

## Introduction

THE ESSAYS collected in this volume, written at various times and in various places, range from an account of early East Slavic (Old Russian) literature, through a number of readings of the classic nineteenth-century Russian novel, to an exposition of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of genre. Despite the differences, however, they have at least one basic theme in common. This common theme may be described as "prose poetics," or as "the poetry of prose," as I call it in my discussion of Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*.

The poetry of prose may seem like a contradiction in terms. We are used to thinking of "prose" and "poetry" as opposite concepts, associating poetry with verse composition, in particular with the short lyric poem, and prose with narrative literature. In contrast to the latter, in which the characters' story develops in a sequence of events, linked together in time and space, by cause and effect, lyrics are composed according to the principle of parallelism. In other words, two or more units are brought together in such a way that they form a series of analogies, in which the units are perceived as similar or equivalent in some respects, retaining their differences in others. Examples of such similarity in difference on the level of sound are: metre, rhyme, alliteration and assonance, and on the level of sense: comparison, allegory, parable and metaphor. Such juxtaposition of different units immediately activates the principle of similarity. Either the units are juxtaposed because they are similar, or they become similar through being juxtaposed. On the level of meaning, the establishment of analogy between different concepts is the source of poetic "imagery," often considered to be the essence of poetic composition.

In the bipolar system of language, equivalence or similarity pertains to the metaphoric pole, whereas combination and contiguity are related to the metonymic pole.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, the basic distinction between metaphoric and metonymic predominance is important for the way we read a text. The foregrounding of similarity or equivalence in lyric verse prompts us to look for a meaningful interplay between sound and meaning, as well as between meanings. Narrative prose, on the other hand, stimulates the readers' curiosity about what happens to the characters in the development of the plot as it unfolds in space and time, and to their interaction with one another and with their social and natural environments. When we read fictional prose, our perception is directed by these two forms of sequencing, the causal and the temporal. It is the principle of contiguity that prevails as we follow the characters in their movements through a fictional time-space that is "natural" enough to allow us to identify our perception of our own life with that of fiction.<sup>2</sup> However, in addition to these "prosaic" structures, based on combination and contiguity, the art of fiction also involves a rich variety of parallelistic patterning. And it is this patterning that gives the "life" material a higher symbolic dimension.<sup>3</sup>

The art of transforming sequential prose narrative into symbolic parallelism is manifest in Russian literature from its very beginning. Already by the eleventh century East Slavic preachers and hagiographers had assimilated the traditional Christian method of juxtaposing their own discourse with biblical quotations in order to bring out the conformity of events and characters from their own recent history with events and characters in the Bible and the Christian tradition. We see it very clearly in Nestor's *Reading on the Life and Slaying of the Blessed Martyrs Boris and Gleb* and his *Life of Saint Feodosii*. In the former, the brothers' acceptance of a violent death without resistance is represented as an imitation of Christ's sufferings, while in the latter the hagiographer deploys his

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- 1 Roman Jakobson, 1956, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," *Fundamentals of Language*, eds. R. Jakobson & M. Halle, The Hague.
  - 2 Krystyna Pomorska, 1985, "Poetics of Prose," Roman Jakobson, *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, eds. K. Pomorska & S. Rudy, Oxford, pp. 169–77, p. 173.
  - 3 See Pomorska, 1985, p. 173. Compare the illuminating analyses of particular texts in Wolf Schmid, 1991, *Puškins Prosa in poetischer Lektüre: Die Erzählungen Belkins*, Munich, and Wolf Schmid, 1998, *Proza kak poezii: Pushkin—Dostoevskii—Chekhov—avangard*, St Petersburg.

rhetoric in order to transform the saint into an image of Christ in both his human and in his divine aspects. Today, the method exemplified by Nestor's hagiographic writings is usually referred to as "figural interpretation," a term introduced into literary studies by Erich Auerbach. According to his definition, figural interpretation

establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. [...] They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a "spiritual act."<sup>4</sup>

From being an intra-biblical method of interpretation, in which events or persons from the Old Testament were understood as prefigurations of events and persons in the New, figural interpretation in the Middle Ages became a wider concept, applied both to juxtapositions of biblical with extra-biblical texts and to non-biblical texts.

