Iurii Buida: A Writer's Search for Authenticity

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> «[…] Ты однажды сказал, что писатель живет в безвоздушном пространстве, добывая воздух для дыхания при помощи магии… Иллюзорная жизнь в иллюзорном мире?» «Через искусство возникает то, форма чего находится в душе,—с улыбкой цитировал он Аристотеля.—Остается понять, какое отношение к содержанию имеет сам писатель… или что Аристотель подразумевал под формой… Впрочем, это забота критиков».
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> Iurii Buida, *Ermo* (dialogue between George and Liz)[1]

Among the vast number of new periodicals and newspapers that emerged following the official abolition of censorship in the Soviet Union in 1990, we find the bimonthly literary journal *Solo*.[2] Concerned with the publication of new, experimental literature, *Solo* immediately started printing works by former representatives of the underground and by the younger generation, but also by such contributors as the philologist and former Kaliningrad journalist Iurii Buida (b. 1954) who, until his debut in *Solo* in 1991, had been writing for the drawer while pursuing a career within the establishment.

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1 Iu.V. Buida, 2000, *Skoree oblako, chem ptitsa*: *Roman i rasskazy*, Moscow, p. 55: "'[…] You once said that a writer lives in a vacuum, obtaining air to breathe by means of magic… An illusory life in an illusory world'?—'From art derives that, whose form is contained in the soul', he quoted Aristotle with a smile. 'It remains to comprehend what relationship the author himself has to the content… or what Aristotle meant by form… However, that is a job for the critics'." All translations are my own.

2 On *Solo*'s role as an outlet for postmodern literature and in generating discussion about the merits of postmodernism, see N. Norman Shneidman, 1995, *Russian Literature, 1988–1994: The End of an Era*, Toronto, pp. 175–76, 196–202.

Since then, Buida has published widely in a series of major literary journals in Russia,[3] was short-listed for the Russian Booker Prize for his novel *Don Domino* (1993, *The Zero Train*) in 1994 as well as for his collection of short stories *Prusskaia nevesta* (1998, *The Prussian Bride*) in 1998, and won the prestigious Apollon Grigorev Award for Russian fiction in 1999.

The response to Buida's prose has been far from uniform. Some critics draw attention to his alleged doubts about history, religion and the very "realness of reality,"[4] as well as to the experimental narration and intertextual structure of his texts.[5] Others accentuate the more traditional linguistic and thematic features of his writing,[6] its autobiographical content[7] and the social emphasis of his settings and plots.[8] Naum Leiderman and Mark Lipovetsky allocate Buida's work to both the main categories usually employed to classify contemporary Russian prose: After initially characterizing his fictional biography *Ermo* (1996, *Ermo*) and historical novel *Boris i Gleb* (1997, *Boris and Gleb*) as postmodern interpretations of history, questioning historical consciousness and historical truth as such, they attribute *Ermo* and *Prusskaia nevesta* to the post-realist trend of trying to make sense of a chaotic or absurd existence.[9]

In this article, I will argue that in spite of the varying interpretations and classifications, Buida's work may be characterized in fact as one coherent project. After initially discussing the author's diversity and providing possible explanations for the contrasting receptions by the critics, I will proceed to a brief analysis of four of his short stories before attempting in conclusion a general description of his project, where I shall pay particular attention to the problem of irony and authenticity.

3 *Znamia, Oktiabr', Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, Volga, Stolitsa, Novyi mir, Druzhba narodov* and others.

4 See for instance K.A. Koksheneva, as quoted in V.V. Ogryzko, 2004, *Russkie pisateli: Sovremennaia epokha. Leksikon. Eskiz budushchei entsiklopedii,* Moscow, p. 80: "Having created the utterly philological and hardly readable (малочитабельный) novel *Ermo*, Buida speaks directly about 'the falsity of history' and 'the falsity of reality.'"

5 See Harry Walsh, 1998, "Intertextuality at Work: Prince Andrei Kurbskii in Contemporary Russian literature," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 40 (3–4), pp. 251–72.

6 See V.Ia. Kurbatov, *Literaturnaia Rossiia*, 24.09.1999.

7 A.L. Ageev, *Russkii zhurnal*, 16.10.2001.

8 For instance A.A. Mikhailov-mladshii commenting on *The Zero Train* as quoted in Ogryzko, 2004, p. 80.

9 N.L. Leiderman & M.N. Lipovetskii, 2001, *Sovremennaia russkaia literatura*: *Novyi uchebnik po literature v 3-kh knigakh,* vol. 3: *V kontse veka* (*1986–1990-e gody*), Moscow, pp. 45–46; 100.

Buida's heterogeneity

The divergent opinions of scholars and reviewers may be due, of course, to the fact that Buida's texts differ from one another a great deal, demonstrating, both individually and as parts of cycles and collections, a variety of styles. The coexistence of reality and fantasy, of everyday life, myth and dream, leaves the reader with a notion of having travelled through several literary currents and canons, including the historical chronicle, *skaz*, realism, sentimental romanticism and fantasy within the span of a handful short stories, in some cases even within a single text.

