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Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Prelude to the Literature of Glasnost

When Chingiz Aitmatov’s *Plakha* first appeared in *Novyi mir* in 1986 many readers here were astounded at the uncanny ability of this established author to ride the wave of the future. This sensational novel, with its stark portrayal of the drug trade, exploitation of the environment, and social alienation in the Soviet Union, was seen by many as the ultimate expression of newfound creative freedoms under Mikhail Gorbachev. For all its seeming novelty, however, Aitmatov’s venture into the area of exposé literature has not been an isolated incident. *Plakha* is only one of a number of recent Soviet novels that focus exclusively on the ills of contemporary Soviet society.

The appearance of exposé literature under glasnost could be viewed simply as a direct effect of the loosening of controls under Gorbachev. Its emergence at this time, however, is actually the result of a whole complex of factors, only one political. Soviet literature has already dealt with such issues as the environment, impending nuclear catastrophe, and a disappearing national memory. These issues, in fact, form the thematic core of the trend of fantastic literature that immediately preceded glasnost and ushered in fundamental changes in Soviet literary discourse. This article is an attempt to examine four Soviet novels that appeared before the era of glasnost. My purpose is to elucidate the nature of the changes occurring in Soviet literature in the mid-1970s and early 1980s and the contribution of this literature to glasnost.

The first works in a fantastic vein began to appear in the mid-1970s. The emergence of this trend coincided with a proclaimed desire by officialdom to broaden the scope of Soviet literature and improve its image, both in the Soviet Union and in the west. The new literature had to appeal to the audience of the late Leonid Brezhnev period—better educated, more discriminating in taste, and deeply dissatisfied with the general state of affairs in the country.

A widespread interest in the Latin American novel and, in particular, the popularity of Gabriel García Marquez partially explain the form that Soviet fantastic literature took in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, Soviet writers have been rather selective in their assimilation of Marquez’s literary heritage. The distinctive features of the new literature—the use of native folklore, the desire to address universal concerns within a national context, as well as the resort to the fantastic—could all be attributed to the direct influence of Marquez’s work, particularly his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (published in Russian in 1970). Marquez’s fusion of eroticism and grotesque fantasy, however, is generally ignored by the writers of the fantastic trend.

In general, contemporary fantastic literature is much closer to the “fantastic realism” of the nineteenth century than to Marquez’s distinctive style. In its more immediate context, this literature is an answer to, and a curious blend of, divergent literary

1. This admission of the need to expand the traditional mode of socialist realism was the major theme of the speech by Georgii Markov at the Seventh Congress of the Writer’s Union. See “Sovetskaia literatura v bor’be za kommunizm i ee zadachi v svete reshenii XXV-go s’eza KPSS: Doklad pervogo sekretaria pravleniia Sovuza pisatelei SSSR G.M. Markova,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 27 (1 July 1981): 2.


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trends: village prose, science fiction, byt prose, and even the Stalinist novel of the 1930s and 1940s. Viewed as an entity, Soviet literature of the late 1960s and 1970s rejects the excesses of advanced technological society, seeks to revive traditional Russian culture with roots in the village, questions coercion, and pines for freedom from the constraints of everyday life. In the 1970s and early 1980s the issues raised in the divergent literary trends of the preceding decade consolidate into a new trend—fantastic literature.

Contemporary fantastic literature is a complex body of works united by the use of fantastic and utopian elements. Science fiction, supernatural fantasy, and fairy-tale magic serve to advance different authorial positions and can play significantly different roles in these works. A number of novels attempt to update or refine the basic socialist realist formula. In the works of Chingiz Aitmatov and Nodar Dumbadze, for example, a reexamination of the canonical novel coincides with the extension of the temporal dimension of the novel into the past and future. Science fiction plots here are always supplemented by legendary plots; issues examined in the future find their parallels in history. This extension of the temporal frame parallels the expansion of spatial dimensions in these novels. The locus of these novels shifts between the city, the distant settlement, and the widest expanses of the universe.

Another group of works, directly influenced by Mikhail Bulgakov’s last novel, Master i Margarita, is united by its selective borrowing from this source. “Bulgakovian” novels provide excellent examples of escapist Soviet literature and are a blend of different genres of popular literature, from the mystery to science fiction to the spy novel. The purpose of these works is to provide escape from the boredom and malaise of contemporary urban life. In a sense, “Bulgakovian” novels revitalize byt prose when they offer the metropolis as a magical place where all the suppressed desires of the common man are realized. These novels also offer a new hero, a new Soviet superman, capable of extraordinary achievements through the application of his creative and magic powers.

Another group of works posits the fantastic as a thematic concern. The limits of human perception are an issue that such authors as Nikolai Evdokimov and Anatolii Kim examine at great length. The fantastic here is the expression of the ambiguous vision of both the protagonist and reader; it is never clear (although sometimes the narrative provides a rational explanation in the end) whether the supernatural events of the story are imagined by the protagonists, are a part of reality, or have some logical interpretation. These works employ an array of fantastic devices, taken from such sources as the Russian fairy tale and the fantastic of Gothic romance. Present, past, and future

3. It has been shown that socialist realism is a set of formal conventions that are a “system of signs comprising, in the case of the novel, such things as standard attributes and epithets for both positive and negative heroes, and standard plot functions which are usually organized in a formulaic plot” (Katerina Clark, “Quo Vadis Socialist Realism: The Case of Chingiz Aitmatov’s I dol’she veka dlit’sia den’,” unpublished article, 3). Some novels of the new trend employ fantastic devices to expand the temporal and spatial dimensions of what essentially remains a familiar formulaic plot of the Stalinist novel of the 1930s and 1940s.


are fused in the vision of the hero. The protagonists of these novels are eccentric truth-seekers who vacillate between the metropolis and village in their search for universal happiness.

