, засыпая.—Вон чего...<sup>37</sup>

37 Buida, 2003, pp. 175–76. “His wife sobbed and mumbled in her sleep and Alesha felt a pain in his heart out of love and pity for her, for Mishutka, for the fool Ovsen'ka, for himself, finally, for the world, which no longer expected the Saviour to come... [...] The old man adjusted the blanket and looked at Mishutka. The boy was smiling. Ovsen'ka knew that Mishutka only ever smiled when he was sleeping and he did not tell anyone about it: it was his secret. He lay down, breathed the smell of children's socks (“Time to wash the lad”) and closed his eyes. ‘So, the first snow’, he mumbled as he was falling asleep. ‘Well, there you go...”

Gelasimov's Zhanna experiences her first joy of motherhood when her child learns to walk:

А потом он пополз к кровати, уцепился за спинку и встал. Постоял немного, разжал ручки, покачнулся и вдруг сделал один шаг ко мне. Я замерла, чтобы не напугать его и протянула к нему руки. И тогда он шагнул еще. А я не могла даже с места сдвинуться и только смотрела на него. Он опять покачнулся и сделал еще один шаг.

И тогда я сказала—иди ко мне. Иди к маме.<sup>38</sup>

Petrushevskaiia's Anna Andrianovna, facing a lonely old age and death, has lost her opportunity for intimacy and responsibility. Nevertheless, she finally reveals herself as unconditionally human and injured:

Я решительно поднялась к себе и вошла в комнату своей дочери, и там при свете включенной лампочки никого не оказалось. На полу лежала сплюснутая пыльная соска. Она их увела, полное разорение. Ни Тимы, ни детей. Куда? Куда-то нашла. Это ее дело. Важно, что живы. Живые ушли от меня. Алена, Тима, Катя, крошечный Николай тоже ушел. Алена, Тима, Катя, Николай, Андрей, Серафима, Анна, простите слезы.<sup>39</sup>

The question now arises as to how this sentimentalism can possibly embrace the "raw realism" of the same texts. How can they be "sentimental" when their bent towards showing life as it really is in a most concrete

38 Gelasimov, 2003, p. 343. "And then he crawled to the bed, seized its side and stood up. He stood there for a while, loosening and fastening his grip, he swayed, and then suddenly he took one step in my direction. I froze, I was afraid to frighten him, and stretched my arms towards him. And then he took another step. And I couldn't move an inch and just looked at him. He swayed again and took another step. And then I said, come to me. Come to Mummy."

39 Petrushevskaiia, 1992, p. 110. The last sentence is unfinished, i.e. it has no punctuation mark. "And then I walked decisively back up the stairs, opened the door and went straight into my daughter's room. The light was still on. There was nobody there. A dusty baby's dummy lay crushed on the floor. So she'd taken them all away. A total raid. All three, Tima too. Where had they gone? What did it matter. She'd found somewhere. What mattered was that they were alive. They were alive when they left me. Alyona, Tima, Katya, tiny Nikolai, all gone. Alyona, Tima, Katya, Nikolai, Andrei, Serafima, Anna, forgive my tears" Petrushevskaya, 1994, pp. 154–55 (translation slightly amended).

manner, as well as their tendency towards plotlessness and eventlessness, mark them indisputably as “naturalistic?”<sup>40</sup> According to Mark Lipovetsky the combination of concreteness—or, to use his term, corporeality—and sentimentalism is, in fact, the very mark of the *neo-sentimentalist* trend that he regards as one of the three dominant tendencies in Russian literature of the 1990s, alongside realism and postmodernism. Of this neo-sentimentalism he writes:

Corporeality has become foregrounded as a result of global disappointment in reason and the fruit of reason—utopias, grand ideas, ideologies. Rationality is interpreted as the source of fictions and simulacra, the body as unassailable authenticity, and the feelings surrounding the life of the body as uniquely devoid of simulation. Among these feelings, pity occupies the place of honor as a synonym for humaneness. [...] Corporeality traditionally belonged to unsentimental naturalism, and sentimentalism was incorporeal. These formerly contrasting categories have become inextricably bound.<sup>41</sup>

If the corporeality and feelings of the characters are naturalistically foregrounded in the unpretentious subcategory of neo-sentimentalism that I have discussed here, how can we possibly grasp or even approach the authorial position? Roughly speaking, do the authors of these texts sympathize with their protagonists and their lives without prospect, or do they rather aim to expose them and their unheroic attitudes? There is, of course, no certain answer to these questions, as it ultimately depends on the reader’s attitude to this kind of misery and to the experience of being confronted with it. The fundamental seriousness of this literature, however, is beyond doubt: the lives, outlooks and voices of the “little”

40 Cf. the description of classical naturalism and late Soviet neo-naturalism in Kustanovich, 1992. Petrushevskaja is one of Kustanovich’s main examples.