While he works for the most part within the framework of an eloquent, traditional Russian language, the author is by no means a linguistic purist. He allows local slang, jargon, and profanities in his work, especially in direct speech. His sentence structure is generally tight, but is sometimes replaced by ornamental descriptions in the form of lengthy, intricate sentences. The epigraph to the short story "Sestra moia smert' (2000, "My Sister Life")," for instance, consists of one single sentence of forty-eight words,[10] whereas the very first sentence of *Ermo,* which describes a Venetian carnival, comprises 231 words.[11] The number of recent loanwords, spelt in Latin or Cyrillic letters, is high, and the author frequently provides his characters with foreign or foreign-sounding forenames (Riccardo, Eloïse, Lavinella) or nicknames (Don Domino, Sister, Pizza) or a combination of a traditional Russian first name and a surname of foreign origin (Ivan Ardabev, Misha Landau, Lena Zass). He also makes use of compound words, where one part is in Russian and the other in a foreign language (улочки-calli, площади-campi). Exotic settings, numerous intertextual references and abundant allusions to myths, tales, and historical and cultural phenomena are all characteristic of Buida's writing.

Even if his stories may be studded with shock effects, brutality and death, Buida's texts do not at any point appear linguistically extreme. The author hardly ever indulges in vulgar details or obscene descriptions in the style of Viktor Erofeev or Vladimir Sorokin. Nevertheless, his comparatively traditional language involves an ambiguity so far-reaching that some critics and reviewers read him ironically, others—straightforwardly. Andrei Uritskii, for instance, finds the miniature prose pieces

10 Buida, 2000, p. 329.

11 Buida, 2000, pp. 7–8.

in *Zheltyi Dom* (2001, *The Yellow House*)[12] "openly parodic,"[13] whereas Mariia Dmitrovskaia chooses to treat opinions expressed by the main character in the same book, Iu Ve, as trustworthy statements articulated through a double or alter ego, who bears the author's own initials.[14]

These contradictory interpretations, which imply that Buida's project could be anything from a mere play[15] to a heartfelt quest for authenticity—an attempt to achieve an individual, credible authorial voice that can express sincere views and ideas—may be due to a number of factors. Firstly, they may be rooted in the sentimental voice prevailing in his writing, perceived by some as genuinely sad, by others as overemotional or even comical. Whereas Aleksandr Ageev, for example, identifies the pathos of *Prusskaia nevesta* as a Глубокая метафизическая тоска (если не ужас),[16] Vincent Farnsworth claims: "what sets Buida's work apart is his use, not just of black humour, but of plainly uproarious comedy."[17] Secondly, his ample use of secondary literary and cultural sources as well as the experimental structure of his texts could be interpreted either as a proclivity for postmodern devices, or as a playful caricature of postmodern practice and theory. Considering, for instance, the ambiguous relationship between author, narrator and characters in *Ermo*,[18] Norman Shneidman's view that this novel "written in elegant Russian and placed within a realistic facade, is no more than a sophisticated play of words, events, and ideas"[19] is not difficult to understand.

Among the works of the "world-famous," fictional writer Georgii or George[20] Ermo-Nikolaev, who is often considered to be one of Buida's

12 Iu.V. Buida, 2001, *Zheltii Dom*: *Shchina*, Moscow. The title could also be translated as "The Mad House."

13 A.N. Uritskii, "Proza Iuriia Buidy v zhurnale *Znamia*," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 18.06.2000.

14 M.A. Dmitrovskaia, 2004, "Bezbratie: 50 let odinochestva Iu. Buidy," *Baltiiskii filologicheskii kur'er* 4, pp. 138–44; pp. 138–39.

15 See for example the distinction made between игровое и серьезное (the playful and the serious) in M.N. Epstein, 2005, *Postmodern v russkoi literature*, Moscow, pp. 233–269.

16 A.L. Ageev, 1999, URL: *http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/1999/7/ageev.html* (accessed 16.12.2005). "A deep, metaphysical longing, (if not horror)."

17 Vincent Farnsworth, "Wholesale (S)laughter," *Central Europe Review*, 04.06.2003.

18 First published in *Znamia*, 1996, 8.

19 N. Norman Shneidman, 2002, "Contemporary Prose in Post-Soviet Russia," *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 11, URL: *http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/08/shneidmano8.shtml* (accessed 27.11.2005).

