

REVIEW PAPER

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**PUSHKIN’S MYTH IN THE NOVEL *THE SLYNX* BY
T. TOLSTAYA: THE TRICKSTER, BURATINO AND
“OUR BE ALL”⁶²**

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The article analyzes Pushkin’s myth as presented in T. Tolstaya’s *The Slynx* (2000), its structure, main components, character specifics, intertextual connections to Russian classics and the author’s own works. The novel enhances the literary tradition of the 20th century and establishes a new artistic paradigm that complements and reinterprets the entire Pushkin mythology. The essential foundations of the Pushkin myth in Tolstaya’s texts were the culture of the Silver Age and Russian traditionalism, which showed interest in the archaic. The author adeptly blends factual and non-factual elements of the poet’s biography, including lines from his texts and allusions, and Pushkin becomes the central reference point justifying the post-apocalyptic city-world. This is achieved by analogy with the Book of Genesis and resembles a primer filled with puppet figures and farce. Despite the various artistic depictions of the poet’s ironic and trickster-like qualities, the image still maintains a sense of mystery that harkens back to ancient times. In the novel, the image of the poet serves as the foundation of the world, representing a sacred point with multiple layers of meaning that ultimately shape the course of history and culture. In her work, T. Tolstaya excludes subjective evaluations and

⁶² “Пушкин – наше всё” (“Pushkin is Our Be All”) – the statement was coined by Apollon Grigoriev in 1859 and became a widely recognized phrase that established Pushkin’s significance in Russian culture and literature for centuries.

focuses on the archaic need for oral tradition. She conveys the voices of poets by rising above written symbolism, images, and texts.

Keywords: Pushkin myth, Trickster, *The Slynx* novel, deconstruction, parody, cult of the Word

INTRODUCTION

At the end of cultural eras and paradigms, it is customary to search for reference points and a cultural hero who can respond to the challenges of the time. The traditional veneration of Pushkin in postmodern literature has now given way to its ironic and decanonized version, while still retaining its relevance:

It is not an overstatement to assert that Pushkin is the protagonist of postmodernist poetry and a perpetual subject of deconstruction. Many elements of postmodernism are in tune with the personality and poetics of Pushkin and the poets within his circle. Therefore, postmodernism can be seen as a form of development and an extension of the limits set by Pushkin. (Shemetova 2009: 64)

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Modern literature still considers the genius a central figure, “Our Be All”, but it presents a distorted view of the poet’s iconography and focuses on elements that differ from those of the classical period. Pushkin’s ability to live artistically, his gift for mirthful creation, his capacity to listen to The Other, and his embrace of European tradition are the qualities that stand out. Moreover, the accounts manifesting Pushkin’s mythology frequently relate to one another by way of mutual allusions and recollections. The concept of Pushkin’s myth, proposed by T. Tolstaya, stands out amidst the backdrop of other ideas. Her portrayal of Pushkin is similar to the image crafted by M. Tsvetaeva in her essay *My Pushkin* (1937), which became an important cultural archetype, through which individuals interpret their own experiences: “*My Pushkin* is my authority, my system of values... *My Pushkin* is the gateway to my spiritual world, it is my faith,” V. Nepomnyashchii deciphers the idea (Nepomnyashchii 2009: 32).

T. Tolstaya examines the main storylines of Pushkin’s mythology: *the birth*, *the duel*, *the death*, and the poet’s *attempt to re-emerge* in the modern world. The short stories “The Fakir” (1986), “The Poet and the Muse” (1986), “The Plot” (1987), and “Limpopo” (1990) serve as a prelude, to some extent, to the renowned novel *The Slynx* (2000). This novel encapsulates the fruits of Russian literocentrism, intertwined with allusions to significant themes and images from global history and literature in its entirety. In all these texts the author’s style,

writes E. Goshchilo, is characterized by “mocking”, sarcasm, provocativeness; the writer has established a reputation as a bright, original artist, albeit “irreverent and poisonous”. T. Tolstaya, a professional philologist, creates her own myth of the poet, encrypts it into a palimpsest text, which she offers to the dedicated reader to unravel. It is no coincidence that critics have labeled this approach as a trickster strategy: “The author-trickster alluded to this deceit with the alphabetical chapter titles in the novel” (Vorobyova 2012: 53). It should be emphasized that Pushkin's narrative plays an important role in Tolstaya's storytelling style. This includes direct quotations, reminiscences, allusions, and travesty, as well as the understanding of Pushkin as a *Witness* to the history of Russian culture. This opens up the possibility of a deeper analysis of Tolstaya's own texts (Vaikum 2020: 31–41).

