Nation Versus Soul: Questioning Pre-revolutionary Cultural Myths and Memory in Post-Soviet Russian Literature

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the perception of nineteenth-century Russian cultural myths in post-Soviet literature written between 1999 and 2009 by ethnic Russians currently living in Russia. In an analysis of three texts by Zakhar Prilepin, Viktor Erofeev and Viktor Pelevin, it studies the reuse of three important facets of nineteenth-century Russian self-identity which have contributed to the conception of Russianness. These are the notions of *dukhovnost'* (spirituality), *narodnost'* (nationality) and the Russian national character, symbolized by the myth of the "Russian soul" and embodied in the *pravdoiskatel'* (truthseeker). It argues that ethnic Russian writers have returned to their literary past in order to assess the relevance of pre-revolutionary ideas of Russianness to what it means to be Russian in the new millennium. Additionally, it demonstrates that within the imagined community (not including émigrés), there is a significant difference in how they appreciate it. While Prilepin represents the new wave of populist idealism, Erofeev and Pelevin deconstruct the myths ascribed to Russian people and their culture. In opposition to Prilepin, they suggest that Russianness according to nineteenth-century Russian thought is outdated because it undermines the extent to which Russian identity has since developed, specifically regarding national, cultural and ideological values. This study contributes to Russian identity studies in its focus on contemporary authors' recycling of cultural memory and re-membering their fragmented conception of self.

Résumé

Cette thèse porte sur la perception des mythes culturels russes du XIXe siècle dans la littérature post-soviétique écrite entre les années 1999 et 2009 par les russes ethniques qui ont toujours demeuré en Russie. À travers l'analyse de trois textes de Zakhar Prilepine, Victor Erofeev et Victor Pelevine, elle étudie la réutilisation de trois aspects importants de l'auto-identité russe du XIXe siècle qui ont contribué à la conception de la russité. Ces trois aspects sont constitués des notions *dukhovnost* (spiritualité), *narodnost* (nationalité) et de caractère national russe, ce dernier symbolisé par le mythe de "l'âme russe" et representé dans le *pravdoiskatel* (chercheur de vérité). La présente thèse fait valoir que les écrivains ont retrouvé leur passé littéraire afin d'évaluer la pertinence des idées pré-révolutionnaires de la russité redéfinissants la signification d'être Russe dans le nouveau millénaire. De plus, elle montre qu'au sein de la "communauté imaginée" (excluant les émigrés), il y a une différence significative dans la façon dont ils considèrent ce passé. Alors que Prilepine représente la nouvelle vague de l'idéalisme populiste, Erofeev et Pelevine déconstruisent les mythes sur le peuple russe et sa culture. Par opposition à Prilepine, ils proposent que la russité élaborée selon la pensée russe du XIXe siècle est obsolète parce qu'elle oublie que l'identité russe s'est développée depuis, en particulier en ce qui concerne les valeurs nationales, culturelles et idéologiques. Cette mémoire contribue aux études sur l'identité russe post-soviétique en se concentrant sur le recyclage des mémoires culturelles visant à reconstruire une image de soi fragmentée.

Acknowledgments

By the time I had decided to pursue a Master's degree in Russian Studies, I had already acquired over ten years of immersion experience in Russian life. It was therefore my goal to prove what I had come to appreciate about the Russian people and their culture, according to the individuals with whom I discussed the topic of Russianness for years. With a rather naive understanding of the unique parameters that constitute academia, I approached the study of Russian literature with an argument about contemporary Russian culture that I was determined to prove. With painstaking care, I searched for evidence that my understanding of Russian cultural identity in the new millennium was one that Russians as a whole—not just the small population that I knew, in all its diversity—also shared. The beauty of exploring the landscape of literature is its power to embody a national cultural phenomenon that one may otherwise overlook. I am indebted to many people for their part in helping make this thesis come to fruition, including colleagues for introducing me to works that I would not have discovered on my own, and to my professors, for accommodating my pursuit of an interdisciplinary approach Russian studies despite the program's emphasis on literature.

I am forever grateful to my thesis supervisor, Laura Beraha, for her unwavering persistence, her invaluable guidance and meticulousness through numerous revisions of my thesis until the very end, which without argument has ensured the quality of the final product.

I am also indebted to my colleague, Vladimir Ivantsov, for suggesting (though on a comical whim) that I read the two novels by V. Pelevin and V. Erofeev, the analyses of which comprise the bulk of this thesis. I also thank Serkan Eli Yarali for his help in editing my thesis.

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Notes On Transliteration and Translation

In order to improve the comprehensibility of this thesis for English readers, Russian terms and phrases that are used in explanatory segments are transcribed and italicized, and followed by an English translation in parentheses. All quotations cited from texts originally written in Russian are first provided in English and then in the original Russian in parentheses.

Book titles are provided in the original Russian cyrillic followed by the English translation (or the transliteration when untranslatable) and the year of publication. For example, *Энциклопедия русской души*: *Роман с энциклопедией* (Encyclopedia of the Russian Soul: A Novel with An Encyclopedia 1999) and *Санькя* (San'kia 2006).

Block quotes are provided in an English translation followed by the original Russian. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian to English were made by Elizabeth Pearl Morgan, with the help of Professor Laura Beraha.

Introduction

The idea that Russians have debated their identity since their beginnings has been long familiar in the West. Despite its geographical location, wedged between the East and the West, Russia's relationship to the two opposing worlds has historically been one of political isolation and cultural dependency on both poles (Groys 1992; Boym 1994; Billington 2004; Cheauré 2010; Cicek 2015). Russian national consciousness evolved from the intelligentsia's acute awareness of and response to the West's "perpetual stream of controversy over hundreds of years" and unflattering categorization of Russia as a "mysterious, dark, barbaric place" (Rabo-Edling 2006; Brenton 2013). Another persuasive adage about the Russians is their apparent reliance on other nations' perception of them to create their own sense of self (Cross 92). At the height of Russia's Golden Age (1820-1905),[1] the debate about Russia's essence that renders its character unique or universal had become an essential facet of Russian philosophy and literature. Consequently, *russkost'* (Russianness), as defined by high culture within Russia and abroad, historically reflects the Russian cultural elite's literary contributions to the subject, creating a notion of self that is "literaturocentric" in nature (Dovlatov 1991). Driven by an internal controversy fueled by divergent reactions to (and anticipation of) the West's judgment, Russian cultural identity still centers on the Golden Age, the most vigorous period of the nation's philosophical and intellectual inquiry, and so draws on ideological, rather than material factors.

Historically, canonical texts in Russian literature have been selected for and shaped by their use as a "vehicle for ideology and social criticism" (Kelly and Shepherd 1). It is not

[1] Defined here as beginning with the works of Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837) and ending with Anton Chekhov (1860-1904).

surprising that post-Soviet writers seldom miss the opportunity to assert their opinions on past constructions of self (Parts 2002; Lipovetskii 1999; Ageev 1995). This thesis centers on the recycling of pre-revolutionary Russian cultural myths in post-Soviet Russian literature. It will study the implications of three post-Soviet Russian writers' perspectives on the myths of the *narod* (nation, people), *dukhovnost'* (spirituality), and the "Russian soul." It will show that their looking back to Russia's most vibrant years serves to alleviate the ideological vacuum produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union. It will also demonstrate that twenty-first-century Russian literature has become a transitional mechanism for contemplating and probing viable connections between pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet notions of Russianness.

The present work is based on the premise that the Golden Age canon continues to supply the dominant notions of Russian national and cultural identity, as confirmed by recent studies in various scholarly disciplines (Morozov 2015; Sakharov 2015; Haskins 2009; Billington 2004; Olson 2004; Franklin and Widdis 2004; Kelly and Shepherd 1998a). In addition to presenting each chapter, this introduction contains an overview of existing research from Russian literary and cultural studies in order to provide a historical context for the problems discussed, and a synopsis of the three primary texts analyzed in this thesis. These are: the semi-autobiographical essay collection, *Я пришел из России: Эссе* (I Came From Russia: Essays 2009), by Zakhar Prilepin; the novel, *Энциклопедия русской души: роман с энциклопедией* (Encyclopedia of the Russian Soul: A Novel with an Encyclopedia 1999), hereafter *Encyclopedia*, by Viktor Erofeev; and *t: роман* (t: A Novel 2009), by Viktor Pelevin. The variety of genres represented by these three texts serves to demonstrate the prevalence of the debate about Russian identity as a topic that post-Soviet writers have not merely returned to the forefront of literature, but have addressed

in different styles in order to accommodate their diverse readerships in twenty-first-century Russia, as well as the émigré diaspora.

As Russian national consciousness developed at the intersection of its literary elites' ever-evolving views, Russian nineteenth-century cultural identity tended to reflect the subjective nature of the intelligentsia's understanding of their peasant compatriots, who were for the most part not interested in national agendas not directly related to the *obshchina* or *mir* (peasant village society). Nineteenth-century Russian literature bears testament to the nation's coming of self through negotiating the notions of authenticity and modernity in order to replace what its leaders feared was an inferior civilization with European state-of-the-art cultural norms. It was this effort to distinguish themselves from imported elements of Western culture that became the cornerstone of the Russian identity. Russian thought itself became a trope for the unresolved *russkii vopros* (Russian question), essentially a conglomerate of presumptive assertions put forth by Russia's canonical writers all predicated on cultural myths of religion and spirituality, nationhood, and a way of being.

Both Russian and Western critics in various fields have exploited the "anomalous" quality ascribed to the Russian people and their culture in order to draw "somewhat arbitrary and unsophisticated […] connections between 'literature' and 'society,' 'text' and 'context'" (Kelly and Shepherd 1998b:1-2). And while Russia's most influential thinkers may exemplify this supposedly national character (Basinskii 2012), the factors stymying the nation's social, cultural and political development are far too complex to be explained by a broad correlation between historical occurrences and the personalities of its iconic cultural figures.

The idea that post-Soviet Russia in the twenty-first century is a "subaltern empire" attempting to reconcile with its postcolonial identity has inspired the present thesis (Morozov 2015). Its aim is to understand how writers within the "imagined community," to use Anderson's (1983) term, of ethnic Russians negotiate persisting notions of Russianness upheld by both traditional and contemporary scholarly criticism in Russia and the West. This project breaks new ground: it applies existing research in identity studies and culturology on post-Soviet conceptions of Russianness to the field of literature. It relies on the theories of Orientalism (Said 1978), Postcolonialism (Bhahba 1994) and the self-colonization among ethnic Others (Kiossev 2010) as well as some of the most important contributions to Russian culture and identity studies by Mikhail Epstein, James Billington, Svetlana Boym and Boris Groys, in order to compare post-Soviet Russian introspective literature to its nineteenth-century counterpart. It also identifies how post-Soviet ethnic Russian writers interact with their literary-cultural heritage in order to negotiate the sustainability of pre-revolutionary conceptions of Russianness in the present context.

All primary texts in this thesis were written by ethnic Russian writers living in Russia who experienced the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They were published within a single decade, between 1999 and 2009, an ideal time frame to reveal different perspectives on Russian cultural identity in a period of transition. Although the question addressed in this thesis is complex and warrants a thorough and broader, comparative analysis that accounts for Russia's diverse demographic, this preliminary study serves to evidence the diversity of perspectives on Russianness in post-Soviet Russian culture. This study focuses on ethnic Russian writers in order to demonstrate that despite the recent success of nationalist leadership, the Russian political and

cultural environments are not homogenous. Beneath the powerful, conservative-isolationist national discourse is a lively debate about the rapprochement with pre-Soviet official values, such as Russian Orthodoxy, and bold arguments against not only the populist "Russia for Russians" movement, but also the notion that Russians can be defined by racial, ethnic, cultural, and ideological categories. Finally, this selection reflects the points of view of "new wave" post-Soviet authors, who have achieved considerable recognition for their artistic resemblance to the nineteenth-century tradition as well as their deviance from it (Beliakov 47).