20 As he grows up in the USA, he is usually referred to as George (Джордж).

alter egos,[21] we find the novel *Als Ob*, whose male protagonist is referred to as "Ermo-Nikolaev's obvious alter ego."[22] The main character of *Als Ob* is also a writer who has created doubles of his own. The author's play with the implied author of the text and his writing, the narrator's experiments with the protagonist and his texts, the secondary protagonist's experimentation with a set of heroes and texts on a third level and so on, generates a series of matreshka texts.[23]

The reader is also introduced to several parallel variants of the story about Ermo-Nikolaev, provided by his own diary and letters, by interviews with him as well as by articles, reviews and biographies devoted to him and his writing. The interpretations of episodes in his life and work often contradict one another, as well as the opinion of the chief biographer, the self-conscious implied author of the present biographical account (*Ermo*). The author alternately draws his novel—almost essayistic in its form—closer to "real life" and then withdraws it again, by, on the one hand, allowing his cast of characters to meet real historical people (such as Briusov, Bunin, Nabokov and Ingmar Bergman), and, on the other hand, by entering the characters' minds and reproducing intimate dialogues between them. The devices described above, in combination with a high degree of authorial self-reflection, as well as reservations, evident in such sentences as: Вот, пожалуй, и все, если, конечно, Ермо-Николаев был искренен в беседах с биографами и журналистами,[24] undoubtedly produce a high degree of uncertainty concerning the author's intentions, thereby contributing to the impression of postmodern play. Such interpretations would however contradict the readings of *Ermo* by scholars such as Mariia Dmitrovskaia,[25] Vladimir Bondarenko, who asserts that: Буйда не пост-модернист, не играет в игры с героями, он им верит, он им верен,[26] and Tat'iana Rybal'chenko, who emphasizes

21 Dmitrovskaia, 2004, pp. 139–40, for instance, refers to George Ermo-Nikolaev as Buida's "alter ego," "ego" and "twin brother."

22 Buida, 2000, p. 40.

23 Тексты-матрешки, a term employed by Sergei Davydov, 1982, *"Teksty-matreshki" Vladimira Nabokova*, Munich (rev. ed., 2004, St Petersburg) is now widely used within Russian literary criticism.

24 Buida, 2000, p. 15. "This is probably all, if, of course, Ermo-Nikolaev was sincere in his conversations with biographers and journalists."

25 As for instance in Dmitrovskaia, 2004.

26 V.G. Bondarenko, 2004, "Novaia pravoslavnaia proza," URL: *http://www.zavtra.ru/cgi/veil/data/zavtra/04/530/61.html* (accessed 13.10.2005). "Buida is not a postmodernist,

that: В романе «Ермо» возникает сложная система текстов, именно система, а не постмодернистский коллаж.[27]

An idea frequently ascribed to postmodernism is the suggestion that behind the multiplicity of roles played out in real life and described in literature there is no true self, making the ultimate postmodern game a game of imitating or actually being that very emptiness itself, for example by means of parody, irony or futile narrative play with a hollow set of characters. Despite his undeniable postmodern traits, I will argue that Buida's writing is far from being solely a postmodern play, merely revealing or imitating emptiness and lack of meaning, but may be regarded on the contrary as a quest for meaning through the establishment of connections and relationships, apparently aiming to reveal the continuity of human existence. This is reflected, above all, in the constant remixing of recurring types and plots, but also in the open structure of his texts, where expectations raised by loose ends that anticipate continuation are fulfilled by means of parallelisms, leitmotifs and variations on overarching themes. Despite the fact that most of his short stories were first published individually in journals, his collections *Prusskaia nevesta* and *Skoree oblako, chem ptitsa* (2000, *Sooner a Cloud than a Bird*) are surprisingly coherent. The first appears so unified that it is often considered to be "a novel of novellas or short stories," and even after it was published, Buida continued to write stories that may be considered to be an extension of the original collection.

Both in *Prusskaia nevesta* and in *Skoree oblako, chem ptitsa* pairs or groups of stories, possibly, but not necessarily, contiguous to one another, constitute titleless chapters or cycles, which share a specific setting, character typology, discourse or mood. In spite of the narrative alteration between the first and the third person, and of multiple points of view (for example an omniscient and self-conscious voice versus a low-register voice that almost merges into the characters), the reader is still left, as I will try to demonstrate in my analyses below, with the sense of a highly

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does not get involved in a play with his characters, he believes in them and is true to them."

27 T.L. Rybal'chenko, 2004, "Roman Iu. Buidy *Ermo*: metatekstovaia struktura kak forma samorefleksiia avtora," *Russkaia literature v xx veke: Imena, problemy, kulturnyi dialog*, vol. 6: *Formy samorefleksii literatury xx veka: Metateksty i metatekstovye struktury*, ed. T.L. Rybal'chenko, Tomsk, pp. 201–35; p. 206. "In the novel *Ermo* an intricate system of texts emerges, precisely a system and not a postmodern collage."