41 Mark Lipovetsky, 2000, “Literature on the Margins: Russian Fiction in the Nineties,” *Russian Culture of the 1990s* (Studies in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature 24 (1)), ed. H. Goscilo, pp. 139–168; p. 158. Significantly, Lipovetsky (2000, p. 157) declares that “this type of writing undoubtedly is represented in purest form by Liudmila Petrushevskaja.” Moreover, other critics have seen Gelasimov as the founder of a “new sentimentalism,” cf. V.V. Ogryzko, 2004, *Russkie pisateli: Sovremennaja epokha. Leksikon. Eskiz budushchei entsiklopedii*, Moscow, p. 126. Finally, Epstein (1999, p. 448) writes that “the myth of Erofeev reveals a new kind of sentimentality, or sentimentality at a new stage of development.”

protagonists are clearly not meant to be taken lightly. This “new seriousness” may be welcomed, on the one hand, as an alternative to postmodern playfulness.<sup>42</sup> On the other, it points towards a possible self-important intention on the part of the authors. Thus, a second conclusion that may be inferred from these texts is that their authors aim to establish a point zero of language, literary devices and ideological ambitions; a point from where a new Russian literature may now begin.<sup>43</sup> So while the linguistic and literary experimentation in this kind of text is characterized by simplicity, concreteness and silence, its response to the present situation of Russian language and literature is in fact, when taken to its logical conclusion, quite pretentious.

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42 Cf. Remizova, as cited in note 35. In the same vein, the “new text” (новый текст) of mass literature has been regarded as a response to the experiments of postmodernist literature: Galina Denisova, 2004, “*Novyi tekst v sovremennoi russkoi proze: ritorika, ideologiya, strategiya uspekha*,” *Poetika iskanii, ili Poisk poetiki: Materialy konferentsii-festivalia ‘Poeticheskii iazyk rubezha XX–XXI vekov i sovremennye literaturnye strategii’* (Istitut russkogo iazyka im. V.V. Vinogradova RAN. Moskva, 16–19 maia 2003 g.), ed. N.A. Fateeva, Moscow, pp. 254–65. This “new text,” however, lacks the aesthetic consistency and ambition of the unpretentious text.

43 Cf. Epstein (1995, p. 90) on the literature of the *arrière-garde*: “In the eschatological perspective, it is more honorable—and aesthetically more productive—not to be the first, but rather the last, not to proclaim, but to stutter, not to lead, but to trail along. The one who is to be last will take the place of Truth, the place of the End.” Cf. also N.L. Leiderman & M.N. Lipovetskii, 2001, *Sovremennaia russkaia literatura*, vol. 3: *V kontse veka (1986–1990-e gody)*, Moscow, p. 84: [С]ентиментальный натурализм оплакивает человеческие судьбы, погребенные умирающей эпохой, он—эпилог этой эпохи и одновременно очистительный обряд, освобождающий живое от обязанностей перед мертвым. Переходный, неустойчивый характер этой тенденции, связан с тем, что заново открывая «маленького человека», эта литература окружает его состраданием и жалостью, но сам герой сентиментального натурализма еще не готов к самосознанию, он целиком замкнут в эмоционально-физиологической сфере. “[S]entimental naturalism deploras human destinies, buried by a dying era; it is the epilogue of this era and at the same time a purifying ceremony that frees the living from any obligations towards the dead. The transitory, unstable character of this tendency has to do with the fact that in rediscovering “the little man,” this literature surrounds him with empathy and pity, but the hero of sentimental naturalism himself is not ready for self-consciousness, he is fully absorbed in the emotional, physiological sphere.”