In the novel *The Slynx*, the key subject of the *Pushkin myth* is travestied along with other essential components of the “Russian myth” (Kovtun 2009: 85–98). The work is based on the refined culture of the *Silver Age*, where primitive art has a significant place (Flack 2015: 2), and *the artistic traditionalism*, as found in A. Solzhenitsyn's linguistic innovations and his interest in the archaic, as well as in the Dal's Explanatory Dictionary. “Tolstaya blended opposing literary styles, combining the authenticity and nostalgia for traditional Russia found in the village prose with the urban St. Petersburg-Moscow cultural focus, mixing elements of fairytale and dystopia” (Ivanishina 2019: 221). The proximity of her own poetics to the modernist culture has been openly acknowledged. “The motif of the simulacrum is evident in modernist aesthetics. It is sufficient to recall the use of ‘dominoes’ in Andrei Bely's work, and the significance of masquerade symbolism in the poetry of A. Blok and F. Sologub”, M. Lipovetsky stresses (Lipovetskii 2006b: 60). Poetic texts by A. Blok, N. Krandievskaya-Tolstaya, B. Pasternak, M. Tsvetaeva, V. Nabokov, etc. appear throughout the novel. They create an artistic paradigm that ironically comments on works of modern mass culture frequently referenced by inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic city-world.

T. Tolstaya's text parodies recognizable historical plots and classic Russian imagery. The “explosion” that occurred 200 years ago serves “to cleanse the metaphysical core of the Russian world from subsequent layering, according to the author” (Lipovetskii 2006a: 3). The author also uses this motif to justify their detached position. Catastrophe dominates the world. But experts believe that by accumulating in the depths of our consciousness, catastrophes stimulate the revival of archaic cultures and the regeneration of historical tissues (Patsyukov 2001: 41). As an artistic technique, “explosion” characterizes the strategy of *the writer-trickster*.

The Explosion, a catastrophic event that occurred in the 20th century, eradicated the foundations of civilization, leading to the mutation of both Russian lan-

guage and people. The individuals born after this event, labeled as "Golubchiks", possess abnormalities or deformities, such as half face, chicken scallops covering their body, or multiple eyes. These anomalies are referred to as "Consequences", which everyone bears. Few individuals survived the Explosion, but those who did experience a unique repercussion: they have ceased aging. They are referred to as "The Oldeners", a group which includes former Russian intellectuals, and "The Degenerators", which encompasses proletariat who mutated into cattle.

Rather than Moscow, the city of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk takes precedence, where the "biggest murza", Fyodor Kuzmich, claims all civilizational and cultural accomplishments. "Golubchiks" fear the Murza, but what truly terrifies the denizens of this new world is the Slynx. By tearing out their main vein, it is said to extract their entire mind. The Slynx, a mystical creature, is feared universally despite its lack of physical sightings. Numerous interpretations have been proposed in criticism, ranging from the Slynx being synonymous with a Lynx to being viewed as a mystical doppelgänger capable of transforming into an uncontrollable destructive force.

Even Benedikt, the main character of the novel, who is the son of an "Oldener"-mother and a "Golubchik"-father, is terrified of the Slynx. Throughout the book, the plot follows the protagonist's journey from a humble clerk to one of the leaders of the city-state and his subsequent transformation into the fearsome Slynx.

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The artistic world depicted in the novel *The Slynx* is secluded and exotic, an island of life that persevered after the catastrophe. It is presented as *a rayok*, *an alphabet book*, and *a farce*, with heaps of debris and the sound of mice squeaking behind the scenes. The box serves as a symbol, a tangible object, a representation of the universe, and a confiner of spatial experiences. All events occur within the belly of the rayok, where people, puppets, goats, monsters, Kitties, and the fabulous Zmei Gorynich reside in disarray. Instead of a sky, it is a "blacker than black" cover, and stars, "it looks like they're breathing, flickering, like they're suffocating too, they're withering, they want to break away, but they can't, they're pinned fast to the black heavenly roof, nailed tight, can't be moved" (Tolstaya 2003).

Fyodor-Kuzmichsk is a travelogue version of the city on seven hills. It is lost in time and space, enclosed by a fence against unknown enemies, and "around the town are boundless fields, unknown lands" (Tolstaya 2003), where black hares are found and date palms grow. This satirical version of Moscow is superimposed in the consciousness of the survivors – "The Oldeners" and "The Degenerators" – onto the historical outline of the capital; all events and images are evaluated in a *doppelgänger* manner. The author, occupying the role of *a trickster*, provides a satirical commentary on the events (Kovtun 2022). The past splendor of the city as the Third Rome is suggested by the presence of palm trees and blooming date

branches – symbolic of paradise. Lush vegetation and exotic birds may come to mind as an image of the “Russian paradise” presented in utopian traditions (from Prince V. F. Odoevsky and N. Chernyshevsky to A. Chayanov and V. Rasputin). However, the description including hares and flying chickens takes on the characteristics of a blatant chimera.