To begin with, of these three works, *I Came From Russia* is characteristic of the conservative post-Soviet writers. He employs Russian coloring (stylizing the people and scenes of everyday life according to cultural myths of Russianness) and the pathos typical of Russian romantic and realist canonical prose. It comprises a selection of editorial pieces written between 2005 and 2008 about post-Soviet Russian life from the author's personal experience. In it, Prilepin compares post-Soviet Russian society to that of the pre-revolutionary era and suggests that the present ideological chaos is due to the nation's fragile connection with its heritage (Tsvetova 455). He upholds Slavophile notions of Russianness, turning back to a nineteenth-century school of thought that described authentic Russian culture as rooted in the Slavic folk tradition, the Russian language, and the Russian Orthodox faith. The essays exemplify the popular nostalgic conception of the distant past and perceived loss of the "true" Russian spirit; they are compiled in non-chronological order, but collectively illustrate the gradual change in the author's perspective on the nation's challenges in the post-communist era. In the last piece in the collection, the author implies that returning to pre-revolutionary conceptions of Russianness

defined by a tradition in line with Orthodox values and the idea of nationality emphasizing an ethnic "Russian soul" will resolve the current post-Communist identity crisis.

Encyclopedia presents a polemic against Prilepin's (and other nationalists') vision of a viable and unified Russian cultural tradition. In it, Erofeev continues his well-known criticism of pre-revolutionary Russian thought and "addresses many issues of […] the Russian cultural tradition" and "the intelligentsia's messianic visions of Russian history" (Rudova and Spektor 87). Each topic is presented in essay form from the point of view of an unnamed narrator who has embarked on a detective-like mission to capture and destroy the main protagonist, Seryi. The mission proves to be impossible as Seryi turns out to be a constantly regenerating vampire-villain (Seryi dies and comes back to life several times). His character is "polyphonic" in that he represents "a single individual, no one and a hundred thousand [different characters]: he himself does not know which of his personas is the real one" (Salmon 186). Over the course of the narrator's investigation, he discovers the historical scope of Russianness. Disillusioned, he comes to understand that Seryi, as the soul of Russia, is indestructible because he is inseparable from the Russian past and present as well as the people and their culture. The narrator abandons his mission and accepts the dismal idea that the Russian people must remain captive to its spirit, Seryi, in order to exist. This in turn causes him to denounce himself as a coward for lacking the rationality to destroy his culture's greatest vice.

One might understand Erofeev's bleak metaphor as the author's attempt to argue that reconstructing a national identity is a worthless investment since, according to history, it will eventually dissolve once again. In the section titled "История национального футбола" ("The History of National Football"), Erofeev compares Russian history to a soccer match and

concludes that Russia's leaders have treated nation-building as a sport, so that one "*skipped* century" ("*пропущенный* век") has followed after another (39; original emphasis). According to Erofeev, Russia's greatest vice is its attraction and commitment to the clichéd idea of its intrinsic, enigmatic quality. Probably the best-known example within Russian culture is the poem "Умом Россию не понять" (Russia Cannot Be Understood With The Mind 1866) by the poet and diplomat Fedor Tiutchev, about Russia's mysticism:

> Умом Россию не понять,
> Аршином общим не измерить:
> У ней особенная стать —
> В Россию можно только верить.
>
> Russia cannot be understood by the mind,
> Nor measured on a common scale:
> She is of a peculiar kind—
> In Russia only faith prevails.[2]

Winston Churchill reaffirmed this notion during the Cold War in his assertion: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."[3] This idea has since acquired the value of an indispensable variable in discussing Russian domestic and international affairs. While the myth of the Russian "soul" is often imbued with sentimental patriotism as in Tyutchev's poem, Erofeev attacks the traditional pathos, and blames it for what he sees as the deplorable character ingrained in the spirit of the Russia's leadership and its common man.

Recognizing Erofeev for his trenchant criticism of Soviet society, scholars have also noted his targeting of "nineteenth-century realism, with which socialist realism shared certain

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[2] My translation.

[3] Radio broadcast on October 1, 1939.

aesthetic methods of representation, messianic and prophetic tendencies and a belief in the spiritual nature of human beings" (Rudova and Spektor 86). He represents the post-Soviet "alternative prose writers" who "have lost their belief in the traditional values of the Russian intelligentsia" including "faith, church, culture, […] the people's wisdom, and even the West" (Rudova and Spektor 86). In *Encyclopedia*, Erofeev suggests the complex nature of Russian identity by defining certain terms or phrases only to later disavow them. For example, he continually returns to the meaning of Russianness throughout his novel, initially providing a comprehensive account that various characters later refute or question. Furthermore, contrary to the informational content of articles in a real encyclopedia, the explanations in this text are seldom narrowly conceived outside the scope of an anecdote, particularly one based on black humor. The tone alludes to the anxieties about the cultural and ideological torpor following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the setbacks to creating a "new" identity that is in fact based on imperial precedent.

Some literary critics put the works of Pelevin in the category of the "post-postmodernist" New Sincerity for their "nostalgic return to a literature of lost emotionalism" (Ivanova 62-63; Epstein 1995:336). His oeuvre was recognized as "the hallmark" of the first years of the twenty-first century; together with Vladimir Sorokin, he has been said to "define Russian literature" in the post-Soviet context (Aleksandrov 9). His novel, *t*, looks at the influences of the pre-revolutionary past on post-Soviet culture, but with an apprehensiveness typical of the postmodernist style. As in *Encyclopedia*, the plot of *t* revolves around a quest to achieve sublime understanding of a peculiarly Russian cultural myth. Centering on the moral philosophy and post-conversion life of Lev Tolstoi, Pelevin sets the writer's didactic literature in opposition to

his private persona. Since "the private lives of Russian intellectuals in the nineteenth-century […] were almost as important to their fellows as their artistic and intellectual achievements," their moral integrity was measured against their capacity "to carry out their answers to the eternal questions in their daily lives" (Frede 6). By portraying Tolstoi as a man of conflicted values, Pelevin suggests that Russians never in truth upheld the values by which they attempted to distinguish themselves from others, particularly the West.

In the novel, Tolstoi is caricaturized into the existential hero, Count T., who searches for a mysterious place called Optina Pustyn'. In reality, Optina Pustyn' is a famous Orthodox monastery located in the city of Kozel'sk, Russia. It was a popular destination for pilgrims seeking spiritual hermitage, but became an iconic symbol of Russian spirituality through the accounts of many writers, especially Tolstoi, who frequented it throughout his life (Stanton 42).[4] Count T. is a pretentious, naive young nobleman who fails to live up to his own claim to moral authority as a result of his poor sense of self-control. Pelevin challenges the sincerity of the thinker's lifelong pursuit of divine wisdom and explains his lifestyle as characteristic of "how wealthy gentlemen lived before Rublevka existed" ("как состоятельные господа жили в России, когда рублевки еще не было") (95).[5] The author satirizes Tolstoi's idolization of the "simple" Russian folk (*prostoi narod*). He turns Tolstoi's adoption of romantic nationalist ideas about the cultural and ideological authenticity of the *narod* into an object of his, Pelevin's, postmodernist play. The novel ends with Count T. arriving at Optina Pustyn' by conjuring it up in his imagination and finally becoming a happy man.

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[4] See Bakusev (1997) for various nineteenth-century writers' private correspondence about the monastery.

[5] Rublevka is a historically important affluent neighborhood new Moscow.

Pelevin makes multiple literary allusions to the works and lives of many Russian late eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers. He blames Vladimir Solov'ëv (1853-1900), creator of the doctrine of Sophiology, for conflating fantasy and reality in T.'s world for the sake of Solv'ëv's own amusement. Throughout his quest, T. interacts with a demiurge named Ariel' who tells him that Optina Pustyn' is entirely fictional and his quest is futile.[6] Vexed by the idea of his ultimate powerlessness, T. attempts in vain to disprove Ariel''s theory. He finally meets Solov'ëv, who admits he is responsible for creating the myth of Optina Pustyn' and instilling the idea into T.'s mind. In his defense, Solov'ëv argues that T. has proven that truth exists "within oneself" ("внутри себя") by virtue of one's imagination and entrusts T. with realizing his own version of Optina Pustyn' through the creative process (Pelevin 347).[7] However, when T. believes he has finally found Optina Pustyn', the author notes that his ill-fated hero has actually mistaken a dark hole in the abyss for a place containing "all the answers to every question" (381).

The analysis of these three texts begins with an examination of each author's reaction to the re-instatement of Russian Orthodoxy as the state religion of post-Soviet Russia. Chapter One argues that in spite of the various secular and non-secular notions of spirituality in nineteenth-century Russian thought, *pravoslavnaia dukhovnost'* (Orthodox spirituality) remains the dominant definition of Russian moral consciousness. Exhibiting a Slavophile-leaning conception of the role of the Orthodox faith in the fate of the Russian nation, Prilepin suggests that Russian

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[6] A demiurge is a being that resembles God but lacks omnipotence and omnipresence. In *t*, the demiurge only appears when the author wants him to; he is conscious that he lacks absolute will, but cannot explain it, nor can he interact with the author (Pelevin's subtle metatextual commentary about the power of authorship).

[7] This is a possible allusion to Tolstoi's treatise "Царство Божие внутри себя" (The Kingdom of God is Within Us," 1890-1893).

identity ought to reflect Orthodox traditional values. Erofeev and Pelevin demonstrate little enthusiasm for restoring a religious identity. Erofeev, in fact, offers the harshest criticism of the role played by Russian Orthodoxy in the development of Russian culture throughout history. Pelevin's novel *t* presents *dukhovnost'* as a myth that grew from the nineteenth-century Russian literary conception of Russia's spiritual home. Erofeev's novel rejects the notion of *dukhovnost'* altogether and denies the Russian intelligentsia's capacity for moral consciousness.

Chapter Two explores the re-contextualization of *narodnost'* (nationality) from the cultural myth of the *narod* (nation, or people) from the postmodernist (Erofeev), new sentimentalist (Pelevin), and new-nationalist (Prilepin) perspectives. Since the rise of Russian national consciousness, the meaning of *narod* has become increasingly nuanced as it has grown to symbolize not only the Russian polity, but also a romantic nationalist idea of "the people." In the post-Soviet context, *narodnost'* conflates Orthodox and Soviet socialist realist values. It was first instated as part of the national triad *pravoslavie*, *samoderzhavie*, *narodnost'* (orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality)—itself an adaptation from the French national slogan, *Liberté*, *egalité*, *fraternité*. It was proposed by the Minister of Education, Sergei Uvarov, in 1833 and initially served to identify all the constituents of the Russian Empire under a single notion of nationality. In the Soviet years, Uvarov's slogan was replaced with "*partiinost'*, *ideinost'*, *narodnost'*" ("party-mindedness, ideological content, and *narodnost*'"). The latter component embraced two notions: 1) *narodnost'* as folk-oriented content – folktales, the folk idiom (later debunked), and 2) accessibility, the requirement that a literary text be readily comprehensible by the common people. While Prilepin, Erofeev, and Pelevin express diverse attitudes toward the

idea of Russian nationhood, their narratives collectively illustrate that *narodnost'* does not operate within a single, stable concept of nationality.

Chapter Three investigates the revival of the myth of the "Russian soul" in post-Soviet literature. As Williams demonstrates, this idea "illustrates the complex relationship of Russian and European, especially German, thought" concerning the supposedly innate, exotic element of the Russian people, their culture, and the land (573). Visarion Belinskii (1811-1848) first expressed the idea of a uniquely Russian soul in his appraisal of Gogol''s novel *Мертвые души* (Dead Souls 1842).[8] The term later became a popular phrase among the cultural intelligentsia during the 1860s and 1870s, as used by Appolon Grigor'ev (1822-1864) and Dostoevskii (Williams 574). The myth of the Russian soul "suggests a strong polysemy" of both positive and negative ideas about the Russian mentality, "implying the inability to define [it] or articulate a narrative suitable for the present time" (Iarotskaia 2012). Its inherently contradictory nature resulted from the merging of multiple, opposing beliefs about Russia's collective unconsciousness in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian philosophy. The "Russian soul" reflects the Russian Romantic folk coloring of the countryside, the Russian Realist tradition's idolization of the *narod*, as well as Eastern Orthodox religious mysticism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, émigré Russian writers and post-Communist Russians refer to the myth of the Russian soul primarily in nostalgic musings on the distant past. There is a relative consensus among post-Soviet Russians about the significance of the "Russian soul" as the core of Russian identity (Leukart 2012; Steinberg 814, Piirainen 156). However, for most, the concept remains tied to the literary classics and a bygone notion of national unity and the cultural

[8] See "Несколько слов о поэме Гоголя: Похождения Чичикова или мертвые души." Москва. 1842. В 8-ю д. л., 19 стр. http://az.lib.ru/b/belinskij_w_g/text_0800.shtml.

memory of "an intense whirlpool of ideas and images that became […] a historical trauma [referring] to a dramatic loss of identity and sense of historical mission" (Iarotskaia 2012).