idiosyncratic narrative that always points in the same direction. Varying or breaking up the narrative into numerous constituents, does not imply with Buida, as I will argue, a devaluation or de-centring of the subject, but rather a duplication and centring of it, thereby increasing its force. Both his style of narration and his character typology seem to imply that numerous parallel alter egos are given the opportunity to speak on behalf of one another, and, even more importantly, of the real author, thus making both *Ermo* and *Zheltyi dom* fictional biographies that reflect Buida's own project to an even larger extent than they mirror the life and work of the fictional writer George Ermo-Nikolaev or the "literary citizen" Iu Ve.[28]

The Moscow Cycle

The four short stories "Legkaia Nastia" (2000, "Light Nastia"), "Kazanskii vokzal" (1996, "Kazan' Railway Station"), "Sestra moia smert'" ("My Sister Death") and "Noch'" (1998, "Night") are all set in Moscow in the 1990s. Although initially published separately in literary journals, they form a "Moscow cycle"[29] within the collection of nineteen short stories entitled *Skoree oblako, chem ptitsa,* which, collected in one volume with *Ermo,* comprises a book with the same title. In three out of four of these stories the miserable environment of prostitutes, criminals and simple souls living in the contemporary capital is described in realistic detail, although occasionally the boundaries of a purely realistic setting appear to be exceeded. Poverty, misfortune and violent crime are portrayed straightforwardly by a third person narrative and intensified through an extensive use of direct colloquial speech containing vulgarities and slang. The fourth story, "Noch'," is a philosophical monologue amplifying motifs and themes introduced in the remaining three texts. Before turning to my analysis proper, let me give a brief summary of the first three stories.

The main character of "Legkaia Nastia" is a meek, young mother with a miserable past.[30] When her violent husband, Kostia, disappears after a late business meeting in a parking lot, Nastia runs to a fortune-teller,

28 Литературный житель. Buida's own term. Buida, 2001, p. 19.

29 My definition. Another group of stories make up a similar "Venetian cycle."

30 Nastia grew up with an alcoholic mother, a sister who died from diptheria, and an invalid brother, on whose pension the family would barely survive. Her mother did not only neglect her children, but had a terrible temper and would regularly threaten to set herself and them on fire. But since her husband loathes their baby daughter, Nastia regularly takes her to her mother's, thereby continuing the circle of evil.

who advices her to turn to the police and refrains from charging her a fee, considering it Грех на дурах наживаться.[31] A year after her husband's disappearance, Nastia still shivers at the sound of their hallway lift, still has not dared open the secret compartment of his secretaire, let alone sell his car or garage, though repeatedly advised to do so by her boss, who also regards her as a very simple being. After she eventually receives the "officially missing certificate," Nastia learns that the secret compartment is full of dollars. She exchanges a couple of notes, but terrified at the thought that somebody might be following her, she sets off to her mother's. On her way home, somebody calls to her from a nearby car, and she ends up being driven outside the city and raped by four men. Back in the flat, she puts a thin thread around her neck,[32] but somebody knocking on the door interrupts her. Outside she finds a tall, handsome man, who turns out to be Kostia, and soon after finds herself dancing with him in an elegant ballroom, surrounded by cameras, before they are taken home in a limousine.[33] But suddenly the sound of her own voice brings her back to the real world. Exhausted, and still holding on to the white thread around her neck, she falls asleep with a happy smile on her lips.

"Kazanskii vokzal" is devoted to one day in the lives of the elderly, invalid man Ovsen'ka and his great-grandson, the nine-year-old deaf-mute epileptic Mishutka, who live outside Moscow with Mishutka's mother, Ovsen'ka's granddaughter. She is an alcoholic, who constantly puts down her grandfather but who, since she became tired of keeping Mishutka on a leash, has allowed him to take her son along on his almost daily journeys to Moscow. The pair spend their days making trips on the Moscow metro system, calling on their friends and acquaintances in and around the Kazan' Railway Station—Pizza, who offers them a warm trailer and something to eat and drink, and the prostitutes Cindy and Barbie, who contribute to Ovsen'ka's modest birthday celebration with a few dollars and their company, and comfort the old man and his great-grandson when they are harassed or beaten up by individuals or gangs.

31 Buida, 2000, p. 350. "A sin to profit from fools."

32 Recalling a neighbour's comment about her being so thin that she can hang herself in a thin thread.

33 The magical story following Kostia's return can hardly be regarded, in my opinion, as a fantastic element in an otherwise realistic story, but should be interpreted psychologically, as a defence mechanism triggered by the rape—a hallucination, displacement or simply a daydream.

Another person, who cares for the old man and the little boy, is the policeman Alesha, who is married to Zhenia, a woman with a dubious past, who cannot or will not give him any children. Having eventually plucked up courage to ask her if they should adopt Mishutka, he is turned down with the mocking comment: Припадочного? Глухонемого? Не люблю цепных детей.[34] In the following sequence, Alesha enters his kitchen in the middle of the night and is left by the window contemplating God's existence. Ovsen'ka, looking out *his* window, notices that the first snow has started to fall. Tucking his grandson into bed, he sees a smile on Mishutka's face. The boy smiles only in his sleep.