PUSHKIN-CUCKOOSHKIN AND THE GRAPHOMANIAC BENEDIKT

The path of the protagonist, Benedikt, links all areas of the rayok-world, its “buffoon folk”. The character’s selectness is denoted by his name: Benedikt means “a good word”, “blessed” (Petrovsky 1984: 82), his profession is a book scribe, and he possesses an exceptional inner world filled with dreams and visions. Each of Benedikt’s characteristics is presented in a playful and reflective manner. It is worth noting the ironic reference to the image of Catholic *Saint Benedict*, founder of the Benedictine order, whose mission was to promote cultural enlightenment. In the context of the novel, it is significant that the Order’s efforts led to the creation of massive libraries. Benedictine abbeys were renowned for their status as publishing and intellectual centers during the Middle Ages. Additionally, there were scriptoriums – workshops where manuscripts were illustrated. This parallel emphasizes the correlation of Tolstaya’s work with U. Eco’s novel *The Name of the Rose* as a pre-text, in which the events unfold in a *Benedictine* monastery, associated with the search for the lost second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. “The intertextual connection between the novels of T. Tolstaya and U. Eco can be traced at the phonetic level: Benedikt – *Berengar* (assistant librarian), *Bencius* (scholarly rhetorician)” (Smirnova 2011: 41).

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The story in *The Slynx* commences with Benedikt’s account as “a naked man”, who constructs his attire from scraps, felt boots, and straps discovered in the surrounding area. In the chaotic world, humans lack protection and must continually rebuild themselves, as seen in Solzhenitsyn’s novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, set in a prison camp (Kovtun 2019: 157–168). Literally *naked* Benedikt observes himself in prophetic dreams:

Benedikt went into a room where the family was waiting for him. They’re sitting at the table and watching... They’re creeping around in lapy. And they look at him so sternly, judging, angry. Benedikt looks too and sees *he’s naked*. (Tolstaya 2003)

As a *trickster*, the protagonist exists on the border of worlds. He is connected to the realms of “The Oldeners”, “The Degenerators” and “The Golubchiks”.

However, his image also exhibits the traits of a *cultural hero*, being a "good young man": "Benedikt didn't have any Consequences, his face was clear, he had ruddy cheeks, a strong torso, you could marry him off any time you liked", "a golden beard, darker hair on his head, and curly" (Tolstaya 2003). In the same typological paradigm is the character's ability, which indicates the ability to transform the existence: "Benedikt was taught by his father from childhood to do all kinds of work", "he can do anything in the household". It is not by chance that he is entrusted by the Chief Stoker to work on the monument to Pushkin, which should accumulate cultural memory and open the future. Benedikt, as a creative nature, is characterized by doubts and a "spark of humanity": "You do have a certain creative streak, I think..." (Tolstaya 2003), Nikita Ivanovich concludes.

The other side of "a certain creative streak" is *graphomania*. For the character it means that rewriting books is his only way of existence, without any regard to their meaning. In this context, Benedikt's plot becomes an ironic reference to the motifs of Gogol's *Bashmachkin*, even down to his fatal infatuation with a promiscuous maiden, which results in the loss of his overcoat and his death. Prince Myshkin similarly desires to solve the mystery of Beauty. The character's literal interpretation of written guidance leads to the inversion and defamiliarization of meanings. According to the author, "Rereading and rewriting serve as a writing technique rather than a physical journey," which is a work of fiction and devilry (Tolstaya qtd. in Podoroga 2006: 145). Benedikt's name, interpreted as a dog's name in the text, references the imagery of the Apocalypse beast. The plot of M. Bulgakov's *Sharikov* is similarly framed as an ideal representation of the "underworld". E. Khvorostyanova, a researcher citing U. Eco's authority, quotes the soothsayer Ubertin stating, "The number of the beast, if counted in Greek letters, is Benedict" (Khvorostyaova 2002: 115). In *The Slynx's* inverted world, the concepts of divinity and devilry are stripped of subjective value and formalized, which reinforces the prominence of *werewolfism* as a theme defining the characters' portrayals.

The novel *The Slynx* satirizes both *The Book of Genesis* and *The Primer*, which serves as the starting point for the schoolboy's literacy journey. This is highlighted by Benedikt's comparison to Mitrophanushka from the D. Fonvizin's play: "Good Lord Almighty! ... Lord forgive me, but what a dim-witted oaf you are!" ("Прости, господи, но что ж ты за дубина великовозрастная!... *митрофанушко, недоросль*" [Tolstaya 2007: 137]), Nikita Ivanovich laments. The portrayal of the Book of Genesis depicts God's writings that necessitate concentration and serious spiritual work to comprehend fully. In the absence of a Deity, real connection becomes impossible, giving rise to numerous deceitful

“moves” and lines that are seductive and risky. Benedikt’s journey as a mystic commences within the mundane boundaries of black huts and crooked streets before unfolding towards the Terem. The Terem, in turn, houses a library with a fabled tsarevna named Olenka, a garden paradise, and the Princess Bird Pauline, who is pure white. Pushkin plays the role of both doppelgänger and guide of Benedikt in the *labyrinthine* streets and lines of the book.

