

Cheshire Cat's Smile

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Pushkin had four sons and they were all idiots. One of them couldn't even sit on his chair and kept falling off. Pushkin himself was not very good at sitting on his chair, either. It used to be quite hilarious: they would be sitting at the table; at one end Pushkin would keep falling off his chair, and at the other end —his son. What a pain these saints can be!

—Daniil Kharms, *Incidences*

I am [...] a living avatar of structuralist wisdom.

—Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*

February in New York is cold, windy, and dried out, like old love. Snow-less chill is penetrating into the bones, sidewalks are clean with occasional dark icy spots, and street colors are hazed. Winter? No way! Real winter is of a different color, bright, white, fluffy, and airy. Every year at this time, for seventeen years already, I have been learning a new English word—*winter*, which has nothing to do with Russian *zima*.

I get off the subway station, walk a few blocks toward Central Park, and stop on the sidewalk across the street, gasping: Christo has transcended

New York! Central Park has disappeared from its bedrock place in the center of Manhattan. In the crisp air among barren, colorless trees, red fabric flaps and blinks in the dry winter light, forming dark vertical shadows, promising hope, summer, and unreasonable childish happiness. No matter in which direction I walk and from which angle I look, infinite views, aesthetic ensembles in their own right, like separate words and phrases, offer a panorama, a vision, and a reflection of language. Is it a metaphor of a different city or of the same city's future?

I look down the hill at the skating rink reflecting Manhattan skyscrapers and skyscrapers reflecting the rink and see the sky with red spots appearing and disappearing in a labyrinth of mirrors. I walk along a serpentine path around the Central Park Lawn dressed in a colorful saffron belt and suddenly feel strangely and irrationally festive, like at a holiday celebration without a cause.

It smells like winter in early November in Moscow, but it is not quite winter yet. On November 7, the Day of the Great October Revolution, red flags and portraits of "founding fathers"—Lenin, Marx, and Engels—draped in red fabric and decorated with red ribbons give Moscow a joyful lift, amid tentative snowflakes darkening the ground.

I am six or seven, and my Dad takes me to a mandatory holiday rally—a procession of happy proletarians exhibiting collective happiness and waving with their red celebratory paraphernalia. A mandatory holiday is an oxymoron of Soviet life, just another one of those ubiquitous paradoxes and incongruities. People have gotten so used to these comic shows in which they themselves are protagonists that they have lost any perspective on their true meaning. Instead, they see these compulsory celebrations as an excuse to eat, drink, and recover in the coming evening with friends and family a particle of their humanity that has been lost in this morning's oblivion.

All adults are forced by their employers and students by their schools to be out in the streets to express their agreement with the Communist Party's foreign and domestic policies and to celebrate "the achievements in the fields and in industrial production." Having the masses parade in the street is also a good occasion to condemn American imperialism, world colonialism, and South African apartheid, all represented on posters as tiny figures crushed by a big proletarian fist. The radio keeps blasting short rhythmic sentences trying to drive the crowd to an ecstatic quasi-religious mood, but the only sounds we hear are the *-ism, -ism, -ism*, tiny

silvery lightning balls with a fiery tail, which hit the air and the ear. The rest is blank.

TV endlessly plays movies about The Revolution, and I watch, every year, funny soundless scenes of workers and peasants storming the Winter Palace, climbing up, like monkeys, the enormous Baroque gates of iron lace. This is the bloodless coup called The Great Bolshevik Revolution, which subsequently flooded with blood several generations of people and spotted with cheerful red the dark November streets of Moscow fifty years later.

The holiday rally is mandatory for my parents, but I look forward to carrying my innocent red *flazhok* (little flag), a piece of red fabric on an “Eskimo” ice cream stick, and I especially like big fake flowers made out of multi-colored tissue paper and wire. I love their artificial neon colors and the rustling sound they make, fsh, fsh, fsh, like a layered princess’s dress when she gracefully bows.