Erofeev's formal classification of the Russian soul as a cultural myth compares to several other post-Soviet authors, for example, Vyacheslav P'etsukh, who treat it as such. Unlike *I Came From Russia*, *Encyclopedia* attaches the myth to (if not blames it for) Russia's prolonged and troubled search for a sense of identity. The author portrays it as an endless, quixotic negotiation with the foreign concepts of the Russian Self that compounded an identity which came to reflect fears that 'confirmed' the West's suspicions about Russia's cultural and intellectual "backwardness."

Finally, the third chapter investigates the extent to which post-Soviet Russian writers characterize their literary heroes according to the myth of the "Russian soul." It identifies the *pravdoiskatel'* ("truth-seeker") from the Golden Age canon as the literary type that embodies twenty-first-century conceptions of the "Russian soul." Following an overview of the personality traits of this ambitious yet ill-fated Russian idealist victimized by his own virtues, I argue that: Prilepin reaffirms the nationalist appeal and heroism of the traditional *pravdoiskatel'*; Erofeev unabashedly debunks the myth and describes him as a quixotic imbecile; Pelevin's parodic simulacrum portrays the truth-seeker as a philosophizing literary stooge. Erofeev stands out as the most provocative author in this survey for his overt criticism of the Russian intelligentsia's identification of the *narod* with a lost cause (Erofeev 12). He satirizes Dostoevksii's conception of the Russian mentality, based on the idea that "the most basic, most rudimentary spiritual need of the Russian people is the need for suffering, ever-present and unquenchable, everywhere and in everything" (Ries 83). This analysis will draw on recent cultural studies such as that of Dale

Pesman (2000), exploring "the cultural meanings and spatial metaphors of the enigmatic Russian soul" and demonstrating the recycling of nineteenth-century myths in post-Soviet literature as a testament to the Russian nation's attempt to reconcile with its past and form a new identity (Berdahl, Bundl and Lampland 10).

The concluding chapter summarizes the main arguments presented in this thesis. It also identifies the aspects of the research that the present work does not cover, which might inspire further fruitful research in post-Soviet cultural and identity studies, specifically pertaining to Russian nationalism.

The ideal survey of post-Soviet literature on Russian cultural identity should include selections of prose by non-Russian ethnic minority writers. However, the brevity of this work does not allow for sufficient analysis of each such text in the manner they deserve. Additionally, this thesis strictly addresses the question of ethnic Russians' conception of themselves in the post-Soviet context rather than whether or not (or how) minorities identify with the ethnic Russian "imagined community."

Finally, despite their diverse genres and views on Russian identity, the selected texts offer a valuable insight on the lasting importance of pre-revolutionary conceptions of Russianness in twenty-first-century Russian culture. Whether they use or abuse cultural myths, recollect or dismember cultural memories, they illustrate the continuing evolution of Russian literary thought and its instrumental role in the (re)formation of post-Soviet Russian identity. The texts analyzed in this thesis illustrate the universality of the manner in which people process cultural trauma and demonstrate the inevitably slow yet steady pace at which a nation re-stabilizes itself and the inevitable anxieties provided by probing traumatic cultural memory.

(De)Facing the Myth of *Dukhovnost'* in Twenty-First-Century Russian Literature on Religious Cultural Icons, Literary Giants, and Identities

In an interview about the documentary "*Vtoroe kreshchenie Rusi*" (The Second Baptism of Rus', 2013), the Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that since the collapse of Communism, Russian "society itself, without prodding from the outside" ("общество само, без подталкивания извне"), has naturally returned to its roots in the Orthodox faith and religious spirituality (2013). Indeed, Russian culture carries strong influences of the Church's "long-standing values and ideals" due to its, the church's, vital role in preserving cultural materials, including those related to literature and the visual and performing arts, many of which were "subsumed or corrupted under Communism" (Likhachev 61-62). On the eve of World War II, Stalin himself—despite his severely oppressive anti-religious policies—addressed the Soviet Union as "brothers and sisters" in order to invoke a sense of patriotism in the nation, recognizing them not merely as his political constituents, but as a single people whose moral foundations rested in Orthodox religiosity (Ellis 278). The problem of reviving the Orthodox Church as the state religion is not so much a matter of expediency. It involves re-conceiving (or re-negotiating) the post-Soviet Russian nation's relation to the metaphysical realm—and, more importantly, the Russian identity—as an intrinsically religious one in spite of its ideologically heterogeneous cultural history.

It cannot be ignored that Russian cultural and intellectual thought, especially during the Golden Age, was shaped by the imperial state's religious imperative (Frede 6). In fact, Russian nineteenth-century literature does not exhibit an adherence to Russian Orthodox values as some

have contended, but a complicated dialogue with both clerical and secular philosophical traditions (Raskolnikov 7). Russian literature from Lomonosov to Pushkin represented a century-long secular tradition, after which religious philosophical texts can generally be divided into groups: Gogolian "super-religiosity" and "Belinsky's quasi-religiosity," the latter characterized by "religious atheism," or dogmatic secularism (Epstein 2012:1-4). The official recognition of Russian Orthodoxy as the post-Soviet state religion has generated a wave of controversy among Russian writers, some of whom express the concern that it may lead to the return of the ideological censorship on artistic and intellectual expression that constrained Russian cultural movements in the twentieth- and early twenty-first-centuries (Hughes 194).

Despite the apparent heterogeneity in Russian religious philosophy, critics have noted its underlying tradition as an attempt to "synthesize the material and spiritual worlds" and transfigure the everyday to mirror their transcendental ideals (Frede 61; Hutchings 1997). Furthermore, Slavophile thought distinguished Russian enlightenment as a fundamentally spiritual tradition that prioritized "the moral condition" of humanity and the "higher demands of the soul" over the "individualistic arbitrariness" of Western materialism (Rabow-Edling 87-8). According to Sturova, Russian religious thought concerns a higher spirituality, as opposed to a strictly institutional tradition, and is inseparable from "the customs of the peoples of Russia, their culture, language and history" (3-5). This chapter explores the reactions to the apparent movement toward creating a post-Soviet Russian identity from Slavophile notions of cultural authenticity. It investigates the perspectives of Prilepin, Erofeev, and Pelevin with respect to the Church's legacy in shaping the conception of spirituality and higher moral consciousness (both meanings encompassed in the term *dukhovnost'*), according to Russian Orthodox religious

values. The analysis of the three texts, *I Came From Russia*, *Encyclopedia*, and *t*, follows an introduction to the concept of spirituality in nineteenth-century Russian literature and its elevation to the status of cultural myth in post-Soviet Russian culture.

In Russian religious philosophy, "the concept of d*ukhovnost'* is primarily connected to the Christian God as well as the divine Spirit and the transcendental nature of being" (Avramenko 88). For the purpose of the present argument, *dukhovnost'* corresponds to *pravoslavnaia dukhovnost'* (Orthodox spirituality), as in the conception of spirituality and higher moral consciousness according to Russian Orthodox Christian religious values. *Dukhovnost'* can be categorized as a cultural myth because it constitutes a "problematic idea(l) central to [Russian] identity and its endless metamorphization" through the re-imagination of the distant past (Chulos 119). In post-Soviet Russian culture, *dukhovnost'* exists in the collective imagination as a metaphysical connection between the individual Russian's perceived connection to his imagined community and the "national self-understanding" of "historical and cultural heritage" (Haskins 25). *Dukhovnost'* acquired this status through Russian nineteenth-century writers of high literature such as Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, whose aim was, in this context, to "teach good morals and witness the Spirit of Truth" (Boiko 289). These and other leading philosophers (I. Kireevskii, A. Khomiakov and V. Solov'ëv) were primarily responsible for establishing a moralized image of the Russian people and land. Their romantic depictions of provincial life inspired a national pride that was based on an idealized conception of folk culture and remote provincial landscapes, which suggested the peasantry's natural proclivity for Christian fellowship and higher moral standards.

In Tolstoi's and Dostoevskii's "spiritual-psychological prose," *dukhovnost'* connoted a "morality […] of much higher values" that relied on Christian principles (Sturova 7). While Dostoevskii believed *dukhovnost'* was achievable through religious practice, Tolstoi advocated for a more Roussian concept of childlike sensitivity to goodness and virtue (Tussing Orwin 138-40). Nevertheless, both approaches stemmed from and perpetuated the Russian Romantics' and early Slavophiles' ideas of spirituality as an innate quality of the *prostoi narod* (simple peasant folk). The Tolstoyan hero, for example, evolved at the intersection of the *khristianin* ("Christian") and the Russian *krest'ianin* ("peasant"); it embodied the author's idolization of the peasantry and accommodated his beliefs about the role of politics and religion in modern society (Howe 45; Rabow-Edling 15). From the Orthodox perspective, the greater importance of restoring *dukhovnost'* lies in its capacity to provide "spiritual security" to the nation by rehabilitating the religious ideological component of pre-revolutionary "traditions and customs of the peoples of Russia, their culture, language, and history" (Sturova 3-5).

I Came From Russia, *Encyclopedia* and *t* demonstrate three distinct viewpoints on the Orthodox Church's reestablished presence in post-Soviet Russian society. Each author demonstrates his understanding of the cultural myth of *dukhovnost'* in both the historical and post-Soviet context, and its relevance to Russian identity in the twenty-first century. Collectively, they negotiate the current value of nineteenth-century conceptions of *dukhovnost'* by revisiting religious motifs and cultural icons that were developed in and derived from the Golden Age literary tradition. Prilepin promotes the most conservative perspective on the issue. He upholds the Slavophile tradition and perpetuates the notion that Russianness is fundamentally dependent on Orthodox values. He portrays *duhkovnost'* as an enduring feature of post-Soviet Russian

identity by incorporating biblical imagery and emphasizing the Orthodox Church's historical role in shaping the Russian language. In bold protest against Slavophilia and religious conservatism, Erofeev deconstructs the myth of *dukhovnost'* using derisive parody to delegitimize its legacy in the pre-revolutionary Russian literary tradition and culture. Pelevin employs a much lighter version of satire in his recycling of Lev Tolstoi's post-conversion life and works. He indicts the latter's role in canonizing the idea of *dukhovnost'* through his public persona and oeuvre. Pelevin also deconstructs the "iconic vision" of the Optina Pustyn' monastery, which became a symbol of Russian spirituality through the literary imagination in "works by Gogol', Dostoevskii, and Tolstoi and others" (Stanton 1995).

To begin with, of all three texts, Prilepin's *I Came From Russia* embodies the most conservative perspective on this issue. Throughout the essay collection, the author draws attention to what he considers to be the lasting impact of Russian Orthodox Christianity on the Russian language and everyday life. He peppers his essays with language that is typical of liturgical and biblical texts in order to secure the "[g]raphic fixation of a unique sound in familiar words" and remind the reader of the "deeper meanings" and religious etymology of the Russian language (Tsvetova 454-55). *I Came From Russia* reflects Prilepin's tendency to present the post-Soviet Russian identity crisis in vividly religious "philosophical and mythological terms," as Prokhorova states of Prilepin's novel, *Санькя* (San'kia 2006) (198). The essay collection attests to its author's view that man must "live in accordance with God." Restoring spiritual consciousness will give a higher meaning to "earthly life" in preparation for each person's departure into the "next life" (Prilepin 214).

Prilepin presents himself as a Russian traditionalist. Employing the didacticism associated with Russian Realism as represented in Tolstoi's *Смерть Ивана Ильича* (The Death of Ivan Il'yich 1886), Dostoevskii's *Бесы* (Demons 1876), he interprets the occurrence of misfortune as the just consequence of moral trespasses. In the preface of *I Came From Russia*, the author affirms his sense of spirituality by relating to the notion of a universal truth and "the pulse of the Universe" that connects this world to the higher realm (Prilepin 5). A nationalist writer of the "New Russian" era, Prilepin embraces Tolstoi's and Dostoevskii's attempts to resolve "the most troubling questions" of the human condition by attributing spiritual value to everyday life and relationships (Waszkielewicz 449). However, this essay collection presents some contradiction to Prilepin's acclaimed religiosity. While he urges the Russian nation to return to its God-fearing tradition, he also enjoys worldly pleasures and modern values. He admits that he himself is a "man of the system" and bears "attributes of power" (Prilepin 199). In this sense, Prilepin resembles the poet Aleksandr Kushner, another post-Soviet "traditional *intelligent*," who "draws a line between himself […] and the profoundly amoral, uncultured, and intellectually bankrupt" capitalist leaders of his cultural milieu on the basis that his riches "belong to the spirit" (Lipovetskii 57). As Lipovetskii points out with regard to Kushner, Prilepin's claim that he possesses a higher, "more sound and solid" capital contradicts his attraction to material wealth (56-57).