Urla, the heroine of "Sestra moia smert'" and her friend Vasia meet the skinhead Sister and his gang by chance and join them in a vicious motorcycle raid on a gypsy camp. Having slept with both the girls, Sister chooses Urla, whom he then "lends out" from time to time to his friend Chichik, a former soldier of the Chechen wars. Upon telling her mother that she is pregnant, Urla is thrown out and moves into Sister's cold, dug-out shed (землянка). On Christmas Eve, in search of something to eat and drink, Sister, Urla and Chichik set off on a motorbike to visit their acquaintance, the priest Father Georgii. An ironic comment made by Sister to the guard as they enter the church, indicating that they are terrorists, results in the guard calling the police. The wood-spirit drinking crowd inside[35] become involved in a fierce argument about the Christmas Gospel, as well as about religion and ideology as such, which reaches a point where Sister challenges Father Georgii to cut off his hand, but ends up cutting off his own index finger. Urla has already gone into labour by the time the church is surrounded by the OMON special police forces, and during their raid, Father Georgii and Sister are both killed. Urla dies in the ambulance, on her way to the hospital, and Chichik is left standing on his knees in the snow, praying to God that she must wake up and give birth.

34 Buida, 2000, p. 406. "One who has fits? A deaf-mute? I don't like children kept on a leash."

35 The three male characters of this story, Sister, Chichik and Father Georgii, share an addiction to alcohol.

Discourse and mood

Despite the fact that the plots are connected to neglect and brutality in family life and the horrors of violent crime in the "New Russia," the predominant mood of these three short stories is not entirely sad and distressing. There are blissful moments in each of them; there is empathy, optimism and a sense of humour. The diction is informal, involving vulgarisms, slang as well as grammatical and orthographical errors.[36]

The author knows that a human being's worldview and also the possibility of self-interpretation, are drawn not only from her or his personal abilities, but also from her or his social and linguistic context. The main characters of "The Moscow Cycle" are provided with brief biographies that reveal their miserable childhoods and lack of "normal" socialization, but their personalities and perspectives are most accurately captured and reflected in their direct speech and reported thought. Conversational exchange prevails throughout "Kazanskii vokzal" and "Sestra moia smert'," whereas direct speech play a significant role in "Legkaia Nastia." This is supplemented by the commentary from a subdued narrator, who "steps down" and merges into the characters to an extent that makes him echo their language, ignorance and prejudices, and express views which are typical of a certain person or group, but which may contradict the plot, the reader's expectations and "common sense." Thus, when the narrator, commenting on Urla's life before she gets pregnant twice asserts that before this жизнь была ничего[37] (after which follows the description of her gloomy past), he takes over the low demands she makes on life. A similar effect is obtained through the replacement of the anticipated connective conjunction и ("and") by the adversative conjunction но ("but") in the sentence: Лариска была красивая. «Но умная»,[38] which is Granny Vendeeva's[39] response to the death of the prostitute Lariska in "Sestra moia smert'." In "Legkaia Nastia" a parallel sentence occurs: Денег оказалось много, но все долларами,[40] but this time it comes from the narrator, commenting on Nastia's reaction when she discovers Kostia's

36 в метре, щас, баксы, деньрожденье and so forth, Buida, 2000, pp. 395–97.

37 Buida, 2000, p. 331. "life was okay."

38 Buida, 2000, p. 331. "Lariska was beautiful. 'But intelligent.'"

39 […] которою минеральную воду называла «генеральной», а целлофан—«фалафаном». "[…] who called mineral water 'general water' and cellophane 'falafan'," Buida, 2000, p. 331.

40 Buida, 2000, p. 352. "It turned out to be a lot of money, but everything was in dollars."

money. When the characters in "Sestra moia smert'" use the verb жрать ("to gobble, guzzle") instead of the neutral есть ("to eat"), the narrator does so too. His language, which is far more standardized than theirs, nevertheless echoes their simple speech and simple-mindedness. This becomes particularly noticeable when compared with the philosophical monologue "Noch'," whose language and content is far more complex than in the other three stories.

Buida is obviously concerned with language use as a psychological and sociological phenomenon reflecting identity and social relations. The main characters of "The Moscow Cycle" have nicknames, which reveal the attitude towards them of their surroundings,[41] while the ways in which they address and talk to each other convey significant information about their relationships. Partly due to the fact that Ovsen'ka and Mishutka, as opposed to the lonely dreamer Nastia, have friends and acquaintances with whom they genuinely interrelate and converse (including Alesha, even though he belongs to another social group), the degree of actual communication is high. This is not the case in "Sestra moia smert'," where Sister is so full of himself and Chichik so traumatized (although he *sees* Urla and helps her out) that they fail to enter into productive dialogue with anyone. Father Georgii is perhaps the most interesting character in the "Moscow Cycle" from the point of view of discursive attitudes. Sister's lack of respect for Father Georgii is revealed at the very beginning of the story. When Urla proposes to visit the priest, his answer is a vulgar play on words—К попу […] Да, хоть к жопу.[42] Sister, who addresses and refers to Father Georgii as Жора and Жорка (Zhora, Zhorka), talks to him in a rude and challenging way: Так, кто из нас больше верит. Ты, трусяра, или я, сам себе хозяин? But, interestingly enough, Father Georgii replies in a similar way through utterances like: Но, чего дуришь. Иисус Христос родился, ублюдки. Ты спервa со своим концом разберись, сифилитик etc.[43] The priest's use of language becomes even more striking when he tells and retells the Christmas