I enjoy walking at my dad’s side and, occasionally mounted on his shoulders, I like to overlook a dense crowd of his co-workers. They are laughing and joking in the anticipation of a warm living room, of a table filled with *zakuski* (appetizers), and of a precious bottle of vodka, sweating with voluptuous icy moisture in the refrigerator. At somebody’s house, a long “at-the-tableness,” a good old Russian *zastol’ye*, is awaiting them with not just dinner, but a safe heaven and togetherness, away from menacing Soviet meaninglessness. Warmed up by the drink and by the hearty meal, they will spill out their souls and crack Brezhnev jokes. To their relief, language can be trusted again, as it will have regained its dual Saussurian function, with a signifier and a signified, the sounds refilled with content. My dad is famous for his joke telling, and, falling asleep, I hear his clownish voice, followed by a burst of loud laughter in chorus.

Humor transcended Soviet life, mostly dark folk humor, *humour noir*. For seventeen years in America, I have been stubbornly trying to make my children understand and enjoy *chastushki* (miniature rhymes) and Soviet era jokes, the folklore baggage of endurance and emptiness, omnipresent and yet invisible in Russian discourse, like The Cheshire Cat’s smile. That secret code of collective wit helped maintain sanity amidst Soviet semiotic madness and generated a sense of complicity in the ambience of meaningless Soviet “newspeak.”

This complicity with my children is what I have been trying to achieve, but how can I make sense of it all, without sounding foolish, when I retell those jokes half in Russian and half in English and when I try to interpret those morbid rhymes?

Маленький мальчик нашёл пулемёт —
 Больше в деревне никто не живёт.

A little boy found a machine gun —
 Now his village's population is none.

Катя на речку купаться пошла —
 В среду нырнула, в субботу всплыла.

Katie jumped in the river with a plop —
 Went in on Wednesday; Saturday floated to the top.

They stare at me in disbelief. “What’s wrong with you, Ma? What’s wrong with your Russian culture?”

What to me is a healthy cultural response to almost a century of the theater of the absurd appears as an untranslatable gloom and sadism to my kids, who are only minimally initiated into the Russian cultural experience, mostly via their grandmother’s dramatic lectures. What’s lost in translation is the wisdom and the discourse of survival, a reflection in the reflection of our lives. How can I blame my children for not partaking in that sensibility when it is precisely what we have escaped *from*? Why do I seek their understanding when they are what we have escaped *to*?

And yet, cultural experience notwithstanding, all children, universally, have a special taste for nonsense humor and “strange poetry,” the absurd and the grotesque, brilliantly captured by Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl, and Shel Silverstein—minus the morose Russian flavor. Perhaps at the initial stage of language development, discovering pure sensation of uttering words, children engage in the game of separating sounds from meaning, the signifier from the signified. Since they haven’t yet formed strong personal associations with words, they lack that emotional idiosyncratic connection to language called “language embodiment” that makes words and idioms unquestionable and frozen in their phonetic and later graphic shell. Perhaps in this pristine developmental “Wonderland” it is fun to assemble, disassemble, and reassemble those functions while playing and experimenting with them like Lego pieces.

Because of their imaginative play with language, children easily recognize the subverted meaning in a poem as a whimsical pun or a linguistic game, for it is their own creative game, too, and a secret between them and the author, often involving a parent who reads to the child. Are these innocent linguistic novices, distanced from language in the process of

acquiring it, “natural” formalists? Are we all born to enjoy words in a culturally universal catharsis?

Whether it happened thanks to this “natural” formalism or to my nurturing efforts, my younger daughter’s favorite poet was Daniil Kharms, the Russian absurdist of the 1920s and 1930s. Even now, far beyond that developmental stage, having switched Russian from her first to her second language, Julia is never tired of reiterating Kharms’s lines, about Petya Pinchikov, who can’t stop stuffing himself with *blinchiki*, about a cat with an injured paw who springs in the air with balloons, or about the magic *Circus Printipram*.

Russian Formalism, as a literary movement and a precursor of structuralism, was a response to an unconscious need to transcend life’s paradoxes with language. As Dada and Surrealism emerged in Europe in the wake of World War I, so Russian Formalism arose during the post-revolutionary years, bringing a wave of change to poetry and literature—only to be pulverized soon afterwards by prohibition and terror.