Prilepin does not seem to acknowledge that most Russians of low socioeconomic status would probably abandon the old-fashioned lifestyle to which they are confined because of their economic immobility and become "part of the system." Instead, he projects a romanticized image of the Russian nation as a spiritually refined people who would prefer living without

modern (Western) accommodations and interferences. In the essay “Русские люди за длинным столом” (Russian People at a Long Table), Prilepin describes the *narod* as “the clay” that becomes a nation “when you breathe the living spirit into it” (Prilepin 23). This is an obvious allusion to Genesis 2:7, which states: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” Prilepin suggests that, being as refined as pottery clay, Russians need only the reviving power of the Holy Spirit to become a thriving nation once again. This concurs with the idea that post-Soviet Russian society exhibits a “decline of morality” that can be restored only through reviving the Orthodox tradition that emphasized nationhood as a spiritually-bound union (Sturova 7). Prilepin's reference to biblical imagery echoes the Slavophile idea that Russian Orthodox values could offer moral security to the Russian nation.

“Long Table” portrays an enduring sense of Christian fellowship and love binding the Russian people across different classes and backgrounds. Having met “thousands [of Russians] in a variety of situations and in different places,” Prilepin asserts his authority to attest to the moral strength of the entire Russian nation (23). In the countryside, villagers are almost always “genuinely good-natured [toward each other] and cheerful” in their “assessment of nature and the nature of things” (Prilepin 24). In the city, university students who seem to flock like loud, “unkempt birds” and disperse to “God knows where” upon graduating with a sense of responsibility and direction (Prilepin 24). Even the “most difficult ones” —the drunkards and delinquents—share with him the same blood; there is “surprisingly very little” separating him from any of these people (Prilepin 25). Seldom does he encounter a “truly bad” Russian, and the people he once might have wanted to kill in the heat of rage, he now looks on with loving

kindness. He envisions sitting with all these Russians around a great, wooden table partaking in a great feast, a scene inspired by the story of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:17-30). The author concludes that restoring the Russian spirit is an "almost impossible task," though he is willing and prepared to lead the effort (29-30). As the herder of the flock, Prilepin depicts himself as the new torchbearer of *dukhovnost'* who will rally the *narod* back together and renew their faith in God.

Throughout the remaining essays, Prilepin returns to this sentimental depiction of Russians as lost sheep. The miserable drunk knows best that Russia is "God's beloved daughter" who must bear her burden of long-suffering; her dreadfully cold, long and dark winters and history of persecution and famine prove long-suffering is simply preordained by nature (Prilepin 54). The Russian way is to treat every aspect of life "without sly pathos and false tears" (Prilepin 56). This appears to justify his earlier dismissal of the tragic cultural memory of the Great Purge as nothing unusual in the history of the Russian people. Thanks to his proclivity to self-sacrifice, the Russian is not only naturally resistant to the harsh climate but also to the severe oppression at the hands of foreign enemies as well as their own political leaders. It is no wonder that so many post-Soviet Russians are ambivalent about their own welfare: once again they find themselves "in [the world of] *The Devils* or among the *Humiliated and Insulted* of Dostoevskii's time ("Мы снова то ли в 'Бесах', то ли посередь 'Униженных и оскорбленных'") (Prilepin 134).

Prilepin suggests that resurgent *dukhovnost'* will revive the currently disillusioned Russian people. They should abandon the "concrete principles" ("Надо отвлечься от конкретных понятий") of Western rationalism and return to believing in that which "cannot be formulated, packaged and used as needed" (210-11). In other words, Russians should depart from the false

promises of freedom and safety to be found in Western capitalism and return to what has supposedly always worked for them—faith in the metaphysical realm. According to Prilepin, man is forever destined to fulfill that which is ordained in accordance with his soul, and the soul must be in harmony with God" ("Человек должен исполнять навек предначертанное в согласии со своей душой. А душа должна жить в согласии с Богом") (Prilepin 214). The "abstract principles" ("отвлечённые понятия"), which constitute Dostoevskii's idea of beauty as the savior of Russians and their world from disorder and confusion, are eternal and govern every aspect of earthly life. According to Prilepin, the Russian people are morally obliged to abide by them in order to depart from "this earthly life with ease" and have a clear conscience in order to enter a new spiritual life (214). He therefore urges them to surrender to the will of God and live according to His principles by fulfilling their ordained purpose.

In the essay titled "Я пришел из России" ("I Came From Russia"), the author depicts the Russian people by drawing on the religious symbolism of Mikhail Nesterov's paintings, "Святая Русь" (Holy Russia 1906) and "На Руси (Душа народа)" (In Rus': The Soul of the People 1916). In "Holy Russia," Russian peasants are visited by Christ and three Orthodox Saints, including Tolstoi, Dostoevskii and Solov'ëv; in the latter painting, a peasant boy leads a throng of Russians including writers, philosophers, and Russian Orthodox prelates. Prilepin seems to agree that throughout Russian history, even the cruelest of Russia's leaders were morally better than their Western counterparts because the former never abandoned their faith. For example, he writes that, though Ivan the Terrible killed people, "Even he prayed and prayed to God to be forgiven of his sins" ("И ещё он молился, отмаливал и замаливал") (Prilepin 244).

In addition to portraying the Russian people as a traditionally spiritual nation, the author describes the religious tradition as something borne of the land. He depicts an eternal, holy Russia, where "churches were built, destroyed" and rebuilt, the Russian Orthodox "priest follows the army, tired, stepping on the burnt, parched land, which has been consecrated" by Russian blood for centuries (Prilepin 242). This patriotic essay evokes Russian messianic ideals, suggesting that Russia has yet to fulfill her mission to lead the world by example. It suggests that the myth of *dukhovnost'* has endured as a stable Russian tradition for centuries; in failing to mention the two secular periods in Russian history, Prilepin diminishes the importance of anti-theism in shaping Russian religious thought as well as the attitude toward spirituality in Russian culture. Epstein identifies these two periods as first, the medieval secularism spanning from Lomonosov (1711-1765) until Pushkin (1799-1837), and neo-medievalism, from the revolution until the end of socialist realism (1907 until 1988) (2012:5).

Prilepin's attempt to revive the myth of Holy Russia falls prey to Erofeev's shockingly uncensored sardonic parody of the Slavophile movement and religious nationalist writers of the nineteenth century. In the latter's view, restoring the myths of *russkii Bog* (the Russian God) and *dukhovnost'* will revive an old controversy ("будет оживлением старой полемики") (Erofeev 160). Nietzsche was wrong to say that God is dead because He still exists in Russia behind a series of different masks ("очередная маска"): "Christianity is turning into a folklore ensemble directed by Peter and Paul" ("Христианство превращается в фольклорный ансамбль под управлением Петра и Павла") (Erofeev 160). The narrator dismisses the current importance of gods in general as belonging to a time when myth governed science and reason:

> It's time all the gods retired. There'll be easier jobs for these veterans of the sky. […] Together with the Greek Olympians and Grandfather Frost they'll become children's role models, the edifying heroes of myths, legends, fairy tales. (Пора бы всем нынешним богам на пенсию. Для них, ветеранов неба, найдется необременительная работа. Вместе с греческими олимпийцами и Дедом Морозом они станут наставниками детей, назидательными героями мифов, легенд, сказок (Erofeev 161).

The narrator has completely lost faith in the power of religion to secure social order. If he could, he would destroy the "old gods" ("старых богов"); he doubts it would do any harm because they have never prevented society from collapsing into "total chaos" ("к тотальному хаосу") (Erofeev 161).

Erofeev downplays the Eastern Orthodox Church's historical role in shaping Russian cultural identity. He denounces Russia's religious experience as one that has been "Christian in outward appearances" ("христианский по внешним формам") (Erofeev 22). A "historically *dishonest* country" built on false hopes and the "intelligentsia's lies," Russia's claim to moral superiority is a construct of its own literary imagination (Erofeev 23). Indeed, the religious re-acculturation of post-Soviet society has taken a turn to an almost profane degree of enthusiasm that arguably serves the interests of consumerism rather than rebuilding the nation upon time-honored traditions (Hughes 193). Erofeev argues that the intelligentsia conjured the myth of Russia's moral authority as a fig leaf to cover the lacunae in their nation's cultural and economic development. Whereas "Greece burned down because of religious formalism, Russia is burning from formal religiosity" (Erofeev 24). Since religious observance affected Russian cultural development through ideological censorship, the revival of Russian Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet world, for people like Erofeev, is a reminder of the extent to which religiosity is imbedded in Russian life.

One of the best attested ways in which the Church has permanently established itself in Russian culture is through the evolution of the Russian language. The modern Cyrillic script stems from the Old Church Slavonic, which originated from the Glagolitic alphabet that was created by the Byzantine theologians, Saints Cyril (826-869) and Methodius (815-885). Because of its initial clerical usage, religious expressions that were commonplace among the church elders became part of everyday language among the peasant folk. In the passage titled "Здравствуйте!" ("Greetings!" or "Hello!" Literally, "Be of good health!") Seryi, who personifies the myth of the "Russian soul," refuses to answer the narrator's greeting in order to avoid having to ask forgiveness when it is time to say goodbye (Erofeev 47). In Russian, farewell —*proshchaite* — derives from the verb *proshchat'* ("to forgive"). The same issue applies to the words *spasibo* ("thank you"), from an elision of the phrase *spaci nas Bozhe* ("God save us"), and *pozhaluista* ("please"), from the verb *zhalovat'* ("to pity"), which denote the Christian principles of mercy and compassion, respectively.

Whereas Prilepin pays tribute to the supposedly high moral code of Russian communication, Erofeev sarcastically identifies it as one of the reasons for the Russian individual's ambivalent nature. It is not do to the estrangement from authentic spiritual values that post-Soviet Russian are living in a dark, Dostoevskiian world, as Prilepin argues. Rather, it is the result of the Russian collective subconscious resistance against the psychologically taxing, compulsory association to a religious ideology they would not observe of their own will. Russian society's involuntary identification with Orthodoxy stifles, rather than enlivens, the Russian spirit; only without God can the Russian truly live (Erofeev 167). According to Erofeev, this is the reason why true Russian religious philosophy questions the divine realm from a place of

doubt, as opposed to the bedrock of faith. He states that, having begun its enquiry with the intent to disprove rather than affirm the idea of God, Russians religious thought conceptualizes spirituality from a point of opposition ("с противоположной стороны") (Erofeev 50). Alluding to Russia's unique sect of theomachists, the author identifies Russians as devout doubters and *dis*believers who question either God's existence or omnipotence (Erofeev 50). As such, despite the nation's apparent commitment to Orthodoxy, as the Russian language and cultural history suggest, *dukhovnost'* is a barren concept that embodies nothing but utter meaninglessness (Erofeev 50).

This disparaging "encyclopedia" recasts Russian theology as philosophical chaos. In the essay "Сумбур вместо музыки" ("Muddle Instead of Music"), the narrator states that post-Soviet Russian culture's weak grasp on religiosity can be explained as a result of its fundamental unsettledness ("принципиально не обживается") (Erofeev 120). The title of the passage, which originally appeared in a 1936 article of *Pravda* attacking the composer Dmitri Shostakovich, indicates that Russian intellectuals mistook confusion for harmony. In Erofeev's reworking, the phrase alludes to the historical debate about Russia's purportedly barbaric character and innate incapacity to appreciate orderliness. Religious faith remains a foreign concept in Russian culture because of the nation's historical tendency to "combine the incompatible" ("совмещается несовместимое") (Erofeev 120). Erofeev applies the idea of Russia's backwardness to its religious philosophical tradition, adding that Russia's historical tendency to raise churches only to fearlessly tear them down later attests to its concomitant system of radically changing beliefs (Erofeev 120).