In terms of major concerns, tone, and the hero, the novels of the last group perhaps come closest to the literature of glasnost and, therefore, merit further elaboration. This strand of the fantastic trend is first and foremost moral literature, concerned with the plight of the individual in a technological society. It celebrates the appearance of a new ideal—the “natural man,” an eccentric and a seeker who is aware of the uniqueness and catastrophic potential of life around him, who reveres his ancestors and the spontaneity of the natural way of existence. He looks for answers to his and society’s problems both in his own past and in the past of his country. The rational way of thinking is combined in this new individual with the uninhibited spontaneity of a “natural” man.

The influence of Andrei Platonov in the works of Nikolai Evdokimov and Anatolii Kim is obvious both in the choice of main characters, eccentrics questing for eternal truths, and in the problems confronting the seekers. The Platonovian search for “relatedness” between people and his reverence for tradition are prominent themes of this strand of contemporary fantastic literature. In fact, the importance of Platonov for this literary trend is one of its distinguishing features.

Since a questioning of the limits of reality is one of the main themes of this literature, it incorporates a broad range of fantastic metamorphoses to illustrate the breadth and mysteriousness of life. Inexplicable events are superimposed on the familiar fairy-tale pattern of a journey into a different, even alien world in search of a better way of life. Contrary to the fairy-tale pattern, however, the goal of the hero is not some tangible prize but self-understanding.

This literature is far removed from the teleological direction of true socialist realism. It is open-ended in its refusal to provide final answers to the vexing issues of the day. The magic furniture of the fairy tale, with its dead or living water, the obligatory three stages of endeavors, or the Golden Fish that fulfills the seeker’s wishes, are simply manifestations of the inexplicable phenomena of life, of the inscrutability of the universe and of man’s place in it.

These writers employ another form of the fantastic; they borrow from the Gothic novel of the nineteenth century, in which magic, mystery, and chivalry are prominent.

6. Andrei Platonov (1899–1951), Soviet writer and critic. His most important works include a science fiction trilogy Potomki solntsa (1922), Lampaia bomba (1926), Effirnyi trakt (1926–27); a book of poetry Golubinaia glabina (1922); and collections of stories: Epifanskie shliuzy (1927), Sokrovennyi chelovek (1928), Proiskhozhdenie mstera (1929) (first part of the novel Chevengur, published in full only in the west, 1972), and Kotlovain (1930), published in the west in 1973. An electrical engineer by profession Platonov was an enthusiastic supporter of the revolution. His idiosyncratic style of writing and his insistence on a reexamination of the costs of building a socialist society were reasons for his repression in the 1930s. Platonov’s work betrays the direct influence of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov (1828–1903), whose confidence in Russia’s messianic role in transforming nature, belief in the ancient Orthodox idea of the eventual transfiguration of all matter through communal work, regenerated feeling of brotherliness, and rejection of the sexual union, form the ideological core of Platonov’s own writing. Platonov’s work is unique in its simultaneous praise of traditional peasant values and insistence on the need for a technological transformation of the world. Platonov’s hero, sokrovennyi chelovek, a compassionate seeker and an eccentric, is entrusted with the task of building a perfect society through brotherly love and technological reorganization of the world. Platonov’s gradual rehabilitation in the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death is responsible for his direct influence on contemporary Soviet literature. Publication of Platonov’s long suppressed Kotlovain and Juvenill’ nove more in the Soviet Union today is yet another proof of the writer’s importance for contemporary Soviet literature as well as of the leadership’s desire to reexamine recent Soviet history.
The medieval castle of the true Gothic novel, with its long underground passages, trapdoors, dark stairways, and mysterious rooms is brought back in contemporary fantastic literature but placed in a modern high-rise apartment or an old house in a sleepy provincial town. The atmosphere of brooding and unknown terror is especially prevalent in the works of Anar and Nikolai Evdokimov.

Writers of the fantastic are not immune to the attractions of contemporary science fiction. The model of the science fiction novel, with its inevitable journey to an alien country, is generically related to the fairy-tale and medieval romance. In contemporary fantastic works, however, the journey is yet another form of the fantastic. It places the novels in a contemporary context and provides another explanation for the diversity of human experience.

In each of these works there is a uniquely expressed utopian element, related to the underlying pattern of a journey through enchanted space, although the romantic aversion to the evils of the big industrialized city is common to all writers of this strand of fantastic literature. The city is a space that the heroes of this literature try to flee and then transform from the outside. Some find their peace in a vision of a perfect past, others place it in a crystal palace of the future, and yet others unexpectedly find it in contemporary time and space, hidden in the deeper recesses of the mind.

The authors chosen for scrutiny here differ in background, age, and professional history. Nikolai Evdokimov is one of many Soviet writers born in the 1920s who survived the war but could never entirely divorce themselves from this experience. Evdokimov wrote his share of works celebrating the glory of socialist labor, but it was his war prose that brought him renown as an outstanding writer in the Soviet Union.