Benedikt’s movement is an endeavor to locate his own voice amidst the hero’s journey of both concrete and abstract experiences, the latter occurring in his dreams. This journey centers around the Terem Library, serving as a metaphorical Plato’s Cave:

Sometimes he dreamt he was walking around a house that seemed to be his father-in-law’s, from one gallery to the next, from one floor to the next, and it was like the same house, but not the same: it was longer, sort of sideways, everything was warped sideways. He walked and walked and kept being surprised: there was no end to this house. He had to find one special door, so he opened all the doors. But what he needed behind that door wasn’t clear. (Tolstaya 2003)

The image of a mysterious door suggests a possible encounter with *a visionary*. The role of the latter is fulfilled by *Pushkin*. In the dialogue “Theaetetus”, Plato presents various metaphors for cognition and recollection: in one case, fragments of learned knowledge are compared to *captive birds*, which the recollector frees from their cages as the need arises (Plato 1993:192–274). In this paradigm, the significance of the garden surrounding the Terem, containing cages of exotic birds, is highlighted. Benedikt’s plot parallels the story of the birds’ deaths, as they are sent to the “meat patties” (“калеты”) of the Terem’s inhabitants – the “bottom”, the stomach, inevitably displacing and substituting the “top”, which renders the birth of Truth (the birds’ flight) impossible.

PUSHKIN AS TRICKSTER AND BURATINO

Benedikt’s exploration of literature is a journey of emotional growth, guiding his naivete into the “adult” world of written culture, centered on Pushkin’s legacy. His marriage marks the loss of “innocence” and initiates the test of knowledge in the Terem-library. The next stage aims for maturity, examining morality, mortality, and physical suffering. The poet’s image assumes a paramount role in Benedikt’s initiation ceremony. The famous poet Pushkin transcends art and literature to become a universal symbol “of the mysteries of life, death, good and evil, embody-

ing the infinite and inexhaustible" (Nepomnyashchii 1980: 31). Here, T. Tolstaya follows an archaic tradition where poetry and myth hold central meaning, but this ideology no longer fits within a society that values continuity, tradition, and memory. The poet is a condensed expression of energy, *a point*, opposing the sprawling expanse of *history*. As Kassirer argues, "If discursive thinking tends to expand, connecting and systematizing, linguistic and mythical perception, on the contrary, leads to concentration and compaction" (Kassirer 2000: 360).

Pushkin's image in *The Slynx* is situated within a broad intertextual framework, comprising key elements from his biography, motifs from his oeuvre, their interpretations in folk art, and moments from the author's creative biography. This becomes a tool for exploring the human condition. It is well-established that the poet drew upon folk engraved books and the lubok while working on fairy tales (Sakovich 1991: 204), which assumes an important role in T. Tolstaya's work. The appearance of Pushkin in a text or painting evokes a sense of timelessness, often perceived as a miraculous experience. This connection between his image and folkloric, humorous elements cannot be overlooked (Rtischeva 2001: 321).

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Benedikt's narrative unfolds in three phases: the *barbaric pre-Pushkin era*, the period of *mastery*, and the making of the poet's idol (during which he "went to Nikita Ivanych and carved Pushkin out of a log"), followed by the *abdication* and execution-burning of the monument, seen as an act of self-immolation. The creation of the idol represents the character's transformation, resulting in freedom from the consequences of mutation, including the tail. In 1835, N. Gogol declared A. Pushkin as "a Russian man in his development, in which he may appear in two hundred years" (Gogol 1952: 50). T. Tolstaya explores this idea in her work, portraying *Benedikt* – "Good Young Man" – *a pushkin* (referring to the statue of Pushkin that was created by Benedikt) sculpted from a tree trunk as a newborn by a naïve artist. Meanwhile, Nikita Ivanich unsuccessfully attempts to explain the textbook features of the poet's appearance to his apprentice while contradicting himself:

- He wasn't very tall.
- But you said he was a giant, – muttered Benedikt, wiping his nose with his sleeve.
- A giant of the spirit. "His proud head rose higher than ..."
- "... the Alexander column." I know, I copied it. But we don't know how many yards tall that column was, Nikita Ivanich.
- It doesn't matter, not one little bit! Now, we'll extract him from this log – sorry, but we haven't got any others. The most important thing to me is the bowed head and the arm. Like this. – The Stoker showed him. – Look at me. Carve a curly head, a straight nose, and a thoughtful face. (Tolstaya 2003)