In Erofeev's view, Russian religious philosophy is conceptually backward because of its idolization of archaism, as though modernity were antithetical to spiritual beliefs. The enthusiasm for romantic ideas about the *obshchina* (peasant commune) among the Slavophiles and other anti-Western elites in the nineteenth century underwrote their decline from sophisticated schools of thought to a "nation of bums" (Erofeev 120). By claiming that Russia's leading thinkers "confused vagrants for saints," Erofeev belittles Tolstoi and other intellectuals who idealized not only the peasants, but also hermits, *startsy* (elders), *raskol'niki* (schismatics), pilgrims, and other societal mavericks. The narrator expresses his strong sense of doubt that God would entrust the task of saving the world to such a nation (Erofeev 121). He later adds: the more probable "gift" that Russians might bestow on the world with "their *dukhovnost'*" is the lesson of how not to be (Erofeev 151).

Erofeev redefines the myth of *dukhovnost'* to signify the Slavophile-leaning intellectuals' inferiority complex. He portrays post-Soviet intellectuals who perpetuate the myth of *dukhovnost'* as a minority. The narrator states that there is nothing special about the term *dukhovnost'* unless it means *bestolkovnost'* ("stupidity") (Erofeev 55). While almost anyone will initially boast about their nation's saintly image— the holy *startsy*, the Vologdan *skromnitsy* (modest maidens), and "Nesterov's Rus'"[9]—"Most smart Russians are eventually disappointed in the Russian people" ("Большинство умных русских в конце концов разочаровываются в русских") (Erofeev 60). From this perspective, Prilepin's endorsement of the pre-revolutionary notion of Holy Russia places him outside of the smart majority and into the smaller "horde of idiots" ("скопище идиотов") (Erofeev 165), who have suspended themselves in their own

[9] Two of Nesterov's paintings, "Holy Russia" and "In Rus': The People's Spirit," are discussed above in the analysis of *I Came From Russia.*

"slump" ("провис") for having lost to the West (Erofeev 94). Unable to reconcile with their nation's history of "contradictory values" and "chain of unsuccessful reforms," this small portion of the intelligentsia created the idea of Russia's spiritual clout that glorified its "unsuccessfulness" ("неудачничества") (Erofeev 165).

This criticism reflects Rabow-Edling's interpretation of the nineteenth-century Slavophile movement as "an attempt to deal with the question of Russian's national identity," as opposed to the traditional understanding of Slavophilism as primarily religious in focus (2). Today, one might interpret this movement as a form of populism whose purpose was to break the general tendency among the cultural elite to favor Western cultural traditions instead refining their own (Rabow-Edling 7).

The Slavophiles understood very well that the peasantry did not favor Peter the Great's reforms, particularly those that sought to assimilate regional cultural practices to national standards. They advocated for "commodification," the integration of folk paganisms, such as *Maslenitsa* (the burning of the hay effigy in honor of spring), with Russian Orthodoxy in order to justify the uniqueness of Russian society and culture as one that was "merged into higher truth" and *in opposition* to traditional colonialization (Chulos 120). However, the Slavophile movement failed to dissolve the factors that distinguished the elite from "the masses" because it defined Russian national values according to highly selective, refined and standardized versions of folk culture (Frolova-Walker 121). Unsurprisingly, the peasants in turn rejected this political movement as they had the Petrine reforms; it was also met with various reactions by the religious literary gentry. The Russian nationalist undertones in Dostoevskii's *Дневник писателя* (Diary of a Writer 1876-7) won him the favor of the Slavophiles, who "rightly acclaimed" him as their

own for embracing the movement's conception of "pure" Russian culture as one that was founded upon Orthodox Christian principles (Lavrin 315). In contrast, Tolstoi, who began to openly question the Russian Orthodox during the same time—eventually denouncing all established religions in *В чем моя вера* (What I Believe 1884)—was drawn more strongly to the *narodniki* (anarchist Russian populists). The *narodniki* shared "his love for the people *qua* people [and] his attitude toward the land question"; Tolstoi sympathized with revolutionaries for "their theoretical moral protest against injustice" as well as their tendency to adopt unorthodox attitudes towards spirituality (Lavrin 316).

In the section titled "Детство, отрочество, юность" ("Childhood, Boyhood, Youth")[10] Erofeev suggests that by promoting dissension against the status quo ostensibly to respect and restore religious ideals, Tolstoi and Dostoevskii fostered a culture of rebellion in the Russian self-conscious to the point of justifying irrational behavior and delinquency. The author depicts Seryi as a young boy receiving religious instruction from his mother during bath time. Upholding a Peter the Great doll, Seryi jokingly exclaims "Only God is better than us!" ("Лучше нас только Бог!"); his mother asks him to explain Dostoevskii's term, *narod-bogonosets* (God-bearing people).[11] Seryi replies:

> There is no such thing as too much for Russian men and women when it comes to asserting free will. […] You can't force me to wear a seatbelt in a car. To buckle up is included in my idea of cowardice. (Нет такого излишества, на которое были бы неспособны русские мужчины и женщины, когда они берутся утверждать свою свободную личность […] Меня не заставишь

[10] This is a satirical reference to Tolstoi's trilogy of the same title (1852-1856).

[11] Dostoevskii incorporated this phrase in several works, occasionally with subtle irony, such as in his novel *Demons*, while at other times, with a tone of commitment to the idea of Russia's messianic mission, for example, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880). Erofeev later defines *bogonosets* as "some kind of animal, like a pig" ("такое животное, вроде свиньи) (Erofeev 189).

> пристегнуть ремень в машине. Пристегиваться входит в мое представление о трусости) (Erofeev 202).

Playing on the meaning of the verb *pristëgivat'si a*, Erofeev suggests that due to their disinclination for mundane order, Russians do not associate the idea of safety with any physical entity. Emphasizing the fundamental contradiction in the Russian messianic notion of their moral authority, Seryi's mother states that the Germans were right to call Russians "unscrupulous, churlish pigs" ("нечистоплотные, неблагодарные свиньи") and then adds that world is too filthy for the Russian ("мир слишком грязен для русского") (Erofeev 201). In other words, the Russian idea of Self conflates the German Romantics' notion of Russia's barbarism with the Russian messianic vision, ultimately representing an absurd concept of "holier than they."

By interpreting the peasant commune as the embodiment of "religiosity of conditional freedom and equality before God," the Slavophiles and populist thinkers almost equated socioeconomic underdevelopment with the concept of moral superiority (Michelson 260). According to Erofeev, the myth of *dukhovnost'* has come to represent the centuries-long "conversation about [Russia's moral] frailty" ("беседа о бренности") (Erofeev 94). It justifies the notion of Russia as the West's inferior Other because, while it opposes European cultural values, it also suggests that remaining "uncivilized" in Western terms allowed Russians to develop its spiritual connection to God, which the West had lost to modernity and materialism.[12] Having eventually proved themselves to possess less moral strength than their Western neighbors, the Russians' national problem, which more closely resembles a joke, "offers an invaluable lesson" of what it is like to be "a complete loser" (Erofeev 94). Perhaps Russia's

[12] See Edward Said (1978) on Orientalism and cultural Others.

failed re-appropriation of its purported lacunae demonstrates the uselessness (and, perhaps even detriment) of creating a sense of self from one's flaws.

In their unforgiving criticism of the human proclivity to err, Russian nineteenth-century didactic writers suggest that their mere awareness of this moral dilemma grants them the moral authority to reproach people who seem to be less enlightened. Viktor Pelevin's parody of Tolstoi "the man" illustrates how the writer-turned-religious thinker fell short of his own moral ideals, thereby attesting not only to the futility of attempting to live by such high standards, but also the unnecessary torment one ends up inflicting upon himself. *t* portrays Tolstoi's pursuit of the universal truth as the epitome of Russia's suicidal quest. Despite its anecdotal criticism of the nineteenth-century idealist, Pelevin's narrative possesses a sentimental view of the Russian religious thinker's perilous struggle to conquer the moral dilemmas encompassing the human condition, which both Erofeev's and Prilepin's works lack. In restraining the severity of his attack on Tolstoi's idealism, Pelevin elicits a sense of appreciation for the current rapprochement with pre-Soviet Russian fascination with the spirituality that was suppressed under Communism.

Nevertheless, Pelevin is unsympathetic to traditional religious concepts. In *t*, God has joined Erofeev's "veterans of the sky"; the demiurge who replaces Him, Ariel' Edmundovich Brakhman, is only one of the many invisible powers that be; the others include a group of unknown authors who, in perpetual disagreement with each other, comprise a dysfunctional board of writers who seek to inflict moral injury on Count T. Despite his control over T.'s thoughts, Ariel' denies all responsibility for the count's actions. He admits that "we are all puppets one can reduce to bare mechanics" and though he is powerful, he cannot solve the

"complex and confusing" algorithm of life (Pelevin 176).[13] Gone also is the hope of being redeemed by religious faith. The notion of a universal truth has lost its integrity. All the iconic religious thinkers of Russia's Golden Age finally agree that their claims to spiritual enlightenment were a hoax. The only protagonist who remains committed to the apparent illusion is Count T., who is led by self-interest and the naive desire to prove that everyone's theories about the metaphysical realm, including his creators', are wrong.

Like Erofeev's novel, Pelevin's text is rich with literary allusions and references to key concepts in nineteenth-century Russian religious philosophy. Count T. is an existential hero whose character resembles Tolstoi during his spiritual crisis and his post-conversion belief system. T.'s experiences affirm Tolstoi's speculation that life was just a cruel joke and that an unknown "somebody" has created him simply in order to play an evil and stupid prank on him.[14] Pelevin's parody of Tolstoi's quest that led to his post-conversion rapprochement with God and spirituality deconstructs the nineteenth-century religious thinker's image as a literary and cultural icon. He juxtaposes Tolstoi's self-venerating public persona with the less admirable version that the writer disclosed in his diaries. As I will show through the analysis of T.'s behavior, the protagonist demonstrates himself to be someone who does not lead by example, but rather a confused and morally weak individual. Pelevin also capitalizes on the extent to which Tolstoi's private and public personalities became part of the writer's controversial legacy. By re-fashioning Tolstoi's philosophy into a meaningless conflation of ideas that have been since refuted, Pelevin diminishes the importance of not only Tolstoi the writer, but also the usefulness

[13] Ariel's name comes from Shakespeare's comedy *The Tempest* (1610-11), perhaps personifying the ambiguity in Tolstoi's notoriously non-ideological (or, at least, non-didactic) short story, "Метель" (The Snowstorm 1856).

[14] Tolstoi discussed this in *Исповедь* (A Confession 1882).

of his didactics for resolving the post-Soviet Russian problem. Pelevin does not attach Erofeev's label of "proclivity to dishonor" to the great Russian author,[15] although Count T. demonstrates a rather disappointing inability to adhere to his own principles. Pelevin tacitly alludes to Tolstoi's pretentiousness by having Count T. commit Tolstoi's mistakes and then castigate himself for "only pretending" ("только притворяюсь") to be righteous (Pelevin 82).

Count T. highlights the less-known version of Tolstoi: the morally flawed, internally conflicted man. When T. approaches Ariel' about his concern that this characterization will ruin his reputation, the demiurge explains to him that the novel's authors must appeal to the public's demand for the "mysterious, sexy, and romantic" action hero who provokes "embarrassing scandals" (Pelevin 95-96). Moreover, the public is interested only in Tolstoi the count, not Tolstoi the thinker as the latter's "ideas are particularly useless" ("Идеи его особо никому не нужны") (Pelevin 95). Comically alluding to the changes of his own time, Pelevin departs from the nineteenth-century Russian literary tradition's use of the novel to debate philosophical questions such as the myth of *dukhovnost'*. He explains the revival of *dukhovnost'* in the early twenty-first century as the result of post-Soviet Russian society's "disappointment in the [socialist realist] ideals that once animated" them in the absence of other viable options (Pelevin 58). *t* alludes to the post-Soviet intellectual's indifference to the problems affecting the human condition: although the novel recapitulates Tolstoi's spiritual philosophical quest as a failed attempt to solve the enigma of human existence, Pelevin offers no alternative.