Figural interpretation in its Orthodox form is much more than a rhetorical device. It is a literary expression of the idea of Christian self-realisation in imitation of Christ. This Christocentric anthropology is deeply embedded in Orthodox mentality and part of the religious heritage of all Russians brought up in the Orthodox faith. With the arrival of the new, post-Enlightenment anthropology at the end of the eighteenth century, however, the validity of the traditional Orthodox conception of human nature was no longer self-evident. It was challenged by ideas such as those of Rousseau about the inborn goodness of "natural man," hidden by layers of repression caused by socialisation and acculturation. This had far-reaching consequences for Russian literature, especially for the development of the Russian novel, where the conflict between Christian and non-Christian conceptions of self is crucial. In my study of religion in the Russian novel I try to demonstrate how Pushkin and Gogol reinterpreted the optimistic and revolutionary ideologies underlying the philosophical anthropology of the Enlightenment and Romanticism in the light of their own tragic vision of the moral universe. From here I go on to show

4 Erich Auerbach, 1953, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W.R. Trask, Princeton, p. 73. First German edition: *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, Bern, 1946.

how in the great novels of the 1860s and 70s patterns of archaic rites of passage are “individualised” in the representation of the protagonists. The authors—Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and others—project onto the stories of their protagonists references, allusions and quotations from the life of Christ as represented in the gospels, thus prompting the reader to establish a complex relationship of equivalence and difference between them and the archetype of Christ. As I put it in my examination of the function of hagiography in Dostoevsky’s novels, the author is involved in a poetic activity in which the reader becomes a co-creator.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky, by quoting verbatim the gospel story about the resurrection of Lazarus in his own story about Raskolnikov’s resurrection, brings into play a technique reminiscent of figural interpretation. The spiritual resurrection of the latter is prefigured in the account of the physical resurrection of the former. A similar technique is employed in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In my discussion of polyphony in Dostoevsky’s last novel, I argue that the different subplots of the novel form a series of parallels in which the brothers are transformed into different representations of Christ as generative model and *cantus firmus* underlying the voices of the protagonists.

In trying to define Dostoevsky’s poetics of prose, however, we realise that the concept of figural interpretation is too narrow. It may be applied to the correspondences established between the biblical prototypes and Dostoevsky’s protagonists in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, but it is hardly applicable to the symbolic systems that we are encouraged to construct when reading novels such as *The Idiot* and *Demons*. In *The Idiot*, the two heroines, Nastasia Filippovna and Aglaia, both described as ardent readers, project their literary heroes onto Myshkin in much the same way as Tatiana projects her own onto the figure of Evgenii Onegin in Pushkin’s novel. To Nastasia Filippovna, he is the embodiment of her image of Jesus the Saviour, whereas Aglaia identifies him with the “poor knight” of Pushkin’s ballad, in whom she sees the serious counterpart of Cervantes’ Don Quixote. The analogies between Prince Myshkin and the figure of Christ are not developed into a typological structure, however. On the contrary, towards the end of the story the points of similarity between Christ and the prince are superseded by a marked emphasis on the differences between them.

In *Demons* this combination of story and projection is taken even further. In my essay on the symbolic structure of *Demons* I see it as a novel about idolatry, and the creation of idols. This central theme of the novel is developed in a series of parallel strands, in which the protagonists surrounding Stavrogin, the main hero, try to project onto his figure stories they have invented about him as the disseminator of their ideas, only to discover that he finally decides to turn himself into living evidence of the validity of these ideas by committing suicide.

My last reading, “Seeing the world through genres,” is somewhat different from the others, since my main concern here is not Russian literature, but Russian literary theory, namely Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Iurii Lotman’s theories of genre. According to Bakhtin, genres are treasure troves of potential meaning inherited from the past and projected into the future by the artists’ creative activity, to be liberated from the text by the creative understanding of new generations, whereas to Lotman, the core of creative thinking is found in the juxtaposition of non-juxtaposable elements, between which a relationship of equivalence is established thanks to their shared context. When different genres are juxtaposed in this way, new meanings emerge as a result of their interaction. In order to illustrate the validity of Bakhtin’s and Lotman’s concepts of genre, I try to show how the life and figure of Sebastian Flyte in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* emerges from a complex generic interaction in which hagiographic patterns become predominant towards the end, first in the lay Franciscans’ metaphoric projection of biblical models onto his person—“A real Samaritan,” “like one transfigured”—and then, finally, in his sister Cordelia’s metonymic vision of him spending his last days in a threshold situation at the monastery, “very near and dear to God,” “half in, half out, of the community.”

The conclusion I would like to draw from my readings is that what transforms life material into an art form is the combination of story and projection, the projection of one story onto another, be it the projection of the story about Lazarus onto Raskolnikov’s story, Aglaia’s projection of Pushkin’s story about the poor knight onto Prince Myshkin’s story, or all the other ways in which the texts stimulate their readers to combine story and projection.

The combination of story and projection is not confined to the poetics of prose, however. As Mark Turner has shown,

the projection of one story onto another may seem exotic and literary, and it is—but it is also, like story, a fundamental instrument of the mind. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition generally [...] The projection of story operates throughout everyday life and throughout the most elite and sacred literature.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that this form of projection of story, or *parable*, as Turner calls it, is basic to everyday thought as well as to literature, means that we as readers have access to the poetry of the Russian novel through our ability to manipulate these two fundamental instruments of thought: story and projection.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Turner, 1996, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, Oxford & New York, pp. 5, 6.