41 Urla, for example acquires her nickname "Urla" after having been taken to Poland by a Polish construction worker during his *urlop* (vacation). We are also told that criminals use the term *urla* for stolen goods.

42 Buida, 2000, p. 330. "To the priest. […] Yes, to the priest or up your arse."

43 Buida, 2000, pp. 338, 343. "So which one of us believes the most. You, [who are a] coward, or I, [who am] my own master?" "Don't fool around." "Jesus Christ is born, you little bitches." "Take care of your own arse first, you syphilitic."

Gospel in a language and with a content that is obviously adapted to his listeners,[44] thus trying to convert Sister and Chichik, but achieving the exact opposite. Chichik concludes that the "story" is a fairy-tale, whereas Sister refers to it as a comedy. Father Georgii's bizarre rendering only fortifies Sister's disrespect for his lack of independent thought and for his blind confidence in a manuscript that already contains numerous discrepancies and ambiguities.

Character types

Myths, fairy-tales and historical chronicles are known to be significant sources of inspiration for Buida,[45] and his characters have aptly been referred to as semi-mythic.[46] The cast of "The Moscow Cycle" is on the one hand realistically portrayed; on the other, the stories contain certain features and the characters follow certain courses of action, which conform to a pattern that is emblematic of Buida's writing. Knight-like male figures with the potential and wish to carry out significant deeds or simply do the right thing, end up failing in their duty, letting down those close to them, not being able to save them from serious threats from a third party. The victims of "The Moscow Cycle" (Nastia, Mishutka, Ovsen'ka and Urla) are poor (financially, socially and/or in spirit) or lonely, and all have single mothers (Ovsen'ka's dependent relative is his granddaughter), who are completely unfit to take care of them, mistreating or rejecting them, deliberately or unconsciously pushing them out into the cold, where they become easy prey for dragon-like tyrants (such as Kostia and Sister) and violent criminals (such as those who assault Nastia and Ovsen'ka). Potential saviours (such as the transformed Kostia, the policeman Alesha, Father Georgii and Chichik) all fail to save the victims.

Read in conjunction with "Kazanskii vokzal," "Noch'" presents itself on the one hand as a matreshka text, an elaboration of the concluding scene of "Kazanskii vokzal," where Alesha stands by the window; but

44 See Buida, 2000, pp. 339–42.

45 As is evident from the titles of his works, such as: *Boris i Gleb,* "Simeon Grek" ("Symeon the Greek"), and "Chudo o chudovishche" ("The Monster Miracle"). According to A.A. Mikhailov-mladshii, Buida himself considers historical chronicles to be a major source of inspiration, P.A. Nikolaev, ed. 2000, *Russkie pisateli 20 veka*: *Biograficheskii slovar'*, Moscow, p. 123.

46 Steve Penn, 2002, "The Prussian Bride" (book review), URL: *http://www.nthposition.com/theprussianbride.phb* (accessed 14.10.2005).

on the other hand, it mirrors the archetypical male character of Buida's work, to which Ivan Ardabev, Georgii Nikolaev-Ermo and the alter egos of his texts also belong.

The scheme presented above, which is reminiscent of the tale of St George and the dragon[47] (only with a reversed ending), directly alluded to in *Ermo*[48] and more vaguely suggested in "Sestra moia smert'" and "Kazanskii vokzal," appears to be a unifying motif linking the stories of "The Moscow Cycle" as well as connecting them to *Ermo*[49] and Buida's writing as such. By means of repeating and varying certain characteristics and actions, the author adds a mythic or archetypical quality to his characters, without making them less credible. With every variant of a character type or plot, he digs deeper into his examination of psychological and social patterns, highlighting eternal questions, traditional values and circles of evil, as well as contemporary personal and social dilemmas and problems. But, if we are to assume that Buida's ultimate aim is an authentic portrayal of human actions, of human existence, where does irony come in and what function does it have?

