



# Literature and the Russian cultural code at the beginning of the 21st century

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## ABSTRACT

In the article the role of Russian literature at the beginning of the twenty first century is looked over. The loss of the literature-centricity in Russian culture occurred almost right after wreck of the USSR. So literature now has lost functions which were traditional for it during three last ages. Russian literature formed a national cultural code and formed a manner to feel and think, which did characterize Russian person. The Russian literature accumulated Historical Memory and National Identity, was a form of historical socialization. Also Socialist Realism is looked over as a mythogenic aesthetics.

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## 1. Cultural vacuum as a factor of the modern time

The feeling of an ideological and even a cultural vacuum is becoming one of the dominants in the consciousness (and subconsciousness) of the modern society. Having appeared a long time ago, about one and a half decades, it is not weakening, but, on the contrary, is getting even stronger. This feeling is also shared by individuals, whose life goals, as a rule, are merely personal and limited by their families, private relationships or, at best, career ambitions in a company, firm, bureau or office. These things are certainly not enough: the life perspectives awaiting an individual who belongs to “the office plankton” don’t seem to be satisfactory for a person who has the ability to think.

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This vacuum is felt by a class of politicians as well, who over the last ten years or so have been from time to time seeking “the Russian idea” that would be shared by the whole society and be its guideline in the historic space. In other words, there exists a vacuum of ideas and concepts of what our national identity is and what it is formed by that is felt by all the strata in our society. In addition, there is a vacuum of ideology that could determine the character of the historic path that has been passed, our current place in the national-historic space and the long-term as well as short-term perspectives standing before a modern man and society as a whole.

Today, we are so much afraid of the very concept of ideology – the fear of the only true “Marxist and Leninist ideology” risks becoming genetic and inherited by the future generations. Meanwhile, the lack of an idea (or a set of reflected ideas, i.e. an ideology) is the lack of a comprehensible historic perspective. If one ideology collapsed, does that mean that no other common ideology that could unite people and organize a society for finding historic perspectives could exist? It seems that the very idea of its formation doesn’t occur in the corridors of power.

And what can the present-day political elite thinking primarily in economic terms offer an individual and

society? Some innovations limited to the total computerization of schools? (And are they so really necessary everywhere and always? Won't this rush for innovations at all costs in such traditionally conservative areas as, for example, education become a mindless destruction of what has been accumulated by the Russian school over the last three decades). The development of nanotechnology? With all the significance of these objectives they are unlikely to be of crucial social importance.

This, let us call it, mental vacuum is aggravated by TV whose influence on the consciousness of our contemporaries has become truly limitless. Its catastrophically low level that makes people blunt and the absence of political and analytical programs make the picture of cultural and ideological vacuum even worse. The Russian (and, perhaps, the world) mass-media are not even aimed at the formation and articulation of some socially and nationally important ideas.

## 2. A literary character in the ontological depression

Are the modern literature and the writers aware of this ideological vacuum, which can become ontological, that we are talking about? Is it articulated by the critics?

Strictly speaking, it is much more difficult to realize the absence of something than to state its presence. The lack of a national historical and ideological perspective seems to have become a common phenomenon that doesn't require any realization and interpretation. However, it has been at least reflected, if not realized and interpreted, by the modern literature. The problems raised by Y. Polyakov in his novel "The Mushroom Tsar" are in many ways determined by the emptiness of life experienced by every modern man, whether he is the owner of a small business, a former military man or a student, who has at least the slightest ability to think.

The plot of the novel is a kind of game. One day a director of the firm "SANTECHCOMFORT", selling sanitary equipment – fashionable toilets in the first place (such an ironic detail), – who is quite a respectable man by the modern standards (he is divorced and lives alone, he has a young lover and takes care of his ne'er-do-well daughter who is a student willingly extending her stay at the institute by compensating her poor academic results with generous sponsor contributions), wakes up in the morning in a company of two prostitutes and tries to understand the consequences for his health of the nocturnal adventures. A respectable and successful man, neither a villain nor a hypocrite, such a character may be perceived very positively, but only in modern times (just imagine how Igor Dedkov, a critic of the 1960s, would have reacted upon such a character, if only he had read this novel of the first decade of the 21st century!).

The plot of the novel is a widening gap between the outer well-being of the main character, Mikhail Dmitrievich Svirelnikov (solid business, lack of private and other debts, complete material independence) and the oppressive feeling of deathly emptiness that fills his life. The character is able to recognize that his relationship with daughter is off, he has neither love that is replaced by "a relationship", nor true occupation – apart from the

toilets. Instead, he has got money that becomes the embodiment of emptiness: it buys the surrogates of love, friendship and communication. How far he is from the superhuman ideas, involvement into the national life or at least some participation in it!

The novel begins with a nearly Kafkaesque dream in which the main character gathers mushrooms, wonderful and beautiful, but after breaking one he discovers that it is rotten inside, with tiny black vipers swarming and wriggling inside instead of the ordinary yellow larvae. Awakening became a greater nightmare: choking with disgust and pain, the character pulled his sweater off and saw that many vipers had mysteriously migrated to his body and dug the gray winding tunnels under his left nipple – and after that the character found himself in the company of two prostitutes waiting for the pay. The metaphor of the dead flesh and rot is realized at the level of the detective plot of the novel: after having found that he is spied upon, the main character asks his security service to carry out an investigation suspecting his wife and her lover, his former colleague and a friend of the planning of a murder, and prepares a response of the corresponding character. Polyakov shows a subtle and devastating destruction of some primordial moral foundations of human life: to save himself and his business the main character orders the murder of his ex-wife and it is only the efficient work of the security service that prevents the crime from happening – his wife doesn't appear to be preparing any crime against Svirelnikov, the only thing she wants is to appropriate a half of her ex-husband's business – indeed, a fair claim!

The novel has a circle composition: the nightmare of picking mushrooms repeats at the end, but in a real life. From a mobile phone call Mikhail Dmitrievich learns that the murder didn't take place and gets a great relief, akin to intoxication, "that sudden good weakness which comes down, if you drink a glass of vodka on an empty stomach". The reader begins to hope that at this moment the character will feel a revival of the genuine in himself, but no, Polyakov ruthlessly realizes the metaphor of carrion and decay, with which the novel begins. The character thanks the Mushroom Tsar, a huge and beautiful mushroom, which, as it seems to him, saved him from a crime, "Mikhail turned his head with difficulty and looking gratefully at his rescuer gently stroked its cold and wet, like a marine animal's skin, cap:

- Thank you!

From this light touch Erlkönig trembled, leaned and fell apart becoming a disgusting heap of slime infested with big yellow worms...".

Alas, the life of the character, a very modern and plunged into the socio-historical, psychological and mental environment of the mid-2000s, has no basis other than the money coming from imported toilets. In fact, having all the components of the present-day gentleman's set (a good car, a lot of money, an ardent lover, contacts with people from the middle and upper bureaucratic hierarchy, without which a business won't work), the character has nothing else but money (a half of which can be grabbed by the ex-wife and her lover). Money and groveling allow him to buy bureaucrats, a young mistress and his daughter, whom he generously endows and gets snorts in response ...

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