Pelevin's parodic interpretation of Tolstoi's moral philosophy enables him to safely problematize Tolstoi's system of belief while claiming mere entertainment value as his

[15] According to Erofeev, "proclivity to dishonor" ("склонность к бесчестию") is one of the main traits of Russianness (30). He uses this phrase multiple times throughout *Encyclopedia*; I discuss this in Chapter Three.

underlying motive. In the opening scene, Count T., who has disguised himself as a priest after escaping Iasnaia Polina (the historical Tolstoi's home estate), finds himself trapped in a train car with his assailant, Ardal'on Knopf, who extols T.'s status as "idol of the common people," "defender of the downtrodden, noble aristocrat," "lover of women" and "real folk hero" (Pelevin 8). In order not to reveal his identity, T. objects to Knopf's flattery and states that moral authority cannot be bought with [self-inflicted] "persecution and suffering and is not associated with public approval" (Pelevin 8). Pelevin implies that while Tolstoi outwardly showed himself to be a nobleman whose soul was of and for the common people, thereby gaining popular appeal, he was secretly far from the ideal person he appeared to be. He recreates Tolstoi's principle of nonviolent resistance into a "bloodthirsty" military art whose "moral aspect" extends no further than its decorative title. Count T. has earned the nickname "Iron Beard" ("Железная Борода") because he is a "fearsome fighter" ("ужасный противник") who can theoretically claim not to have hands stained with blood because his method entails avoiding physical contact (Pelevin 11).

Count T.'s scandalous, romantic affair, which is a rough combination of the impassioned heroes in Tolstoi's greatest works as well as the writer's own private life, emphasizes Tolstoi's conflicted attitude toward sexual love. A noblewoman named Aksinia simplifies "herself to complete indistinguishability from a peasant simpleton" in order to seduce Count T., who is especially fond of the simple folk (Pelevin 224). Only after he finds himself unable to satisfy his arousal even a few moments after fornicating, T. blames the female sex for his insatiable lust. He equates women to fallen angels, who must to have "descended to the earth in order to seduce the sons of men and lead them to death" (Pelevin 79). Recalling the Gospel of Matthew,[16] as Father

[16] Matthew 5:30 says, "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

Sergius did in Tolstoi's eponymous short story *Отец Сергий* (1890-98), T. raises an axe to sever one of his fingers in order to rid himself of the temptation, but only manages to scare off Askinia, who thinks he is trying to kill her. In their last encounter, Aksinia, who has become so intrigued by Count T.'s peculiar behavior, asks him to explain how chopping off a finger can protect a person from lust. Instead of expounding on the Gospel, T. proposes to demonstrate its lesson to her in action (Pelevin 283).

It is true that Tolstoi did not possess the self-restraint and moral conviction of his saintlly Kasatskii in "Father Sergius." Rather, the writer reflected the moral vicissitudes of his most conflicted heroes such as Anna Karenina, the novel's namesake, and shared the romantic jealousy of Pozdnyshchev in *Крейцерова соната* (Kreutzer Sonata 1889). He claimed an intense aversion to sexual love, which he portrayed as a mortal sin and gateway to greater evils, in both his diaries and particularly in his two fictional works, *The Kreutzer Sonata* and *Дьявол* (The Devil 1889). However, Tolstoi did not adhere to his own belief in sexual abstinence, despite outlining it as one of the main steps toward spiritual purity. In addition to the fourteen children that his wife, Sophiya, bore to him (eight of which they conceived after his religious conversion), he fathered an illegitimate son, Timofei, as a result of his affair with Aksinia Bazykina, the wife of one of his peasants.

As though blaming human nature for Tolstoi's inability to adhere to his own system of values, Pelevin refutes the writer's idea that one can truly cultivate self-control and self-mastery to the point of being godlike.[17] He also deconstructs the myth of *dukhovnost'* by debunking its

[17] In his essay, "Первый шаг" ("The First Step 1892), Tolstoi argues that by following a particular sequence of "right actions" and striving "to cultivate […] self-control [and] self-mastery," a man will clear his consciousness of all evil and live a good, moral life (103-04).

foundations in the religious notions of God, sin, good and evil, and free will. In the novel, "God" is just a well-advertised brand on an empty cloud, and no one, including the demiurge, is responsible for their actions since we are all controlled by invisible puppeteers (Pelevin 218). According to Ariel', human actions are the product of multiple essences ("сущности"); the only ones who are responsible for their behavior are these invisible master powers. They fill people—who serve as their playthings—with passion, causing them to commit shameful acts and then, disguised as the human moral conscience, rebuke them. The irony is that after discovering this, T. becomes indifferent to his own set of moral principles. He indulges his sexual appetite, breaks his abstention from alcohol and abandons vegetarianism, relieving his guilty conscience by blaming the "main Demon" and the invisible gang of writers for his moral shortcomings (Pelevin 220).

Pelevin laces the protagonists' debates, which are based on important Russian nineteenth-century religious philosophical controversies, with ludicrous digressions as an indirect critique of the thinkers' theoretical inconsistencies. For example, during a discussion with members of various religious sects, T.'s spiritual advisor, lama Dzhambon expounds on the concept of "word-ghosts" ("слова-призраки"), which he argues are the foundation of all religious philosophies (Pelevin 308). Dzhambon explains how "word-ghosts" possess a mystical semantic quality, unlike objects with a universal meaning, such as the word "condom." Having noticed that Dzhambon pronounced "condom" with a breathy French accent ("с французским придыханием"), T. quickly realizes that his associates are not "wonderfully intelligent, clear-headed, amazing people" as he initially thought, and that their argument constitutes an extremely

"perverse, dubious conversation ("речь идет о чем-то крайне порочном и сомнительном") (Pelevin 309).

Everyone turns out to be either charlatans or consumers of someone else's myth. Each would-be spiritual pundit who advises T. on morality, God, free will, and directions to Optina Pustyn', further diverts him from greater spiritual understanding or reaching any physical destination. The pretender, Princess Tarakanova, asserts that the question of soul salvation has no use other than idle gossip since after struggling with it, philosophers (including herself and Count T.) return to "drinking wine, playing cards, writing silly poems [and] sinning" without a care for morality (Pelevin 28). The Dostoevskii figure in *t* envisions the world through a pair of glasses which the legendary elder, Fëdor Kuzmich (1777-1864) has sold him.[18] T. later discovers that Kuzmich is actually a false *oproshchenets* (follower of the *oproshchenie* movement) who merely reiterates conventional religious dogmas in "the people's vernacular" ("народный говор") to make them sound like "simple peasant wisdom" (Pelevin 328).[19] According to the character Solov'ëv, the mind is an "insane monkey rushing towards the abyss" ("ум — безумная обезьяна, несущаяся к пропасти") and philosophy is the product of "intellectual inactivity" ("умное неделание") (Pelevin 221). The lama Dzhambon confesses to T. that he doubts his own faith, but still proselytizes it because it is a viable source of income since people will always be willing to believe in something in order to feel better (Pelevin 198). T. himself

[18] In reality, Kuzmich's true identity remains unknown, although many believe he was Alexander I who had faked his death in order to become a hermit. Kuzmich was posthumously sainted by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1984.

[19] The *oproshchenie* ("simplification") movement was a social act that nineteenth-century populists and nationalist-leaning intellectuals chose in demonstration of their support for the common people as well as in opposition to the Westernizers, who advocated for sophisticating Russian culture by adopting Western customs. In addition to adopting the lifestyle, Tolstoi believed that the material deprivation involved in *oproshchenie* is one of the first steps toward spiritual enlightenment, which, according to him, explains the moral purity of the peasant. See *A Confession* and "Первый Шаг" (The First Step 1891).

must pretend that he believes in his quest in spite of the numerous reminders that his entire being is meaningless.

Pelevin undermines the role of the Orthodox Church in Russian literary and cultural heritage, not only as the nation's state ideological foundations in both pre- and post-Soviet times, but also its legacy as one of the most disputed facets of Russian identity. In his novel, the Optina Pustyn' monastery has also lost its historical and religious value. During the nineteenth century, the monastery became a national icon through its association with many Russian religious thinkers of the time. It symbolized *dukhovnost'* and the myth's emphasis on the supposed distinctiveness of Russian spirituality in view of its popularity among both Orthodox and nondenominational Christians, religious mavericks and mystics (Stanton 40-43, 49). Gogol', Dostoevskii, V. Solov'ëv and many others also expressed their interest in Optina, often detailing its supposed distinctive, mystical qualities as well as claiming to have experienced peculiar, transcendental experiences and contact with the sublime realm there (Bakusev 247-383). It became particularly associated with Tolstoi and his lifelong spiritual quest after speculation arose that the writer had intended it to be his destination upon his final flight from Iasnaia Poliana. The enigma of this forever-unsolvable question has added to the air of mystery already surrounding the monastery's image. Even after his excommunication from the Orthodox Church, Tolstoi continued to visit Optina, either to seek quiet retreat, sometimes in disguise as a peasant, or to discuss his religious beliefs (or lack thereof) with its elders (Stanton 42, 204). Tolstoi's admiration of Optina despite his disapproval of Russian Orthodoxy dissociated both the monastery and the myth of *dukhovnost'* from the Church and aligned it instead with a radical version of the Christian faith (Stanton 49).

Pelevin deconstructs the Optina Pustyn' monastery's symbolic status as a locus of Russian spirituality by transfiguring it from a physical structure into a meaningless idea. According to Knopf, rumor has it that it is some secret monastery where Count T. is to receive a spiritual farewell speech from its elders; others suggest it represents the furthermost mystical limit, the peak of spiritual ascent (Pelevin 8-9). Aksinia's husband, Olsuf'ev, tells T. that the count is expected to discover the true meaning of Optina Pustyn' through his journey, and that currently the only thing that is certain is that God can be found there (Pelevin 264). Olsuf'ev advises T. that according to Solov'ëv, only the count can reach the mystical place, but it turns out to be just a partial anagram of the words "я" (I) "истина" (truth) and "путь" (way) (Pelevin 318). Count T. begins to think that his quest to find Optina Pustyn' relates not to the physical realm, but to the realm of metaphysics ("к области отвлеченной метафизически") (Pelevin 344). Solov'ëv agrees: philosophizing, the count will arrive at the place where the "road to Optina Pustyn' opens" (Pelevin 344). Solov'ëv insists that although the term currently lacks both a physical and semantic value, T.'s "obsession" ("наваждение") will end when he finally understands that everything constituting his world exists on the same plane; he will discover where he is going and what Optina Pustyn' signifies in this meaningless void (Pelevin 345). By recycling Optina Pustyn' to represent a nonentity of subjective import, Pelevin suggests that the monastery's embodiment of various notions of *dukhovnost'* effectively canceled out its potential to signify any one specific ideology. For the post-Soviet generation it stands as an enticingly fashioned, yet hopelessly multifarious emblem of conflicting putative truths.

Pelevin suggests that Tolstoi's spiritual conversion, after which he resolved to believe in God and exploit the literary text to argue his moralist ideals, was merely the late writer's return

to his religious beginnings with a new perspective. In his final moment at the end of the novel, T. sees a familiar, dark void ahead of him, which he identifies as Optina Pustyn'. He decides that God and the answers to all his spiritual questions exist there (Pelevin 381). The count has yet to reach the void when the novel ends; by ending his existential hero's life before he can reach his destination, Pelevin spares himself the need to define God and the pertinent issues he satirizes in the novel. According to the author's logic, claiming to understand the mysteries encompassing the spiritual realm is the first fallacy and defining it for others deprives them of their right to create their own meaning of it for themselves. In the last paragraph, Pelevin even warns against attempting to extrapolate any useful ideas from the novel's content; even he cannot provide any insight on its metatextual value, since "any words will [convey] stupidity, dream, and error" ("любые слова будут глупостью, сном и ошибкой") (Pelevin 383).

In conclusion, my comparative analysis of the recycled myth of *dukhovnost'* in post-Soviet Russian literature suggests that the concept of spirituality in twenty-first-century Russian culture exists at the intersection of the traditional poles of religious atheism and overt religiosity. The lack of religious and ideological censorship that shaped the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literary canons in the present climate has generated the public debate about whether or not Russia's cultural identity ought to be considered a truly spiritual one. The current rapprochement with the Orthodox faith, made ardent by involving the nation-wide restoration of Russian religious sites, has not been received without criticism. For example, Andrei Zviagintsev's controversial film, *Левиафан* (Leviathan 2014), suggests that the revival of Russian Orthodoxy is a tool that corrupt government officials use to conceal their exploitation of their powerless constituents. Non-believers in the Russian Federation regard the restoration of

religious sites, such as the Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow, “as a grotesque attempt to shove religion down people’s throats” (Hughes 194).