Russian Formalism’s founders, Victor Shklovsky, Yury Tynyanov, and Boris Ekhenbaum, among others, built a consistent literary theory focused on form, composition, poetic devices, and the craft of the author, which was divorced from political, cultural, and historical context. The theory’s main construct is “*ostranneniye slova*,” the “defamiliarization of the word,” which produces an artistic effect by “estranging” words from their familiar connotations and contexts. Poets like Khlebnikov and Kharms, for example, accomplish just that, making adults feel unreasonably and strangely joyful, as if attuned to their childhood’s love affair with the linguistic form.

Every year, my father watched on television a popular movie of the forties, *Best Friends*, and sang its popular tunes along with his favorite characters. His nostalgia for illusions, for genuine life-saving friendships, and for a meaning greater than the ordinary life that he had experienced in his youth fighting the war and defending his motherland, pierced my heart with bittersweet pain. Although he had seen all possible war horrors, from the Battle of Kursk to street fights in Berlin, my Dad romanticized the war, like most people of his generation subjected to Soviet propaganda, which canonized and glorified massive patriotism into a socialist realist ethos.

This brainwashing was effectively wearing off during the Brezhnev era, and the erosion of meaning, the emptiness of official discourse, and the never-ending absurdity generated contempt and cynicism. My generation cracked morbid jokes, sang *chastushki*, and developed a special affinity with forbidden Dadaists and Surrealists André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Max Ernst,

Salvador Dali, and René Magritte. At our own risk, we passed to each other *samizdat* poems written by Russian formalists and futurists of the 1920s–1930s, Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexey Kruchonykh, and Daniil Kharms, among many others. We cherished priceless art albums and Ionesco’s plays smuggled from abroad. Some of us, the fortunate French speakers, watched, in confusion and awe, Bunuel’s and Goddard’s movies at the French Embassy. My father did not even know these names.

Kharms was a special “sweetheart” of my college years, a cheerful presence exhaling our everyday experiences whose grotesqueness we could not otherwise articulate. We copied by hand and typed Kharms’s vignettes with carbon paper and quoted by heart from his rhythmic telegraphic lines:

The Plummeting Old Women

A certain old woman, out of her excessive curiosity, fell out of a window, plummeted to the ground, and was smashed to pieces.

Another old woman leaned out and began looking at the remains of the first one, but she also, out of excessive curiosity, fell out of the window, plummeted to the ground and was smashed to pieces.

Then a third old woman plummeted from the window, then a fourth, then a fifth.

By the time a sixth old woman had plummeted down, I was fed up watching them, and went off to Maltsevskiy Market where, it was said, a knitted shawl had been given to a certain blind man.

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Or take, for example, Kharms’s *Scenes from Pushkin’s Life*, where Alexander Pushkin, the grand Russian classic, whose name makes Russians kneel, is removed from his august pedestal and placed in common, almost vulgar situations where he is throwing stones, whining about his thin facial hair, or pathologically falling off his chair along with his seemingly retarded children.

Daniil Kharms’s life was itself an example of “estrangement” from reality, a dreadful act of tragic absurdity. During the revolutionary years, Kharms made his living writing children’s books in Leningrad, but he also wrote poems and absurdist short stories, some of which were published in underground magazines and later banned by Stalin’s regime. That was sufficient to convict the poet of anti-Soviet activities and to send him to

prison and exile. In 1937 his children's books were banned and removed from circulation. In 1941, shortly before the Germans' siege of Leningrad, Kharms was arrested a second time and accused of spreading defeatist propaganda. During the trial, Kharms was declared mentally incompetent (so much for healing humor in Russia!) and incarcerated in a military prison in Leningrad. In 1942, while Leningrad was ravaged by famine, Kharms starved to death while in that prison.

Okay then . . . let's see if you got it, kids. . . . So a boy found a machine gun in the field. . . . Why? That must have been a machine gun that had been there since the war. Why is that strange? For years after the war, people found grenades and weapons in the fields and the woods, and there were tragic accidents. And the next line is: nobody lives in that village anymore. . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! Why? Because he shot them all, duh! Why did he do it? Because he was a normal Russian boy, that's why! Why all? I don't know, because it is a machine gun or because it is a small village. . . . Okay, how about Pushkin's children who were falling, one by one, off their chairs . . . ? Did you get that one? WHO IS PUSHKIN???