Evdokimov’s work of the late 1970s and 1980s betrays the author’s fascination with the fantastic. Proisshestvie iz zhizni Vladimira Vasil’evicha Makhonina (1980) is the story of a middle-aged Moscow school principal, who returns to his native town to obtain a copy of his birth certificate. His life in Moscow, with his aging wife and their precocious grandson Platon (the name is obviously a double allusion to Andrei Platonov and Plato) is an endless round of petty deceit and mindless routine. Suddenly Makhonin is removed from his routine Moscow existence and strange things begin happening to him. At night the house where he is staying fills up with the voices of former residents, now long dead. He finds a notification of his own death on a bulletin board. When Makhonin inquires about his birth certificate the clerk tells him that he is supposed to be dead. Makhonin finds out about the funeral of a long-forgotten friend who was at the front with him. Memory, however, is playing tricks on Makhonin. The long-forgotten friend’s name differs slightly from the name of this dead person.

Something compels Makhonin to attend the funeral, where he meets Irina, the daughter of the deceased. Irina falls in love with the hero and follows him to Moscow. Makhonin is both irritated and flattered by this undaunted pursuit and unusual devotion. In the end the hero’s insensitivity and inability to remain his natural self disenchant the young girl, who leaves Moscow, never to return. Makhonin discovers that the airplane on which she was supposed to have left Moscow crashed. In desperation he prays to his personal God and to the magical Golden Fish of the Russian fairy tale for Irina’s salvation. On Makhonin’s second visit to his native town he once again encounters Irina. She had been saved by his prayers when she failed to reboard the ill-fated
airplane after the first stop. She does not want to see Makhonin again, however, and he is left alone to live his life with yet another memory and another emotional wound—unrequited love.

The plot of this short novel centers on the hero’s pilgrimage to the source of his life. It is also the story of another journey—Irina’s quest for her true love and father incarnate, Makhonin. Both journeys end in revelation and higher understanding. The form of the novel is a confessional Ich-Erzählung and the story is fittingly a highly moralistic tale of man’s trial by conscience.

Moscow and Makhonin’s provincial town are established here as two opposite ends of a moral scale. The Moscow of the hero’s youth is no longer there. Makhonin feels alienated and anonymous in this big and constantly changing metropolis. His native provincial town, on the other hand, is a place where everything takes place out in the open. The town becomes a critical space, capable of bending time and perception. It is a hallucinatory but revealing presence, open and mysterious at the same time. It is a space where enchantment can occur and where the hero can return to his natural spontaneous self and relive his past.

The fairy-tale vision of a mythical merger with nature is not for Makhonin, who is corrupted by his city existence. This variant of utopian bliss, rejected by the hero, is one of the two models of happiness proposed in the story. The other is a somewhat ironic rehashing of the populist ideal of living a useful and creative existence in the Russian village. In a very concrete sense Evdokimov’s rejection of village bliss is an answer to village prose writers who find the only remaining source of values in the old village community. Evdokimov’s modern hero is a displaced person, almost schizophrenic in his inability to find his true ideal. He vacillates between the city and country, unable to pinpoint his own perfect space. Perhaps the hero’s only hope for regeneration lies in the enchanted space of a provincial town.

Confrontation with the irrational in his life forces Makhonin to remember his childhood, to evaluate his wartime experiences and to dig up all that is shameful in his past. These recollections are organized in layers, which alternate seemingly at random. This very randomness is deliberate, since the past, present, and future are combined in this story in the tragic vision of one man lost in the rush of everyday existence. Like the fusion of real and unreal, the fusion of temporal planes becomes a prominent theme here. When Makhonin remembers his past, it is as real as the events he experiences at the moment of narration. In his visions he is still a young soldier fighting in the war or a little boy releasing his magic Golden Fish into a pond at night.

Makhonin’s journey is a quest for self-awareness. The major obstacle to his quest is his other life and his other self—the rational and busy city dweller who is immune to the memory of his parents and who easily adjusts his way of life and his conscience to the demands of his job. Makhonin is leading a life not his own because under the urban veneer there is a “natural” man, an eccentric who believes in the Golden Fish.

The supernatural events in the novel can be explained either rationally or through a fantastic model. For example, a rational explanation of Makhonin’s hallucinations can be found in his emotional and physical exhaustion. In the rational model of the universe, the house that disappears during the day and reappears at night is simply a house with two entrances facing two different streets. The fairy-tale magic believed by Irina and Makhonin is but a childish indulgence. But the other, fantastic solution to these riddles, is equally viable in the novel. Which of them does the author choose? Neither. Or both. The point is in the inseparability of the two visions of reality. Makhonin's
utopian visions as well as his layered past are all part of his reality. Neither the fairy-tale kingdom nor the idyll of country life, however, can regenerate the hero. Each person finds his own road to salvation, and Makhonin's lot is in understanding through suffering.

The broad scope of the fantastic and the right to consider it a part of reality are qualities common to all writers working in this vein. Another common point is a powerful scepticism of man's ability to embrace all of reality and to understand its workings. For another important writer of this literature, Anatolii Kim, the fantastic is an indicator of the profound disorientation of contemporary man. Born in 1939 in Kazakhstan, Kim graduated from the Literary Institute in Moscow in 1971. His ancestors were Koreans, but three generations of his family have lived in Russia. He writes in Russian and considers Russian his native tongue. Kim's first book Goluboi ostrov appeared in 1976. It is devoted to the people of the Far East. Here one can already observe Kim's interest in the exotic, since the novel is filled with Far Eastern legends. It was his novel Lotos (1980), however, which made him an overnight sensation in Moscow literary circles.\(^8\) The short novel, published in one of the most interesting contemporary “thick” journals Druzhba narodov, was awarded the journal's literary prize for 1980 and created a significant controversy.