Irony and authenticity

The presence of irony in Buida's texts is indisputable, and it finds abundant expression. Aleksandr Ageev asserts that even a term such as "bitter irony" becomes mild when it comes to characterizing the mood of *Prusskaia nevesta*. What he refers to as a deep metaphysical longing (if not horror)[50] prevails also in "The Moscow Cycle" of *Skoree oblako, chem ptitsa*, but the slightly ironical, yet highly affectionate relationship between author/narrator and the suffering parties in the stories, softens the grief and misery. Rather than ridiculing the characters' strange opinions

47 Which is also the motif of the Moscow city coat of arms of 1791, which was abandoned in the Soviet era, but reinstated by a Presidential Decree on 30 November 1993.

48 Buida, 2000, p. 8, 17.

49 As commented upon, among others by Rybal'chenko, 2004, p. 211, Ermo-Nikolaev is not only connected to St George through his name, but also by means of the novel's rescue plot (сюжет спасения). Ermo-Nikolaev is unable to prevent his first wife, Sofiia, from getting killed in a car accident, and to save his second wife, Liz, from growing mentally ill and die, and his colleague, Laura, from committing suicide. A similar pattern occurs also in *Don Domino*, where Ivan Ardabev tries to rescue his beloved Fira by killing the local NKVD operative, but fails to save her from the cruel revenge—a mass rape that leaves her devastated.

50 Cf. above, note 16.

and judgments, the author/narrator constantly focuses on their ability to look on the bright side of life in spite of the poor odds.[51] He, in other words, joins the ranks of their defenders.

Nastia, Ovsen'ka, Mishutka and Urla all possess an optimism and ability to forget,[52] accept and forgive that make them akin to Dostoevsky's holy fool-like Prince Myshkin. After what would seem to most people like a horrible day, Nastia and Mishutka fall asleep with smiles on their faces. But a constant accumulation of negative response from their ego-centric, abusive dependents, partners and surroundings produces a self-esteem so low that they become passive and completely misplaced in the cynical, hostile capital as described in "The Moscow Cycle." Mishutka and Ovsen'ka have to cope with daily prejudice and scorn from individuals and gangs who, simply by virtue of belonging to more privileged social groups, believe it to be their right to bully and bash up an old beggar and his handicapped grandson. Nastia is faced with a selfish and brutal husband, involved in shady business deals, and, after his death, with a group of rapists. Urla meanwhile puts up with a former engine-driver from the Moscow metro, who has grown fed up with "brakes," has become a skinhead and developed a pseudo-philosophical system combining fascist and racist maxims with the personal conviction that one should live without brakes, and that women are the equivalent of brakes.

Buida is obviously ridiculing characters, who by virtue of their sex, status[53] and pseudo-knowledge[54] believe they have the right to repress and abuse others. But his ironic attitude towards characters who claim to be thinkers, is also applied to real intellectuals, including the unsuccessful saviours. The unfortunate knights Chichik and Alesha, though failing to fulfil their tasks, still emerge as positive, active, coherent characters,

51 As when Nastia reasons about the rape: Изнасиловали. […] Но ведь не убили. Даже не ударили. […] Шофер шепнул: «А ты девка красивая». Костя никогда так не говорил. "They raped me. […] But didn't kill me. Didn't even beat me. […] The driver whispered: 'You're a pretty lass'. Kostia never said that."

52 Buida, 2000, p. 353. Nastia is known to eject negative experiences from her memory: Зла она не помнила. "She did not remember evil."

53 Alesha's wife, most likely a former prostitute, has (like Nastia's husband, Kostia) moved up the social ladder and now mocks more unfortunate beings and ridicules her husband's interest in them.

54 Such as Ivan in "Kazanskii vokzal," who uses grand words like Русь ("Rus'") православный ("orthodox"/"true believer"), but admits that he has quit reading, and now just loves to talk about it. Buida, 2000, p. 403.

helping out in crucial matters, whereas Father Georgii, with his profound belief in the Bible, but lack of ability to live by it, the rich fascist and romantic de Sanseverino (in *Ermo*) and the chivalrous Ermo-Nikolaev, who travels all over the world to save the reputation of the former husband of his second wife, are often described and commented upon in humoristic or highly ironical terms, for instance when it is suggested that Ermo-Nikolaev had been to Spain during the Civil War, as he was in need of впечатлениях, в опыте более широком, чем он мог почерпнуть в воспоминаниях о детстве, сердечной неудаче и великолепной библиотеке Гарварда.[55]

Buida reveals a sceptical attitude towards introspection and erudition as the golden means of arriving at truths, and in the descriptions of such characters as Ermo-Nikolaev, the I-character of "Noch'" and a vast number of other alter egos, we sense a bitter self-irony, which almost makes Buida the anti-hero of his own work. But we also perceive an unwillingness to give in to the potential meaninglessness and lack of values lurking in this irony. In spite of such negative traits as an unfashionable romanticism and sentimentalism, these characters give the impression of idealistic, kind-hearted humanitarians. In contrast to Ivan Ardabev (of *Don Domino*), who refuses to accept that he has spent his life in the service of something that appears to be without significant purpose—Buida (who used to be an active member and deputy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and worked for the local Party press), enters into an ongoing dialogue with the past and the present in what seems to be an endless search for strategies to understand the past and (re)gain a future. His experimentation with a series of alter egos conveys, above all, an urge to unite the multiple consciousnesses expressed through all these doubles in pursuit of coherence and consistency.