Growing up Soviet meant, among other things, desensitizing oneself to absurdity by adopting a defensive cynicism. My childhood "family romance," with Mom cooking exquisite "mandatory holiday" meals and my Dad entertaining his guests during their elaborate "at-the-tablenesses" was over. As November 7 celebratory rallies became mandatory for me, too, Moscow streets did not appear festive with their red ornaments. Puffy paper flowers, little red flags, and princess's dresses were gone. Red was a dull ordinary color, the color of familiar hypocrisy and lies, the color of nothingness, almost the same as an invisible gray. I lost my innocence, my sense of detachment, and all my "natural" formalism.

About thirty years later, on November 7, the day of the U.S. Congressional elections, emotions ran high in New York about the war in Iraq, and on my way back from voting, I happened to get in the elevator with a young man who I knew was from a Russian family although technically an ordinary American kid. Spontaneously, I spoke to him (in English), expressing my hope for change. He looked at me, with visible puzzlement, open contempt, and all too familiar apathy and said, "Republicans or Democrats . . . who cares? Isn't it the same thing?"

My American colleagues often asked me about their Russian students' cynical remarks, crooked smiles, and disdainful giggling in response to their socially relevant teaching and frequently politicized classrooms. I did my

best to explain. I lectured them about the scarred Soviet tissue of cynicism, political apathy, and trans-generational effects of Soviet history. I tried to translate into English Russian jokes and rhymes. I even drew a Homo Sovieticus on a piece of paper. And I attempted to translate Daniil Kharms's vignettes, only to be crushed by the room's dead silence.

Cultural translation is always problematic. Maybe I have a better chance with literature? I might get through to them via my favorite Russian novel, a jewel of wit, *Master and Margarita*, and Bulgakov's interpretation of the New Testament, in which Jesus Christ's story is described as a real event—perhaps more real than Satan's burlesque adventures in Moscow. Perhaps they would get it from the book, the essence of Soviet experience? Dictatorship and utopia, in Bulgakov's version of Christ's story, embedded in the ideas of Bolshevik revolution; faith and romance in conflict with themselves; good and evil switching their roles. What else can be an answer to that but Satan's infamous ball or the crazy *Circus Printipram*?

Very few of my American friends and colleagues felt compelled to read the novel and even when they did, they hardly enjoyed it. One of them, my last hope, a widely read intellectual, said with blunt honesty, "This is nothing but the romanticized Russian drunkenness. . . . No, I don't get it. . . . Why is it a masterpiece?" She didn't quite understand Andrey Platonov's *Foundation Pit* either.

In cases like this, my mother sighs with bitterness, reiterating her favorite mantra: "They will never get it! One has to live there to understand!" The untranslatable is existential and emotionally painful; it is about unrequited old pains and far-gone eras, about living in a foreign land that will never replace home because home is in the past, and about losing the slight possibility of perpetuating oneself culturally, as well as biologically, in children and grandchildren, who had already cut off that primary connection, the umbilical cord of immortality.

I am not immune to these fears and anxieties either. My emotional response to a frustrating life in the untranslatable is a compulsive desire to make myself known and understood and to regain the complicity and the intimacy of my first language and culture that used to embody family and home. Although I comfortably use English at home, it is not in English that I rode my first bike, scribbled my first letter, got drunk with my buddies in the park, or made love for the first time. That visceral home is whispering longingly somewhere deep in my limbic system and is trying to recognize itself in a sixteenth century "back to the future" surrealistic still-life by Juan Sánchez Cotán, in my virtual flight over a spacious Vermont landscape, and

in Patrick Modiano's novel about a Jewish girl in Nazi occupied Paris. How can I, like Christo, transcend cultural space—use English to name home?