The idol of the poet, "extracted" from the "dubelt" ("the beriawood" in the English translation) by Benedikt, becomes a reflection of the mutated world – a *trickster* who is associated with the master himself. In the context of the Pushkin myth, the mention of the species of tree actualizes the image of the cavalry general *Dubelt*, who was the head of the secret police under Nicholas I and followed the disgraced poet on duty. The future relationship of the families is also significant – the young Natasha Pushkina will become the wife of the son of the chief of the gendarmes, Mikhail Dubelt. In 1880, the heirs gather to lay wreaths at the poet's monument on Strastnoy Boulevard. In the novel, Pushkin's idol is made *six-fingered* ("You can always cut off the extra." – Benedikt is convinced) and left that way, i.e. with Consequences, like the other inhabitants. Nikita Ivanych laments: "How could he, so to speak, dare to have the Freethinking temerity to blasphemously hack off the poet's hands at his own caprice? A tail was one thing, but this is a hand!!!" (Tolstaya 2003). The procedure to remove Benedikt's tail and the possibility of amputating the extra fingers of Pushkin's wooden sculpture are interconnected events. The Oldeners have a humorous perception of the idol, which is reflected in the modernist discourse. "He looks like a pure retard. A six-phalanged seraphim. A slap in the face of public taste", – Lev Lvovich expressed. The concept of having *six fingers* is associated with the image of the "six-winged seraphim" from Pushkin's poem "The Prophet" (1828), in which the lyrical hero references "the sting of the wise serpent".

Benedikt interprets *Pushkin's mythology* based on his personal ideas and worries: "He rode in sleighs. Was bothered by mice. Ran around with girls, got his rocks off. He was famous: now we're carving a *pinocchio* (*буратино*) of him". The character creates "his own Pushkin", a Pushkin-cuckooshkin, with whom a trusting contact is established: "So there he stands, the poor dear, listening to the noise of the street, like Nikita Ivanich wanted – you turn the corner and see him on a hill, in the wind, all black. This wood, 'the beriawood,' always blackens from the rain" (Tolstaya 2003). It is ironic that Benedikt uses the Head Stoker's memories to create the idol, which makes it difficult to transfer cultural heritage. *The White Hill* (*Belaya Gorka*) is where Nikita Ivanych aims to build a monument that takes inspiration from the Holy Mountains and *the Black River* (*Chernaya Rechka*). However, they are unable to come to an agreement with the owner of the dill bed, so they put the idol in "a place between the fences that didn't belong to anyone" – on the border of the worlds, as appropriate for a trickster.

The prototype of Benedikt's mentor Nikita Ivanovich is Pushkin's uncle *Nikita Kozlov*. The image of the Main Stoker correlates with the figures of the fairy tale *Zmei Gorynych* and the trickster *Prometheus*, who stole fire, the basis of

culture. It is no coincidence that Nikita Ivanovich is portrayed in the novel as the preserver of classical culture and its champion, under the leadership of Pushkin. "In Tolstaya's book, the 'Main Stoker' is not just a certain kind of activity, it is a place in the cultural hierarchy. The coals ignited by the inner heat of Nikita Ivanovich refer to Pushkin's prophet, whose destiny, as we know, is *to burn people's hearts with a word*" (Ivanishina 2019: 223–224). In this context, the image of Olenka-The Soul is an ironic reference to *Natalia Goncharova*: "Well then, brother pushkin? You probably felt the same way, didn't you? [...] Did you, too, conjure the past, fear the future? Did you rise higher than the column? – and while you rose, while you saw yourself weak and threatening, pitiful and triumphant, while you looked for what we are all looking for – the white bird, the main book, the road to the sea – did your dung heap Terenty Petrovich drop in on your wife" (Tolstaya 2003). The association of the heroine's image with Olga from the novel *Eugene Onegin* indicates a spiritual limitation, the impossibility of understanding the gift of the chosen one, which corresponds to Tsvetaeva's version of the Pushkin myth, important for T. Tolstaya.

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It should be emphasized that the period of mastery gives Benedikt an opportunity to get acquainted with the world of the former, with high culture. He takes part in the funeral ritual, which becomes a paraphrase of the story of the relationship between Pushkin and the "Babylonian harlot", Anna Petrovna Kern. The funeral of Anna Petrovna, a "petty, vicious, communal old woman" from the Oldeners, whose main relic was a manual for a meat grinder, is a tragic reference to the history of the poet's correspondence. Towards the end of her life, A. Kern was in great need and sold her beloved's letters at a ridiculous price. It is a well-known myth that during the funeral procession with Anna Petrovna's body along Tverskoy Boulevard a monument to Pushkin was erected there (P.B. 1884: 349). In *The Slynx* this plot is played out: from the motive of the heroine's forgetting about the sale of the letters (the novel uses household instructions instead), to the image of the thaw and the installation of the idol. After the funeral of the old woman from the Former, Nikita Ivanych decides to erect a monument to the poet, about which he informs Benedikt: "We said goodbye to Anna Petrovna, and I thought... Association, you know. There Anna Petrovna, here Anna Petrovna... A fleeting vision..." (Tolstaya 2003).