In this quest for credibility, the author, instead of attempting to present his fiction as authentic in the sense of being "completely true to reality," explores the very concept of authenticity, for instance by making the discussion about religious belief and practice an imperative leitmotif of "The Moscow Cycle." Nastia's last action before escaping into her soap-like fantasy is to grasp a lipstick and draw a red cross on her cheek

55 Buida, 2000, p. 36. "a wider range of impressions and experience than he could draw from the memories of his childhood, a broken heart or Harvard's splendid library."

with the words: И зачем мать меня крестила? Все равно не помогает,[56] whereas the dialogue between the sceptical Alesha and the minor character Ivan, who believes in God,[57] plays a significant part in "Kazanskii vokzal." Alesha's views on religion are more thoroughly developed in the scene by the kitchen window, and further amplified in "Noch'," where the first-person hero-narrator, pondering upon his gloomy Sundays (воскресенья), reflects on the religious essence of the concepts воскресение ("Resurrection") and воскрешение ("the raising of somebody from the dead").[58] And finally, a religious-philosophical dispute features throughout "Sestra moia smert'," where Father Georgii by way of a personal, fanciful adaptation of the Christmas Gospel tries to convince his listeners of the truthfulness of the Bible.

Buida's irony is not so much directed here against religion as against the practice of bringing God's name and holy commandments into everyday language and affairs—against a vulgarization of religion, materialized through such characters as Father Georgii and Ivan[59] and opposed somewhat ambiguously by Alesha, who: так пока не понял, зачем ему этот самый Бог о котором с легкостью болтают все вокруг. The narrator's description of Alesha's attitude towards religion is then supplemented by the latter's reported thought: «Христос был преступник, нищий и еврей, то есть трижды гад […] Кто ж его такого готов принять?»[60]—a vulgarized description of Christ, which must be interpreted ironically, on the part of Alesha as well as on that of the narrator—yet an other example of the ambivalence prevailing in Buida's texts.

In his work, the author also discusses whether authentic life follows from being true to an ideology or conviction ("Sestra moia smert'," *Don*

56 Buida, 2000, p. 356. "Why did mother christen me? It doesn't help anyway."

57 In contrast to Ivan and Alesha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Buida, 2000, p. 403.

58 Buida, 2000, pp. 388–89.

59 Cf. above, note 53.

60 Buida, 2000, p. 406. "had still not understood of what use this God, whom everybody around him talked about so easily, was to him." He continues: Он подозревал, что настоящий Бог существует, но это такой Бог, который человек ни за что не пустит в свою жизнь с будильником, зарплатой и премией, с газетами и теплым туалетом, выпивкой и телевизором. "He suspected that a real God exists, but that would be a God, whom people would never let into their lives so easily, along with the alarm clock, wages and prizes, with newspapers and a heated toilet, with drinks and television." And he then concludes: "Christ was a criminal, a beggar and a Jew, that is a louse three times over. […] Who would ever welcome someone like him?"

Domino), whether it is to be found in a historical and cultural heritage (*Prusskaia nevesta, Boris i Gleb*), in compassion and tolerance ("Kazanskii vokzal," "Sestra moia smert'," "Noch'") in improved life conditions ("Legkaia Nastia," "Kazanskii vokzal") and last, but not least, whether it involves a process of intellectual self-reflection and introspection ("Noch'," *Ermo, Zheltyi dom*). In "The Moscow Cycle" he gives his text the impression of authenticity by also bringing to the fore contemporary social problems, such as poverty, alcoholism, sexism, child neglect, prostitution, xenophobia and violent crime, as well as contemporary linguistic variations, such as slang, jargon and foul language.

But Buida's literary production also presents itself as a self-shaping process, where the healing of the self seems more important than revealing ultimate truths. Hence his integration into his texts of contemporary social and linguistic realities, his use of the past and of reccurring types, plots and themes, as well as his method of exposing himself and his readers to terrifying phenomena, may be characterized as a kind of "authorial therapy." While Iu Ve's literary credo Подальше от жизни, поменьше правды[61] could well be interpreted in postmodern terms as a play for the sake of playing, here I have tried to argue that, on the contrary, such an attitude belongs to an author who writes in order to fulfil his striving for "the whole," in the sense of "continuity" and "entirety," as well as "integrity."[62]

61 Buida, 2001, p. 36. "The further away from life, the less truth."

62 See the elaboration of стремление к Целому ("striving for the Whole") in Buida, 1998, *Prusskaia nevesta*: *rasskazy*, Moscow, p. 9, and the discussion about the expression тоска по целостности ("longing for a whole") in Buida, 2000, p. 158.