Critical response to the novel was generally enthusiastic and quite perceptive. Some critics discovered the influence of Buddhism in the clash between life, death, and immortality.\(^9\) Others focused on the mythological vision and thinking of the author. The wondrous in Kim is not an exception to the everyday rules of life but a “law-governed pattern [zakonomernost'] which is hidden in the depths of being and directly correlated with the essence of things and phenomena.”\(^10\) Life for the author is creativity, which “is not characterized as a process flowing in time but as a series [riad] of swift and irreversible metamorphoses.”\(^11\)

Some critics, however, were offended by Kim's obvious disregard for the rules of proper behavior. They called his prose “a mixture of naturalism and symbolism,” berated him for the fact that “the author and the hero after him make death an aesthetic concern [estetiziruiut],” and that the reader “is transposed from the world of verity into the world of some higher order, higher ‘reality.’”\(^12\) The same negative attitude to the novel is evident in the remark of one critic who believes that the author simply “wants to show off his refined formal skills.”\(^13\)

There are three main characters in this deliberately complex work: Lokhov, a successful Soviet artist; his mother; and the collective spirit of the dead, called My. The narrative is almost painfully disjointed and kaleidoscopic. When the plot is unfolded in a straight chronological line, the story of Lokhov becomes the story of his mother and her son's repentance for the sin of neglect.

In the beginning of the story Lokhov's mother is twenty years old. She draws her strength, beauty, knowledge, and power of love from nature—the steppe and the sun, who divulge their secrets to her. She falls in love with a young officer, marries him,

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10. Ibid. (Arkadii Khvoroshchchan).
11. Ibid., 41.
12. Ibid. (Svetlana Lanshchikova).
13. Ibid. (A. Razumikhin), 42.
and bears his child. The officer is killed in the war. With her baby Lokhov’s mother flees the approaching Germans. The train she rides is bombed by German planes, and she crosses the entire country in her search for safety.

While in flight she meets her dead husband who warns her against leaving the forest, but she does not heed his warning. She tries to find haven in a village but is seized by the Ukrainian polizei who brutally rape her in front of her crying baby. She manages to run away and finds refuge with an old nomad, who becomes her surrogate husband. She leaves the nomad, settles somewhere in Kazakhstan, and marries her second husband, a hopeless drunk. She leaves him as well, and there are intimations in the story that she becomes a prostitute. Lokhov leaves for the big city, his mother gets sick and marries her third husband, the Korean Pak, who takes care of her in her debilitating illness. Her son comes to see her before she dies and offers her an orange cut in the shape of a lotus. Fifteen years later Pak dies after he sees his wife in the image of a young woman, and many years later Lokhov dies after bringing another lotus orange to his mother’s grave.

The plot of this complex work revolves around yet another journey—the journey of a son to see his dying mother for the last time. On the surface the story is reminiscent of a number of novels put into circulation by village prose writers about prodigal sons and daughters who come to the country to ask their parents for understanding and forgiveness. Like Evdokimov’s Proisshestvie, however, this work is more a dialog with the village prose writers than another faithful rendition of a familiar pattern. In the village prose model, sons and daughters, the “displaced villagers,” rediscover their roots in the country and come to recognize their alienation from the city in their final encounter with the wise, saintly, and strong peasant women—their mothers. In Lotos, the writer goes beyond this simplistic model and focuses on universal questions of life and death and the spiritual indebtedness of all children to their parents.

The deliberate complexity of form here is inseparable from Kim’s ideas about life and art. The portrayal of time and space is fluent. The point of narration shifts from the hero’s youth to his childhood to old age (long after the death of his mother), then back to the time of his last visit. The narrative voice changes constantly—from the voice of the young mother to the voice of the son to the hero’s stepfather’s then to the collective voice of the dead. The style of narration is very complex as well. The stream-of-consciousness technique, used for the mother’s voice, alternates with highly poetic narration, on occasion crossing the borderline into vers libre. Through the voice of the main character, on the other hand, we are offered a deeply psychological portrayal of inner turmoil, written almost in the manner of Tolstoi. As in Tolstoi’s prose, a multitude of different stimuli generate the thoughts and emotions of the main character at any particular moment of narration.

In a sense Kim is an extreme representative of this strand of fantastic literature because his ambition here is to represent what Velemir Khlebnikov so aptly called vsevremennataia odnovremennost’. The ultimate realist, Kim is trying to embrace all of reality by condensing and expanding time and space into a single utterance. At times the text eludes the spatial and temporal ordering that any reading imparts to it, as though Kim wants to free himself even from the reader. Fortunately, he does not succeed; the pressure on the reader, however, is extraordinary.

The author strives to be liberated from any interpretation; he is searching for an intuitive perception rather than a rational explication of events. The unpredictable shifts in the voice of narration, while keeping the reader in constant tension, also point to the basic idea of Lotos: There is no death, only a painful but necessary transition
into something different. The idea of a transition from the prosaic to the elevated, from one state to another is supported by deliberate changes in voice and style of narration. An entire subchapter, written in the six-foot iambic of epic poetry, marks a transition, a transformation from the prosaic description of Lokhov’s mother to the symbolic tale of Lokhov’s encounter with the spirit of his mother.

For Kim, art is also a continuous transformation. The lotus, a beautiful artificial flower created of something no longer living (an orange), becomes newly alive as a symbol of the connectedness of all things and the moral responsibility of all sons before their mothers. Kim’s hero bridges the gap between himself and his dying mother, his city life and his village roots with the gift of true art, the lotus.