Benedikt's rise and maturation, however, turns out to be completely imaginary. The hero, despite his feverish efforts, does not move anywhere, "because he has no key code to the surviving texts of the former, pre-breakup culture. As a result of this emphasized forced spatial limitation, the dynamics of character and action cease to be relevant" (Vorobyeva 2012: 56). In pursuit of the book, Benedikt

quickly adopts the habits of the orderly, changes internally and externally, loses his youthful curls (a symbol of masculine strength), his body changes, resembling a huge box: "The box replaces the absence of an individually experienced body image" (Podoroga 2006: 133).

Benedikt's mockery of the Golubchiks, who hid the old printed books, coincides functionally and attributively with *Pilate, the Grand Inquisitor* (a Sanituration's robe in the novel resembles that of the inquisitor): "And a Sanituration should also watch himself, his hands always have to be clean. The hook will always be dirty from the Golubchik: with blood or vomit, whatever; but the hands have to be clean. That's why Benedikt always washes his hands" (Tolstaya 2003), up to the *Twelve* by Alexander Blok and *the Slynx* itself (References to Red Army soldiers from Blok's poem are evoked in describing the Saniturations hurrying to retaliate against the Golubchiks.). The Father-in-law "stomped and thrust a double-edged hook – who knows from where – into Benedikt's hand. He throws open the door of the closet and tosses a robe to Benedikt; it blinds Benedikt for a moment, but the slit settles right over his eyes. He can see everything through this crevice, all human affairs, trivial, cowardly, fussy: all people want is a bit of soup and to bed, but the wind howls, the snowstorm shrieks, and the Slynx is in flight; it soars, triumphant, over the city. "Art is in danger!" shouted Father-in-law as the sleigh swerved and screeched at the bend in the road. Our robes gleam with red light in the blizzard wail – watch out! – the storm's red cavalry flies across the city" (Tolstaya 2003).

The motifs of the *storm, flight, black wind, fire, cavalry*, which refer to A. Blok's poem, are presented in a buffoonish projection. Even at the fire (an allegory of the revolution) the crowd of Golubchiks (the people) is silent: "They stand there staring and the fire dances in their eyes too, it's reflected like in water, it splashes" (Tolstaya 2003). The picture is resonant of Nikolai Gogol's comedy *The Government Inspector*, which ends with a *silent scene*. Yu. Mann and O. Lebedeva believe that the finale of the play was written under the influence of K. Bryullov's famous painting *The Last Day of Pompeii*, which deeply impressed the author:

Gogol's insistence on calling the silent scene of *The Government Inspector* a painting involuntarily brings to mind pictorial associations in connection with this unique dramaturgical finale. And these associations cannot help but remind us that the process of creating the text of "The Inspector" in its final version, which, in addition to the text of the comedy itself, includes various genre text appendices, a process that lasted more than ten years (1835–1846), is chronologically framed by Gogol's two strongest impressions of K.P. Bryullov's paintings. P. Bryullov's *The Last Day of Pompeii* and A. A. Ivanov's *The Appearance of the Messiah*, which

led to the articles "The Last Day of Pompeii (Bryullov's Painting)" (August 1834) and "The Historical Painter Ivanov" (1846). (Lebedeva 2001: 115)

The image of the "Apocalypse of Bryullov" is a tragic key and is played by T. Tolstaya through N. Gogol. In the novel the city is nullified by the explosion of gasoline, the scene resembling the eruption of a volcano.

The round dance of masks, the mechanical movement of puppets in the book represent the "driving forces" of Russian history, where the role of literature and writers is significant, which reflects the parallel: *Pushkin – The Idol – Benedikt – The Slynx*: "Go take a look at yourself in the water ... in the water... hee, hee, hee ... Yes, the Slynx, that's just who you are" – The Chief Sanitarian (the inquisitor) laughs at the hero" (Tolstaya 2003). The impossibility of being outside the limits of the text leads to hatred, rebellion, extermination of the living world; a Sanitarian's hook resembles a *stylus*: "The hook is for grabbing the book, hooking it, pulling it up, pulling it towards you". Fyodor Kuzmich, who appropriated the authorship of all books and paintings without exception, left a picture of M. Vrubel's Demon to the copyists to decorate the workhouse: "The stove hummed and radiated waves of warmth. The warmth made the blue Demon on the wall stir, as though he wanted to get down" (Tolstaya 2003). The author parodies the ideas of Vl. Solovyov and, in general, those of the Art Nouveau artists who were eager to turn creativity into theurgy, into a mystery created by the masses.

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The novel is an ironic reply by T. Tolstaya to the utopia in "The Golden Key", "encoding the Silver Age of A. Tolstoy himself" (Tolstaya 2002: 203). The plot of Benedikt's meeting with Olenka-the Soul echoes the situation of Buratino – Malvina through the parallel Malvina – Sofia, drawn in the work of A. Tolstoy (Tolstaya 2002: 203). The little wooden man, according to the critic M. Petrovsky, embodies for the "red count" a new ideal of steadfastness, sobriety in contrast to the false life-play of the dolls (Petrovsky 1979: 229–251). A. Tolstoy's fairy tale "Buratino" does not need transformation; his escape from the balaganza is rewarded by a miracle, by taking the theatrical world into "his own hands": "Self-realization does not occur by leaving the world of conventions in the world of immanent values, but by creating a convention of the second order and dominating it – this is a post-symbolic solution, it is the novelty of the fairy tale" (Tolstaya 2002: 207). No one can take away the gift of the artist that the hero has acquired, not even Carabas Barabas.