Draping Le Pont Neuf in Paris, Christo crossed out, at least temporarily, three centuries of French history. The silvery geometric shape that used to be The Reichstag deleted Nazi Germany for a few months. The “surrounded islands” in Florida transformed a majestic topography into silly ballerinas in pink tutus. And the wide spaces and horizons, speckled by yellow and blue umbrellas, made the valleys of Japan and California look like a child's playground.

Now I understand why Christo's art has to be squeezed into the term “exhibit” and why it is designed to have a limited lifetime. The subverted “defamiliarized” public space, a huge *ostranneniye slova!* Meanings are removed and given different perspectives with an invitation for a new marriage of the content and form. Here Russian white fluffy *zima* becomes dry American *winter*. Here Kharms's old ladies fall one by one from their windows and Pushkin's children drop from their chairs. Here animals and clowns perform magic in the *Circus Printipram*. Here I feel alienated and yet whole again, like a rejuvenated immigrant, “*svoi sredi chuzhikh, chuzhoi sredi svoikh*”—at home among strangers, a stranger among one's own.

Although Christo has never wrapped the Kremlin, his spirit has undoubtedly visited Moscow's modified public spaces and “defamiliarized” landscapes. Needless to say, here his umbrellas were not blue or yellow but red, yet it was not the color of The Great October Revolution. This was a new red, the color of the blossoming tacky Russian capitalism, resembling the fake tissue paper flowers that I liked as a child. Several clusters of these umbrellas, with a universally familiar white Coca-Cola signature above ice cream stands, burst into view at the approach of the Victory Memorial on Mount Poklonnaya, devoted to the Soviet victory in World War II.

Since everything is for sale now, Russia has a hard time preserving its “aesthetics of the red.” The war is perhaps the only remaining public concept of the Soviet era that is carefully guarded against cynicism, and when the memorial itself, with the obelisk and the fountains, several sculpture ensembles, and a charming golden-dome church on its left, comes into view as secondary, past the snack stands and the bright red umbrellas, one can't help but see it as sacrilege. The effect is *The Coca-Cola Victory Memorial!*

Walking around Moscow, I nervously giggle looking at *Dom Pashkova* (Pashkov's House), the former Romyantsev Library. This architectural landmark of the eighteenth century designed by the famous Vasily Bazhenov has been transformed into *Dom Pashkova Samsung*, a Samsung logo pinned

on its sumptuous belvedere's roof! And here is *Dom Na Naberezhnoy Mercedes*, the residential complex built by Stalin for government workers, one of the darkest monuments of Moscow history, bearing the Mercedes logo on its roof. Two hundred forty-two residents of this "House on the Embankment" were shot during The Great Terror, and how many more disappeared, were tortured, exiled, and suffered despicable dramas for several generations. *Mercedes*, huh? A typical Russian black humor joke!

In large squares and avenues and in the middle of old quiet streets, all over Moscow I see wild incongruous constructions mushroom in dissonance with the architectural environment densely filled with history. Some are made of dark glass, impersonal and oppressive, as if transferred from a downtown American city and inserted, as in a collage, in the wrong picture; some in Florida colors, pink, sky blue, yellow and lilac, with pointy Cinderella castles, towers, and balconies. "Christo" met "Kharms" here and together they had the fun of their lives!

Perhaps *ostranneniye slova* is a specifically Russian phenomenon, emerging in different eras in different forms. It is hardly coincidental that a theory conceptualizing it was born in Russia. As history inscribed itself in the present at every turn, dissonance, disembodiment, and incongruity have become part of Russian culture every step of the way and found expression in language, popular discourse, literature, folklore, and visual arts.

Formalism in one form or another, as a discrepancy between the signifier and the signified, was a response to eras ending too abruptly in too many coups and upheavals, to the resulting quantum leaps and chaotic transitions, always too slow to stop backwardness and too rapid to establish the avant-garde. The "Russian Ark," as in Sokurov's film, is always trying to catch up with time, with the West, with itself and creates a burlesque sense of reality. Maybe, because of this cultural legacy, the Russian psyche has evolved to be particularly well attuned to the workings of content and form, and has arrived at a position of decontextualized detachment, and to an immigrant status quo of untranslatable jokes that nobody understands.

Works Cited

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