Another of Kim’s novels of the 1980s, Utopia Gurina, is an important work of contemporary fantastic literature. Iurii Gurin, the main hero of the novel, is an unsuccessful actor in one of Moscow’s regional theaters. Gurin, an eccentric, a great conversationalist, and a sensitive soul, decides suddenly to leave his unhappy marriage, job, and life in the city and try “plain living” (oproshchenie) in a distant region somewhere in northeastern Russia. This remote area is given the fictitious name of Sarym. Gurin’s wife, the beautiful Elena, bitter and distant after years of marital discord, is indifferent to his departure. The hero is invited to Sarym by his friend, Aleksei Danilovich Tianigin, a construction engineer. The two friends’ wives come from the same Tatar village and this fact, in addition to similarities in the heroes’ appearance and biographies, creates a special bond between Tianigin and Gurin. Gurin’s trip to Sarym, his letters to his wife, and Tianigin’s thoughts about himself and his friend make up most of the novel. The title of the novel refers to the utopia written by the hero while in Sarym. After a brief stay with his friend, Gurin understands that his attempt at plain living has not succeeded and he leaves for Moscow. Before Gurin’s departure the two friends witness a miracle—Gurin’s flight through air. Both men are transformed by the event.

Again, as in the works of Evdokimov, and in Kim’s own Lotos, we observe the multiplicity of fantastic models. There is an allusion to the science fiction model when Gurin’s flight and his whole personality are presented by Tianigin in terms of an alien visitation. Gurin sees himself as a Santa Claus who takes upon himself the task of helping others. The image of Santa Claus imparts a touch of fairy-tale magic to the story. Finally, the hero’s ability to create miracles is a direct reference to the biblical feats of the saints whose divine powers in the hagiographical pattern are always demonstrated through miracles. The limits of reality and the presence of the wondrous in the quotidian are again questions that this novel addresses.

Another important theme of this novel is the transformation of one hero’s (Tianigin’s) purpose in life from a rational and narrow-minded devotion to his work and complete sexual subjugation to his wife to spontaneous and all-embracing love for everybody and everything. Gurin is able to free himself from the demands of sexuality when he refuses to fulfill his marital obligations.

Elena’s sexual hunger transforms her love into a selfish and all-consuming force. Gurin’s feeling, on the other hand, is a Platonician (and platonic!) all-embracing devotion to everything existing on the planet, including the spirits of people who earlier inhabited earth. This idea, which is more explicitly stated in Lotos, is inseparable in Utopia Gurina from the notion of the sacredness of all matter.

Death is not frightening to Gurin because he does not believe in the complete obliteration of the human spirit. Reverence for the dead, and particularly for their remains,
is an important positive feature of Kim's characters. Gurin's middle-aged bachelor neighbor has kept the urn with his brother's ashes for seventeen years in his apartment and the hero is deeply touched by this display of brotherly love. In Gurin's own literary work, "Utopia," death is a welcome act of fusion with nature. The aged are revered and given free reign over their own destiny.

Kim's characters are more concerned with the catastrophic possibilities of the contemporary world than with their own personal mortality. When Gurin explains the appeal of a renowned Russian actor Innokentii Smoktunovskii (famous for his portrayal of Count Myshkin in Dostoevskii's *Idiot* and of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to contemporary audiences he points to the feeling of angst, so widespread in this century.

Gurin's literary work, his "Utopia," forms the structural and thematic center of the novel. The questions addressed in the "Utopia," indeed its very existence in this work, point to the areas of primary interest for the author. The "Utopia" is presented in the form of a dialog between the two protagonists. Tianigin's remarks on the margins of the work are a counterpoint to Gurin's assertions.

In the best traditions of Russian utopian literature, from Chernyshevkii to Zamiatin, the perfect future society is presented in the image of a crystal palace built by utopians in the harsh countryside of Sarym. The future society portrayed in the work is deliberately devoid of any class distinctions. The question of the social organization of this society and the way it arrived at perfection is not addressed by the author. Gurin's utopia revolves around moral questions: love, death, beauty, moral education, and relations between the old and the young.

There is an underlying emphasis on freedom of choice for the inhabitants of this utopia. They are allowed to explore their sexuality—there is no uniform moral code for all to obey. This in turn frees individuals from the oppressive possessiveness of earlier times. Raw sexuality as well as maternal possessiveness gradually disappear. Children are brought up by society in large institutions where anybody can visit and get his or her share of maternal or paternal feeling. All living creatures are revered, and the inhabitants of this utopia are vegetarians. The system of education is completely free. There are no exams of any sort. When people are ready to enter a profession they have to demonstrate professional competence. Art and beauty are held in great esteem. There is no unnecessary emphasis on technological advance. The utopians are not interested in intergalactic travel; they have too many things to do at home.

In his commentaries Tianigin makes two objections to Gurin's "Utopia." The first objection is to the limits of technological advancement. This is psychologically motivated, since Tianigin's whole life is devoted to the "reorganization" of surrounding reality. The other, more important criticism, is Tianigin's objection to the Prometheus aspect of Gurin's work. Paradoxically, Gurin's nostalgic return to the crystal palace of Russian utopian fiction is found wanting by Kim's "conscious" hero—engineer Tianigin. Nobody has the right to impose his or her idea of happiness upon others.

Both protagonists believe in man's potential and good intentions. Civilized people came to Sarym and built hospitals, schools, and factories. Civilization, however, introduced its own evils into this area and Gurin is painfully aware of this. For Guin the city is an evil force, a cloaca, the center of everything that is vile and philistine, the monster of Gurin's visions. Like a medieval knight, the hero sets out to destroy the monster by means of beauty and art.