In the novel *The Slynx* Benedikt-Buratino becomes the lord of the puppet theatre, but instead of the expected freedom, a new role awaits him – the villain Karabas. Benedikt mocks the puppets Golubchiks, pierces them with sticks,

throws them into the fire: "How do they teach the Saniturions? They make big dolls, huge idols, from rags and cloth; and you work on technique on the green-grass: thrusting from the shoulder, catching with a turn, pulling, or whatever" (Tolstaya 2003). The puppet world is all in plain sight, the houses are "empty and open, combed through with frequent ridges of sanitary hooks". There is nothing of essence here: no words, no love, no soul. The world of the square is linked to the constant "absorption" of one by the other, literally "eating" those around it. The bottom, the belly, absorbs the top. The motif of food, of gluttony, is central. In this space one can fight, march and joke, but not live. The lack of meaning makes us look for support in the purely material: "the mouse is our support". In A. Tolstoy's world, the rustling of mice in ruined estates, corroded, dilapidated books is a symbol of oblivion, the fading of life (Pushkareva 1989: 67–78).

Building the parallel of *Pushkin – a demon and a doll*, T. Tolstaya develops and questions the idea of the late N. Gogol, who considered the poet's mastery as a demonic temptation for Russian writers, leading them into the world of beauty, aesthetics, narcissism, bypassing civic duty and responsibility: "Most of those who fought against Pushkin did it in the name of 'life', defeating poetry", – says M. Weiskopf (Vaiskopf 2003: 255). In the dystopian world of *The Slynx*, the poetic lines, spoken anew each time, give rise to a sense of something more than a familiar nightmare of the present, marking the trace of lost meaning. By destroying and travestyng the myths, fairy tales and utopias of the past, the author keeps faith with the potential of *language* itself. It is *language* that is the true hero of the novel. The myth of *language* is not deconstructed: "the great and mighty", it is alive and active. Instead of an icon in the hands of the dying Varvara Lukinishna, the only one who can distinguish the "voices" of the poets, Benedikt puts a picture of Pushkin's idol in her hands:

... He drew a bent head. Around the head – curls: scritch scratch, scritch scratch. Kind of like the letter S, technically, "Slovo". All right... A long nose. Straight. A face. Sideburns on the sides. Fill them in so they're thicker. Dot, dot – and you've got the eyes. The elbow goes here. Six fingers. Squiggle squaggle squiggle all around: that's supposed to be a caftan. It looks like him. He stuck the idol in her hands. (Tolstaya 2003)

In the "Icon" the letter "C", "СЛОВО" ("word"), graphically occupies the position of the *halo* around the head of a saint. The manner of execution of the picture reflects *Pushkin's true handwriting* with its inherent "sharpness of letters", oval, combined with "frivolous curls", "creative carelessness, crossing out" (Kravchenko 2019: 12). Pushkin's image in the novel becomes one of the constants of the na-

tional self-consciousness, a myth in whose language the "collective unconscious" speaks to the world. It is not by chance that the plots of his texts are so popular in the works of naive artists (Kirichenko 2001: 304–313). In *The Slynx* the idol of the poet is associated with a *guiding star*: "A thin strip of horrible yellow sunset filled the western window, and the evening star Alatyr twinkled in the sunset", with a *trestle* and a *writing stick*: "The pushkin stuck out like a small black stick in the confusion of streets". Pushkin's "voice" is an echo coming from the past to the present, a sign of "discovering" the connection between the low, crazy life and another scale of values, and at the same time a metaphor of loneliness in the "world apart". The figure of the poet marks the boundaries of the semantic space within the text; the poetry of the genius is interpreted by both the Golubchiks and the Oldeners, but they cannot hear each other. The Oldeners try to perpetuate the poet's memory in the name of streets and a monument, while the Golubchiks put clotheslines around the neck of the wooden idol.