Notwithstanding the historical importance of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Russia's cultural development, attaching the notion of *dukhovnost'* to Russian nationality is problematic primarily because of the nation's historically dichotomous attitude on the matter. Prilepin’s identification of Russianness with Orthodox religious spirituality disregards Russia's secular tradition, regardless of how much, as Epstein (2012) would argue, its extremism resembled religious dogmatism. There is much to be said for Erofeev's denunciation of Russian spirituality as a whole. Demonstrating its roots in the Russian intelligentsia rather than in folk culture, Erofeev emphasizes the extent to which the notion of *dukhovnost'* is a nationalist-elitist idea rather than an organic cultural value originating from the common people to which it was later ascribed. Finally, Pelevin's juxtaposition of Tolstoi’s religious ideals and contradictory behavior problematizes the impossibly high expectations of Russian religious thinkers who could not live up to their own moral ideals, consequently becoming victims of their own hubris. Despite Prilepin’s indirect dismissal of Russia’s secular philosophical eras, a substantial number of Russians share his view that *dukhovnost’* is a traditionally Orthodox concept (Ellis 393).

There is certainly no value in disqualifying a particular identity on the basis of its poor resemblance to factual history. Part of forming a sense of self within a national community of otherwise unrelated individual requires the collective endorsement of an imagined truth. Particularly in the case of belief systems, identity is an evolving phenomenon, and under no circumstances is it ethical to diminish the importance of a nation’s “forward” or “backward” movement as it recovers and rediscovers itself. Although religiosity in Russian culture can be

seen as having been unnaturally fused with Russian secular culture, ideology has never been regarded as a strictly private affair in Russian culture; the sovereignty has always decided it for its constituents, with punishment by death or exile for dissidents, in some respects, even now.

The following chapter on the cultural myth of *narodnost'* illustrates how Russianness, in contrast to Western materialism, was defined by the idea of Russia's global status as a higher moral authority, which developed the idea of nationhood within the context of a moral ideals inspired by imperial Russia's religious imperative.

Culture — Identity — (Contami)Nation: Re-contextualizing the *Narod* in Post-Soviet Russian Literature

For a country as large and ethnically heterogeneous as Russia, conceptualizing a national identity presents a slew of challenges, particularly, the need to maintain one prescribed set of values to the exclusion of all others. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815), Russians were accustomed to measuring their culture against European standards and understanding its distinctiveness from both the East and the West due to Russia's lacking a classical heritage. The question of Russian identity had been elevated to a national debate with the Petrine Reforms (1696-1721), which were intended to resolve Russia's purported backwardness (Franklin and Widdis 5). Recognizing the loss of cultural authenticity that resulted from Peter the Great's Europeanization drive, the Slavophiles (literally, "lovers of the Slavs") and other nationalist thinkers favored defining Russianness according to the German Romantics' notions about the morally pure and simple folk (Jahn 56). Golden Age writers, particularly Pushkin and Lermontov among the poets, and Turgenev, Gogol, Dostoevskii and Tolstoi among the novelists, sympathized with the idea that the *prostoi narod* (simple folk) was the source of Russia's, if not the world's, cultural and ideological wealth. Their various idealized conceptions of "the people" and its national worth altered the semantic quality of the term *narod* (folk, nation) and its derivative, *narodnost'* (nationhood) from their straightforward linguistic value to two "of the most elusive [terms] in the Russian language" (Perrie 29).

The question of Russianness revolves around this centuries-long debate about Russia's cultural and ideological authenticity vis-à-vis the West. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it has resurfaced once again in national discourse. Post-Soviet Russian writers have approached this problem from various points of view. They demonstrate a tendency to juxtapose the twenty-first-century Russian nation with nineteenth-century nationalist ideals, some of which many post-Soviet Russians have come to embrace as their "true" national values (Ellis 393). The poetic symbolism of the *narod* as the bearer of Russianness that grew from Russia's "literaturocentric" cultural tradition elevated the peasant to a national icon. The concept became so popular that it was incorporated into the national slogan, "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality" in 1833.[20] It was the only term from the original triad that Soviet revolutionaries kept for their own cultural program, "идейность, партийность, народность" (ideological-content, party-mindness, nationality), in which *narodnost'* entailed opposition to elitist formalism, accessibility, and folk-oriented content.

The fall of communism divorced *narodnost*' from the era's values. With the re-adoption of Russian Orthodoxy as the state religion, the debate about *narodnost'* also concerned re-identifying with the Slavophile concept of *sobornost'* (togetherness, or oneness),[21] which conceptualized Russian national unity according to the idea of Christian brotherhood (Duncan 22-23). Contrary to the argument for restoring the "Russia that was lost," some post-Soviet

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[20] The original triad, "православие, самодержавие, народность," was created in 1833 by Count Sergei Semionovich Uvarov, a Russian classical scholar and Minister of Education under Tsar Nikolai I (reigned 1822-1855). He adapted it from the French national philosophy of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*; Nikolai I installed the triad as the ideological base of the empire.

[21] The concept was developed by the early Slavophile, Khomiakov, in the late 1830s.

cultural criticism has raised concerns about the potential inertia that returning to the past might impose on efforts to recreate a national identity.

The works *t, Encyclopedia* and *I Came From Russia* employ the cultural myth of the *narod* to address the post-Soviet Russian identity crisis. They provide three different perspectives on pre-revolutionary conceptions of Russianness and its applicability to the post-Soviet Russian problem. This chapter discusses the re-contextualization of the *narod* through the re-valorization, reduction, and neutralization of its nineteenth-century value by recycling Russia's iconic literary works and personalities. An analysis of these three texts follows a brief historical overview of the cultural myth of the *narod* and *narodnost'* from the rise of the modern Russian national consciousness (medieval Russia had its own sense of nationhood too) until the fall of the Soviet Union.

Post-Soviet Russian writers feel obligated to address the *russkii vopros* (Russian question) at length. *Narodnost'* "was a central tenet of Russian Romantic writers," who adopted the concept of the German term *Volkstum* (nationality) to describe the idealized folk as the embodiment of true national spirit (Baer 80). The word *narodnost'* first appeared in a letter to A. Turgenev from the poet P. A. Viazemskii in 1819, who coined the term to describe Turgenev's characterization of the Russian peasant localities with attributes that were, in his view, most peculiar to the Russian people and their culture. Russian realist writers, such as Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, also contributed to the Russian messianic vision of the *narod* as having a divine social and individual mission (Duncan 20; Piirainen 157; Rzhevskii 1998:64). Collectively, the works of Russian Golden Age writers elevated *narodnost'* from its literal meaning of "nationality" to the specific context of a Russian folk ideal. To some extent, the imperial meaning of *narodnost'*

was also ethnically exclusive, since it favored the Russian-speaking population of the Slav heartland, which was by and large Russian Orthodox, and had developed a high level of culture that was observed almost exclusively by the ethnic Russian folk (Call 181; Jahn 55; Perrie 29).

What came to be known as the *prostoi narod* was originally the *narod*. The term was used to distinguish the French-speaking, Westernized elite society from the illiterate, uneducated Russian-speaking *narodnye massy* ('common masses') (Helberg-Hirn 39; Perrie 29). The idealized Russian folk "enjoyed a considerable vogue in the 1820s," but later came to represent a controversial demographic as the Westernizers and the Slavophiles contributed conflicting arguments about the political and cultural value of Russia's "masses" (Perrie 30). The ethnic Russian *narod* is also the bearer of the so-called "Russian soul," another cultural myth that ascribes certain behavioral and ideological tendencies to the Russian people.[22]

The nineteenth-century Russian cultural elites mainly argued about the national authenticity of the *narod* and whether its antiquated nature was a sign of barbarism or universal, divine consciousness. Nevertheless, the Golden Age literary canon illustrates a relatively consistent idea about the Russian folk. Pushkin's stylized folk material in *Руслан и Людмила* (Ruslan and Liudmila 1820) and Lermontov's *Герой нашего вреимени* (A Hero of Our Time 1840), for example, were followed by narratives that featured variations on the myth of the simple folk. Among them are *Мертвые души* (Dead Souls 1842) by Gogol', Dostoevskii's *Записки из мёртвого дома* (House of the Dead 1860-62) and Tolstoi's *Казаки* (The Cossacks 1863), *Анна Каренина* (Anna Karenina 1877), and *Война и мир* (War and Peace 1869). For all their diversity, the fictional folk figures in these works were regarded as realistic portrayals of the

[22] The myth of the Russian soul is discussed in Chapter Three.

narod; however, they were problematic because none of them had been created by the common people themselves (Frolova-Walker 121; Walker 116; Kelly 2012:141; Boym 1994:82).

Post-Soviet Russian writers are equally divided in their opinions about the *narod*. In the present survey, Prilepin exemplifies the wave of "new-realist" Russian authors who envision the post-Soviet nation within the Russian nineteenth-century literary tradition's imagined folk (Tsvetova 457). I would argue that his nationalist-leaning prose promotes reviving the myth of *narodnost'* in order to remedy the sense of spiritual homelessness and cultural fragmentation that resulted from the fall of the Soviet Union. This contrasts with the larger trend in post-Soviet literature, especially among postmodernist writers, who recycle cultural myths in order to address, though not resolve, the sense of ideological chaos encompassing post-Soviet Russian society (Gomel 2013; Günther 2013; Lipovetskii 1999).

The essay genre allows Prilepin to merge the traditionally distinct simple folk and erudite literary styles, allowing him to recast the formerly elitist question of *narodnost'* as a popular cultural motif. According to Aldous Huxley, "essays belong to a literary species" existing "within a three-poled frame of reference": (1) the informal pole, which is personal and autobiographical; (2) the formal pole, which is objective, factual and concrete-particular; and, (3) the abstract-universal pole.[23] Prilepin approaches the myth of *narodnost*' from the autobiographical frame of reference (the informal pole) to discuss the question of national identity (the formal pole). By perpetuating mythogenic tropes of *narodnost'* in his portrayal of the post-Soviet Russian nation, Prilepin becomes the post-Soviet torchbearer of the nineteenth-century cultural myth of the *narod*.

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[23] See the author's preface to Huxley's *Collected Essays* (1959).

Prilepin begins *I Came From Russia* by suggesting that Russian nationality is above all an identity defined by a shared cultural memory rather than by ideological values. In "Пролёты и проруби" ("Stairwells and Holes in the Ice") the author maintains that Russians acquire a sense of camaraderie through the common experience of an eternally perilous fate. Even though one must "pack up and leave Russia to go to hell" ("собирать пожитки и бросать эту Россию к черту) in order to be happy, Russians would rather stay and face their lot than depart from "the Lord's beloved daughter" ("любимая Господня дочка") (53-54). With apparent chauvinism, the author alludes to the historical plight of the Russian people as one that nature has accorded them; their willingness to carry their yoke "without sordid mawkishness" ("без подлого пафоса") attests to the strength of the national spirit (Prilepin 55-56).

I Came From Russia exemplifies a recent trend in nostalgic prose that depicts the whole of Russia's space beyond the capital as "the provinces" (Parts 2015; Larsen 2003; Zaionts 2003). This trend attributes cultural authority to provincial landscapes—particularly, the derelict localities that used to be collective farms and settlements during Soviet times—as the "topography of post-Soviet nationalism" (Parts 2015:209). In Prilepin's view, the new *narod* is the population inhabiting this area, the laid-off proletarians who have become estranged from the urban world due to their declining socioeconomic status. Unlike the nineteenth-century mythic peasant *narod*, which was idealized for its lack of modernity and Western influences, Prilepin's version includes ex-collective farmers and factory workers who are literate and are familiar with urban culture thanks to the standardized institutions established during the Soviet regime. They represent a demographic that straddles two worlds, the urban and provincial, without any world of its own. Their elemental, old-world environment is unnatural to them; having been raised with

the idea that they were fulfilling a national purpose, their isolation from the rest of Russia becomes a source of their disillusionment rather than enlightenment (Prilepin 174). By illustrating how the post-Soviet "provinces" have lost their Golden Age charm, Prilepin invokes nostalgia for the bygone era.