Those who would build the perfect society are eccentrics and dreamers believing in miracles. The Tianigns of the future world will reorganize nature and the Gurins
will act as watchdogs, protectors of nature and beauty. This is Gurin’s idea of the future. The narrative, however, posits Gurin’s model of happiness as a distant ideal, perhaps unattainable because of its unqualified belief in the goodness of people or because the Promethean ideal always presupposes the destruction of what exists and then a rebuilding ex nihilo.

The hero of this work is another eccentric, a saintly fool, capable of miracles. A Platonovian truthseeker and a creator, he reveres nature and love. For him reality includes both the predictable and the inexplicable. Gurin is a person who suffers deeply but whose appetite for the wondrous has not abated. He suffers, fantasizes, and forgives in his search for the truth, which for him is reverence for all that exists. On his unswerving path to understanding, Gurin influences others as well. It is Tianigin’s rational mind that has to accept the miracle of Gurin’s flight through air. Gurin’s natural spontaneity is counterposed to Tianigin’s rationality and his enslavement to the machine as well as to his own sexuality. Tianigin’s narrow-mindedness is transformed into a higher understanding of his own motivations and weaknesses.

In its quest to discern the future of contemporary society, _Utopiiia Gurina_ displays some of the main distinguishing features of the new fantastic literature. It uses a three-dimensional temporal frame: the past of the Sarym region before the onslaught of civilization (and the past of antiquity alluded to in the image of the beautiful Elena, Gurin’s wife), the present tense of the narration, and the perfect future of Gurin’s utopia. The issue of control and of the imposition of happiness on other societies is important in this work as is the feeling of anxiety and premonition of catastrophe. Civilization is presented as a dangerous force bent on destroying nature and beauty.

The fantastic is presented here as a theme: Is what we find unbelievable in fact a part of reality? The central hero is a spontaneous wise man in search of beauty capable of saving the world. The main line of character development is radically different from a typical socialist realist novel. The road to perfection is a road to spontaneity and complete freedom.

The juxtaposition of freedom and control imposed from without is very important for Anar, another writer of contemporary fantastic literature. Anar (pen name of Anar Rasul-ogly Rzaev) was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 1938. His father is a famous Azerbaijani poet, Räsul Rza, and his mother also a well-known poet, Nigar Rafibelli. Anar began publishing after graduating from the philological faculty of Azerbaijan State University in 1960. His stories, novels, and articles have been appearing in such prestigious journals as _Novyi mir, Druzhba narodov, _and _Sovetskaia literatura_. His first works appeared exclusively in the Azerbaijani language. Since 1969, however, Anar, like many regional writers in recent years, has published novels that are authorized translations into Russian.

Until 1978 Anar was perceived essentially as a writer of _byt_ prose, whose typical characters are unexceptional people with undistinguished professions. In 1978 _Druzhba narodov_ published Anar’s novel _Kontakt_.15 This short work is a radical departure for the author whose earlier preoccupation with ordinary people and events had earned him solid, if not enthusiastic, recognition by the critics. _Kontakt_ is a typical work of the contemporary fantastic trend. The fantastic devices in this work are numerous; they include allusions to fairy-tale magic, the mysterious atmosphere of a Gothic romance,

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15. Angar, _Kontakt_ in _Druzhba narodov_, no. 12 (1978), 122–155. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. The translation is mine.
science fiction plot, and a Dostoevskian “hesitation” between the real and unreal. The
right of the fantastic to exist, or rather, the right of people to acknowledge the inexpli-
cable in their lives, is one of the major themes of this novel.

The story centers on mysterious events in the life of a new student. The hero has
no name and is referred to as the “Student” throughout the work as if to underscore his
conformity to a type. There are very few characters in this story and the locus is an
unnamed city transformed and cut off from the rest of the world by an unusual heat
wave. The plot is both very simple and very elaborate at the same time. After success-
ful entrance examinations into one of the best institutes in the city, the Student has to
find an apartment. In his search he encounters mysterious people and witnesses strange
events. The apartment that he finds is also very peculiar.

Time and space undergo unexpected changes as if to test the Student’s reserves and
ability to think rationally. His apartment is able to change dimensions almost at will: Pict-
es hanging on the walls are transformed right before the hero’s eyes, the clock
goes in reverse, there are mysterious boarded up doors that lead to nowhere, and dis-
connected phones ring in the night. The Student tries to explain rationally all the mys-
terious events happening to him but is unable to do so. He fears that he is losing his
mind. Ultimately the explanation provided by one of the characters is suitably rational
for the hero, who now can finally enjoy the comforts of ordinary life.

As in Evdokimov’s work, the structure of this story is an elaborate succession of
mysteries followed by probable resolutions. The Student, considering himself to be a
“rational modern man,” tries to preserve his sanity by explaining supernatural events
rationally. No matter how farfetched these pseudo-scientific explanations might ap-
pear, they are suitable for this contemporary rationalist. Each new explanation, how-
ever, is negated by the subsequent one. This is vitally important for the author because
his goal is not “simply to play a guessing game, not to intrigue the reader until the final
complete resolution . . . but to create a world which is different, which exists accord-
ing to its own laws in order to analyse the behavior of an ordinary man in it.” 16

The direction of the plot of this novel is circular: “Each new twist negates the
experience gained at the previous stage and, finally, in the solution of the mystery the
hero remains at the same spot where he began.” 17 As in Evdokimov’s and Kim’s work,
the fantastic of Kontakt is varied and each fantastic event is provided both with a fan-
tastic and rational explanation. Anar’s novel is a laboratory in which an ordinary ra-
tional man undergoes a series of psychological experiments: The hero’s capabilities of
self-reliance and self-confidence are severely tested by the irrational. The Student is
ready to believe in acceptable wonders—his good luck in entering the institute or the
most unbelievable but “scientific” explanation of miracles—but to accept the fantastic
without some probable interpretation is unthinkable.