The author shows the components of the totalitarian society and the "mass man", whose main characteristic "is not cruelty or backwardness, but isolation, loss of normal social ties..." (Arendt 1991: 41). Individual "voices" remain alien, misunderstood, which makes the prospect of a dialog impossible. The voice, according to T. Tolstaya, is "an individual, isolated, 'my' soul, which is lonely because it has nothing in common with 'yours' except the archetypal layer of the psyche" (Tolstaya qtd. in Stepanyan 1988: 83). T. Tolstaya's concept of Russian culture seems to be closer to A. Bitov than to S. Dovlatov or A. Sinyavsky. The latter highlights Pushkin's inner void, his dedication to poetry over personal fate, his belief in destiny, and his carefully cultivated identity as a verbose and cunning artist. Sinyavsky's intention is to challenge traditional ideas of genius, portraying Pushkin as a liberated creator who defies political categorization and does not conform to the myths surrounding him. In Dovlatov's *Zone* (*Зона*) Pushkin is a mere phantom inscribed into the artificial atmosphere of the Reserve. The author aims to uncover the characteristics of a true poet, driving Sinyavsky and himself to find meaning within their own destinies through Pushkin's story. Conversely, in Bitov's *Pushkin House* (*Пушкинский дом*, 1964–1971), the emphasis is placed on different aspects. The poet's image reflects the aristocracy of the spirit. Through poetry, the world reveals its original beauty and meaning. This is crucial in creating Pushkin's image in Tolstaya's work. It is no coincidence that the story "The Plot", which is the pretext of *The Slynx*, begins with two epigraphs – Pushkin's and Blok's, repeating the choice of A. Bitov.

In T. Tolstaya's book there is no one to appeal to except Pushkin: "Tell me, pushkin! How should I live?", "you're the same as us, no different! You're our

be all and end all and we're yours, and there's no one else! No one! Help me!" (Tolstaya 2003). In the finale of the novel, individuals with a strong connection to language, where the "voice" is akin to a living soul, are ultimately rescued from their impending downfall. The Oldeners' ascension from Pushkin's idol as the stone Alatyrs refers to the miracle of the revelation of Paradise: "The Oldeners bent their knees, held hands, and began to rise in the air. They were both laughing" (Tolstaya 2003). The finale alludes to the myth of Prometheus, whose image in the Russian tradition was perceived as analogous to Christ, who was crucified not by God but by men. In this context, the motif of "nakedness" is relevant, marking the image of the Oldeners:

"Life is over, Nikita Ivanich," said Benedikt in a voice that was not his own. The words resounded in his head, as though spoken in an empty stone bucket or a well. "It's over ... so we'll start another one," the old man grumbled in reply. "You could at least tear me off a piece of your shirt, to cover my privates. Can't you see? I'm *naked*. What are young people coming to nowadays?" (Tolstaya 2003)

Nakedness here is freedom from the ashes of the momentary, as the modernists understood the idea of the "*naked man*" – *the messenger*, as someone who is "ready to accept the world as it is" (Jacquart 2020: 226). It is interesting that after the next "end of the world", in the midst of ashes, Nikita Ivanich himself outwardly resembles the *poet's idol*: "As black as the pushkin, just the whites of his eyes red from the fumes, hairless and beardless, creaking and still smoking, Nikita Ivanich leaned on Benedikt's numb hand and climbed down from the crumbling, seared braces" (Tolstaya 2003).

The text of Russian culture, having undergone another "explosion", is freed from intertextual bonds and is re-created by "a naked man". Its foundation becomes a sacred *point* – the image of the poet, which contains a *bundle of meanings*, the unraveling of which determines the course of history and culture. T. Tolstaya, ostracizing signs, images, great texts of the past, conveys the "voices" of poets, rising above the written as an artificial, playful text, realizing the archaic need for the oral Word, standing at the source of the lost fullness and integrity of the universe.

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S a ž e t a k

MIT O PUŠKINU U ROMANU *Kis* TATJANE TOLSTOJ: VARALICA, BURATINO I “NAŠ SVEVIŠNJI”

Rad analizira mit o Puškinu u romanu *Kis* Tatjane Tolstoj te razlaže njegovu strukturu, glavne odrednice, osobine likova kao i njegovu intertekstualnost s ruskim klasicima i autoričnim vlastitim radovima. Roman se oslanja na dvadesetostoljetnu književnu tradiciju te uvodi novu umjetničku paradigmu koja nadopunjuje i reinterpretira mitologiju o Puškinu. Temelji mita o Puškinu u autoričnim tekstovima proizlaze iz Srebrnog doba ruske kulture i ruskog tradicionalizma, koji streme ka arhaičnom. Autorica vješto isprepliće istinite i fiktivne aspekte Puškinove biografije, njegove tekstove i aluzije čime Puškin postaje referentna točka kojom se objašnjava post-apokaliptični megalopolis. Svijet romana nalikuje Knjizi postanka i djeluje poput početnice pune plošnih likova i farse. Unatoč brojnim opisima Puškinova ironičnog i

varljivog karaktera, njegova slika i dalje zadržava status misterije iz davne prošlosti. U romanu Puškinova slika predstavlja temelj svijeta, određeno sveto mjesto čija višeznačnost oblikuje tijek povijesti i kulture. Tatjana Tolstoj se ne bavi subjektivnim evaluacijama, već se usredotočuje na arhaičnu potrebu za usmenom tradicijom. Time uspostavlja glasove autora koji nadilaze granice simbolizma pisane riječi, slike i teksta.

Ključne riječi: mit o Puškinu, varalica, roman *Kis*, dekonstrukcija, parodija, kult riječi