The Student is another eccentric, although emphatically not a spontaneous man.
His lack of contact with people, his alienation, is the Student’s secret disease. In this
sense the Student is an antihero, punished by near insanity for his rigidity and compla-
cency. His mind is closed off to anything that he has not read about in books. He is
neither an adventurer nor dreamer.

A final explanation for the mysteries encountered by the Student is provided by an
astrophysicist, whose apartment the Student is renting. His explanation is based on a

17. Ibid., 57.
science fictional model. The astrophysicist advances the idea that the intergalactic system of communication may have been built on principles new and unknown to humans and that contacts with alien civilizations can be varied and inexplicable from the human point of view. The astrophysicist proceeds to suggest that these aliens may possess means of control over the human mind that are incomprehensible to us and that they may test our potential ability to perceive the world intuitively. Since all their attempts at contact would basically be efforts to disrupt causal relationships in our minds (which is seen as the basis of human civilization), they may have chosen the Student’s isolated “contactless” mind as the most coveted place for their experiment.

To the Student, an avid reader of science fiction, this is a plausible explanation. What he cannot understand is the physicist’s insistence on man’s inability to comprehend the whole of the universe:

If for everything that is unusual, incomprehensible, and inexplicable we would try to find a succinct rational explanation and our customary earthly analogies, if we do not accept the thought that the Universe lives not only by laws but also by their absence . . . , if we reduce everything to the poor laws of our imperfect reason, then no contact is possible with anybody. 18

The Student’s answer to this explanation is to decide on further research into the area of intergalactic contacts. He remains at exactly the same spot where he started. The reader, however, is given an alternative model which is completely open to embracing the irrational without “logical” explanation.

The novel is a sharp criticism of rigid human notions about nature and the rationalistic approach that leaves no room for different interpretations of reality and of the fantastic. Anar’s work calls for breadth of vision. It is almost claustrophobic in its dislike of enclosed spaces: the stagnant atmosphere of a city cut off from the rest of the world, the limiting space of a haunted apartment, the horrifyingly suffocating space of the elevator where strange things happen to the hero or, finally, the enclosed mind of the student himself. The issue of control, so important to writers of contemporary fantastic literature, receives a different twist here. According to the science fictional model, which is given special prominence in the novel, the aliens are able to assume control over the Student’s mind precisely because of the hero’s refusal to open it to the outside world.

Unlike other protagonists of recent fantastic literature, the Student lacks any awareness of his cultural tradition. In this sense, his mind is not only enclosed, but also blank, an easy target for outside influence. This also explains the hero’s easy shifts in explaining the irrational; he does not have that “anchor” of tradition which sustains the heroes of Kim or village prose.

In its distaste of entrenched ideals and rigid solutions, Anar’s work, like the novels of Evdokimov and Kim, is a dialogue with the village prose writers. Here the city is condemned because it is responsible for generating alienated minds. Village life, however, is not offered as a panacea; in this short novel there are no quick solutions offered for the problems of modern existence.

The anti-utopia of alien “body-snatchers” controlling people’s minds is a motif familiar to readers of the new fantastic literature. Anar’s answer is to open the human mind completely to other ways of thinking and acting. Paranoia and closing one’s mind

off to fantasy or to the play of imagination can bring the hero and humanity to the brink of disaster. Anar’s escape from control by means of an avid interest in and acceptance of alternative modes of thought is shared by other writers of fantastic literature. For Kim and Evdokimov, regimentation in thought and emotions is unacceptable. Only spontaneity, love for others, and the ability to appreciate beauty in nature and art can save contemporary man from extinction.

The inability of the protagonists to understand fully the mysteries of the universe is established here as a justification for greater openness of thought and action. Fantastic literature rejects dogmatism in any form. Its call for a breadth of vision and for the moral regeneration of man is filled with urgency. This fundamental reevaluation of epistemological suppositions, which radically upsets the “law-governed pattern” (the notorious zakonomernost’) of teleological socialist realism, is the most important achievement of fantastic literature, its greatest contribution to current changes in Soviet cultural and political discourse.

As if heeding the call of fantastic literature for acceptance of alternative modes of thought, Gorbachev, in private conversations with writers in 1986, reportedly commented that restructuring Soviet society was made more difficult by the absence of a loyal opposition to monitor the party, and that glasnost in the arts and press would have to fill that gap. To a degree, this is exactly what the new literature has been able to accomplish.

Literature of glasnost deals with sensitive political issues hitherto unmentionable in Soviet literature. The recent works of Iurii Bondarev, Valentin Rasputin, Evgenii Evtushenko, Vasilii Belov, Viktor Astaf’ev, and Chingiz Aitmatov converge in their emphasis on such controversial topics as the legacy of Stalinism, environmental pollution, emigration, social alienation, and the fate of humanity in the nuclear age.

The literature of glasnost has a mission. It points to the most troubling areas of Soviet society and culture and calls for action. The writer’s awareness of his role as an important social figure, a critic of social mores and practice is reminiscent of Tolstoi’s stubborn dedication to social change in drawing the reader’s attention to sensitive issues and in the writer’s faith in the moral regeneration of man.

Evtushenko’s poem “Kakbychegoneyvshlitsy” touches on censorship in literature and the arts, the effects of collectivization, Lysenkoism, and the campaign against cybernetics. His Fuku treats such previously forbidden themes as Soviet neo-Nazism and the Kolyma labor camps. Chingiz Aitmatov’s Plakha is a journalistic, almost sensational, portrayal of the ills of contemporary Soviet society. Plakha is openly didactic, at times even preaching to the reader of the moral responsibilities of modern man.

Bondarev’s Igra and Rasputin’s Pozhar belong to the same category of morality literature as Aitmatov’s recent work. Rasputin’s work analyzes the economic and spiritual costs of the forced and mindless destruction of a peasant community. Bondarev’s work focuses on the inability of a Soviet film director, an honest person and a former officer in the war, to deal with the deception and hypocrisy of the Soviet art world.

The moralistic tone of the literature of glasnost, its focus on sensitive issues, and the urgency of its message unite the very different authors contributing to this trend.

19. See Reuters, 30 June 1986; also Paul Quinn Judge in The Christian Science Monitor, 18 July 1986, and Radio Liberty Research publication of the samizdat version of the conversation on 23 October 1986. See, for example, Iurii Bondarev’s Igra (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1985); Valentin Rasputin’s Pozhar in Nash sovremennik no. 7 (1985), 3–8; Evgenii Evtushenko’s Fuku in Novyi mir, no. 9 (1985), 30–58; and Chingiz Aitmatov’s Plakha in Novyi mir, nos. 6, 8, 9 (1986).
Another, and very important, shared feature of these works is the profile of their central characters. The two protagonists of Chingiz Aitmatov’s sensational novel, Boston Urkunchiev and Avdii Kallistratov, are typical Russian truthseekers (pravdoiskatel), almost saintly in their unrelenting search for truth and justice. Both heroes suffer defeat in their quest: Avdii is crucified by criminals, and Boston is destroyed spiritually by the actions of one of his fellow workers. Bondarev’s truth-seeking hero Krymov is perceived by his mediocre colleagues as an aberration, his quest for spiritual growth and understanding of human motivations dismissed by the “crowd” as a clever disguise for Krymov’s base, ulterior motives. Krymov dies completely alone, misunderstood even by those close to him. Valentin Rasputin’s Pozhar focuses on another truthseeker’s failure to stop the terrifyingly rapid progression by former villagers from the spirit of sbornost’, to an all-prevailing mood of indifference. Rasputin’s Egorov is as helpless against the fire consuming the storage barns of his settlement as he is against the destruction of traditional village values.

One of the results of the new openness in recent literature is the resurrection of village prose values, in some cases accompanied by an intense anti-urban, anti-Semitic, and pro-Russian sentiment (for example, Viktor Astalev’s Pechal’nyi detektiv or Vasilii Belov’s Vse vpered). Another striking feature is the focus on extreme dramatic situations. Each novel has some sort of a local catastrophe at the center serving as a metaphor for the disastrous situation prevailing in the country, indeed in the world as a whole. The recent literature has also created a hero who is a conscious articulator of the author’s ideas. The introduction of the new hero has, in turn, transformed the narrative structure of the new novels into a series of musings by the hero-author on the sad state of his society.

The literature of glasnost has a familiar hero, the eccentric seeker, aware of the costs of the destruction of traditional values and unrelenting in his search for truth and beauty. In the literature of glasnost, however, the seeker is defeated, crushed by the monster of greed and complacency. Aitmatov’s tragic vision at the end of Plakha is shared by all writers of glasnost literature. The accidental death of his child by his own hand brings with it “the end of the world” for Aitmatov’s hero Boston. Another protagonist of Plakha, the truthseeker Avdii Kallistratov, is killed by a band of criminals. Bondarev’s Krymov, a misunderstood intellectual and a Tolstoian, dies completely alone. It is the end of the old world for Rasputin’s Egorov, who is unable to restore the communal spirit to his new life.

The authors of the literature of glasnost mentioned above have all written works in the fantastic vein. Today the fantastic element is less prominent (one notable exception is Aitmatov’s Plakha), but the issues first raised in contemporary fantastic literature remain central to the literature of glasnost. The conflict between natural freedom and imposed order, the effects of the gradual loss of tradition, and rejection of dogmatism in thought and action are the prominent themes of fantastic literature which have been carried over into the exposé literature of glasnost.

The attempt to view fantastic literature as a prelude to the exposé literature of glasnost might raise a question of provenance. It is obvious, however, from numerous Soviet reviews of the recent novels discussed here, that they were written after the appearance of “fantastic novels.” In some cases the chronological progression can be
proven by the sequential character of a given writer’s plot. For example, Valentin Rasputin’s *Pozhar* is obviously a continuation of the story begun in *Proshchanie s materoi*, Iurii Bondarev’s *Igra* is the third part of a trilogy about creative intelligentsia in the Soviet Union, while Chingiz Aitmatov’s *Plakha* is closely linked to *I dol’she veka dlit’ sia den’,* both formally and thematically.

The literature of glasnost differs from fantastic literature primarily in its journalistic attention to factual detail and in its urgent, even shrill, tone. If fantastic literature only warned of the dire consequences of the loss of tradition, the literature of glasnost examines these consequences as an established fact. The practitioners of the literature of glasnost see the moral decline of their nation as part of the general moral degeneration of humanity. The recurring image of doomsday, the nuclear apocalypse, is only an extreme expression of the pervasive despair with which this literature views reality.