In the essay titled "Глушь" ("The Backwoods"), the author's highlights the distinctions between urban and rural culture, portraying the latter as exhibiting traditional Russian cultural values. He describes the locality with selective details and dated terms in order to recall the nineteenth-century mythic provincial idyll. Instead of using the late Soviet term *poselenie* ("settlement"), Prilepin refers to the locality as a *dereven'ka* ("little village"); he calls the people living there *krestiane* ("peasants") instead of *sel'chane* ("villagers"). In addressing one of the men, to whom he refers as *muzhiki* ("villagers"), he abandons formal address for the old-fashioned familial "father" (отец) (Prilepin 168).

Initially, the author recounts only the scenes that have the potential to invoke the nostalgic cultural memory of the pre-revolutionary Russian countryside. His description of the settlement and its culture resembles that of the mythic *narod*. Despite the varied people and places that should exist in a typical, post-Soviet provincial town, Prilepin makes it seem as though there are only farmers busy with their fieldwork, which he calls "*krest'ianskie dela*" ("peasant affairs"). This daily routine is one of old-fashioned, manual labor: "mowing, raking, stacking, hauling the hay home" ("косить, ворошить, копёнки укладывать, домой сено везти") (Prilepin 171).

Prilepin alludes to the tranquil, unhurried nature of life in the settlement, repeatedly describing the villagers' actions with the adverb *nespeshno* ("without haste"). He characterizes the *muzhik* who comes to his aid in the first scene as having leisurely emerged from the woods

(“из лесу неспешно вышел […] мужик”) and crawled slowly underneath Prilepin’s car (“неспешно подлез под мою машину”) to assess the damage (Prilepin 168). The man then leaves in order to finish mowing and then “calmly” returns twenty minutes later with a rope to tow the car (“через двадцать минут он вернулся с косой, спокойный”) (Prilepin 169). When they arrive at the settlement, a group of men who had been sitting around lazily and smoking pipes “came to life” (“оживились”) at the sight of Prilepin’s predicament and “gathered slowly around [the] car, checking it out silently and without any fuss” (“неспешно сошлись к машине моей, разглядывают, молчат, не суетятся”) (Prilepin 169). Prilepin does not convey any frustration about the slow pace of country life. Rather he admires the tranquil manner in which the villagers conduct their own affairs and accommodate the unanticipated disruption to their daily routine.

Representing urban Russia, Prilepin’s reaction suggests that, with the exception of those living in the “backwaters,” post-Soviet Russians have lost touch with traditional Russian way of life. In “Backwaters,” Prilepin expresses his surprise at how the villagers treat him. No one charged him for the repairs, which was already an act of kindness, since “they had every reason” (“они имели все основания”) to leave Prilepin to his own devices and attend to their own pressing affairs. They gather around his car to assess the damage and, in selfless concern, “went their separate ways, not home, but on various errands to help me— though I hadn’t asked them for anything “разошлись […], не по домам, а по моим делам, — хотя я их ни о чем не просил.” He would have slept in his car overnight, had it not been for one of the *muzhiki*, who insisted against it and took Prilepin in, fed him, clothed him, and even gave him his only bed to

sleep in. Prilepin indicates that the villager's folkish ways are unfamiliar to him by interspersing his narrative with the villagers' voices:

> At breakfast ("Have some aspic—it's homemade! Perhaps you'd like some soup?") I realized that of everyone who had helped me out the previous night, I was the only one who'd had a full eight hours' sleep (Во время завтрака ("Ешьте холодец — домашний! Может, супу хотите?") я выяснил что из всех вчерашних моих помощников я единственный, кто проспал восемь часов) (171).

In addition to their selflessness, the farmers are exceptionally diligent. Even though they had worked on Prilepin's car until one o'clock in the morning, they still departed once again for the fields at the usual hour.

Prilepin reveals that, besides its old-fashioned customs, the so-called *dereven'ka* is actually a disagreeable place to live. It is not a thriving, nineteenth-century quaint little town but a partially abandoned settlement. The author had initially omitted the less-appealing details about the locality in order to make the reader sympathize with the demographic that was once the center of national attention and the source of cultural pride, and is now unseen and forgotten. The rustic squalor turns out to be proof of the locality's deterioration, rather than of its robust old-fashioned ways. Small, two-story wooden cottages line dirt roads that are full of "puddles half the size of the Mediterranean sea" ("лужи по половину Средиземного моря"); the shabby houses are spattered with dirt and, among their gardens, "some [are] well-groomed, others overgrown with weeds" ("порой ухоженными, порой разбурьяненными" (Prilepin 169).

For Prilepin, the settlement serves as a reminder of Russia's fragmented *narod*, the diminishing importance of traditional Russian culture among urban Russians, and the depressing quality of life in rural areas. Only at the point of leaving this idyllic place and returning to the real word, it seems, does the author come to understand the sad realities of modern rural life. In

any event, only then does he draw his reader's attention to them. As he drives around the settlement for the last time, he relates in a sudden change of mood, "Backwoods and melancholy —'you just want to cry,' as Esenin would say" ("Глушь и тоска— 'аж плакать хочется', как Есенин говорил" (Prilepin 172).[24] Prilepin's reference to the Silver Age lyricist—who identified himself as the last village poet in a poem of the same title (1920)—highlights the themes of a departing *narod* and the author's own status as culture-bearer. It also suggests that the inhabitants of rural post-Soviet Russia are the same peasantry from Esenin's time, as though they have not changed since the turn of the nineteenth century. However, Prilepin does not lament the *narod* for the same reasons that Esenin had: he recycles the poet's phrase in order to convey his distress about the post-Soviet Russian rural population's loss of modern amenities and comforts that they enjoyed during the Soviet era.

In fact, while Prilepin's initial depiction suggests a nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary past, he idealizes provincial life during the more recent, Soviet era, when the "village" was a bustling settlement. By repeating the word *togda* ('then') throughout the passage cited below, he employs the then-versus-now paradigm to sharpen the contrast between what he portrays as the good old Soviet times and the dismal present.

> I forgot to mention that I'd already been here. *A long time ago*, about fifteen years back. So yes, in the Soviet period. *Back then,* in the old days… (Я забыл сказать, что я уже бывал здесь. *Давно*, лет пятнадцать назад. Ну да, в советское время. *Тогда, в те времена*…)
>
> The villagers told me about going "down souths" with their families, *back* when we still had "souths" to choose from. Come to think of it, almost all the cars and motorcycles the villagers have *now* had been bought back *then*. (Мужики рассказывали мне, как "на юга" ездили с семьями,— *тогда* у страны еще было много "югов", было из чего выбрать. К слову, почти все авто и

[24] Prilepin also refers to Esenin's *Русь уходящая* (Russia As She Leaves US 1924), which describes the plight of the *narod* and its Motherland after the Revolution.

> мотоциклы, которые *сейчас* есть у мужиков, были купленные ещё *тогда*") (173; emphasis added).

For Prilepin, the problem is not the presence of Western consumer goods, such as cars, but merely that the technology available in rural Russia is outdated. The fallacy in Prilepin's imagination is that, according to the date the essay was written (2004), "fifteen years ago" goes back to 1989. "Back then" was precisely the end of the economic Era of Stagnation, which preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union, and was by consensus no great time, particularly in rural Russia. The settlement was probably already showing the effects of a deteriorating economy the first time Prilepin visited it.

Prilepin contrasts the new *narod* with post-Soviet urban Russians on the basis of their character to suggest that the rural inhabitants still demonstrate the nineteenth-century traditions of *sobornost'*. Identifying himself and the reader as urbanites, he states, "we city dwellers, frequenters of an ever-growing number of bars and restaurants, filling the corporate ranks, all too often tend to believe that our life is right and true" (мы, жители городов, любующие на бары и рестораны, которых всё больше, пополняющие собой фирмы, зачастую уверены, что жизнь наша правильна и верна") (Prilepin 174-75). Having adopted Western consumerism, Russia's affluent, capitalist society has lost the sense of national community. The author implies that individualistic values have replaced neighborly conscientiousness among affluent, urban Russians. According to the mythic, nostalgic re-conception of *narodnost'*, to be Russian entails observing traditional values including those "whose primary characteristics are perceived to be generosity, kindness, hospitality" (Piirainen 160). By criticizing the mentality of urban Russians for their lack of these moral ideals, Prilepin reiterates the Slavophile view of Westernization as

the "destructive force against the pre-Petrine Russian traditions, especially the *sobornost'* of the *narod*" (Hudspith 106).

Prilepin's idealization of Russian culture during Soviet times does not adhere to pre-revolutionary nationalist notions of "pure" Russian culture and its contaminants, although he clearly depicts Moscow and the rest of Russia's larger, industrial cities and their cultural elites as soulless and devoid of authenticity. For example, he attacks his contemporary, Tat'iana Tolstaia, for criticizing the languorous spirit of the *narod* "in our peasant land" ("в нашей крестьянской стране") and argues that the typical Russian's morale falters because he has always worked harder than any German can imagine ("Русский человек мечтает и желает уклониться от работы только потому, что он много веков работал так, как никакому немцу не снилось" (Prilepin 43-44). The author then implicitly links Tolstaia's "hostility towards the people" ("неприязнь к народу") to foreign influences, specifically, her French language studies (Prilepin 50).

By employing a literary text to address the problem of the *narod*, Prilepin preserves the traditional role played by writers in establishing in establishing notions of Russianness. He also re-affirms the cultural myth's demographic boundaries by defining the *narod* as separate from urban, upper class Russians. The purpose of his work resembles that of the village prose writers (1950s-1980s), who portrayed the peasant *narod* as a utopian nation from the "radiant past" and invoked "a nostalgia generated by the loss of traditional rural life" (Parthé 1992:3).[25] Prilepin has also contributed to re-contextualizing the peasant *narod* by attributing mythic ideas from the pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. This illustrates what Mark Lipovetskii calls "re-

[25] The most well-known village prose writers are Fedor Abramov, Vasilii Belov, Valentin Ovechkin, Valentin Rasputin, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Soloukhin, Aleksandr Yashin, and, to a certain extent, Vasilii Shushkin.

mythologization," which reformulates cultural myths in order to compensate for the "state of absurdity and complete chaos" of the post-Soviet period (214). Prilepin re-constitutes the *narod* from peasant motifs taken from nineteenth-century Russian literature, the urbanized village culture of twentieth-century Soviet settlements, and the lower working-class inhabiting post-Soviet (modernized, therefore, Westernized) rural Russia.

The notion that the inhabitants of rural Russia constitute the "true" *narod* has become a primary object of ridicule for Russian postmodern prose, which facilitates "the death of myth, […] and the rejection of metanarratives" (Lipovetskii 4). I would argue that even literature that debunks cultural myths reaffirms their importance in identity formation in that it establishes an imagined community that is defined by individuals who attribute a common value to their shared historical past. In a 1998 survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, participants responded that "being Russian was a matter of shared experience, and of shared perception of that experience"(Ellis 393). Like re-mythologizing narratives, postmodern prose assumes its readers' ability to relate to the text by way of shared cultural memory. As Lyudmila Parts asserts, Russian postmodernist texts do "not strive to destroy […] original and 'pure' myth," but to "reinterpret" it into a new cultural form that is more relevant to post-Soviet society (2002: 459).

Encyclopedia reiterates Likhachev's argument that "the whole notion of a 'national idea' was not just "an [act of] stupidity, but a very dangerous stupidity."[26] The author illustrates how the cultural myth of the *narod* embodies an amalgam of conflicting values originating in both the Slavophiles' and Westernizers' perspectives about the peasantry. He lampoons both schools of

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[26] This quote appears in an interview by Viktor Kostiukovskii in "Akademik Dmitrii Sergeevich Likhachev: Edinomyslie — iskusstvenno," *Izvestiia*, 27 November 1996: 5.

thought, demonstrating an impartial criticism of the "*russkie* versus *rossiiskie*" (ethnic versus political identification) or, the "us versus us" (the Russian masses versus the Russian high society) paradigm (Cheauré 29-31). In this analysis, I will demonstrate how Erofeev challenges established conceptions of Russianness in his satirical recycling of nineteenth-century conceptions of the *narod* and *narodnost'*. By incorporating conflicting ideas of Russianness into his essays on Russian nationality, Erofeev suggests that the Russian cultural elites' historical debate about the Russian identity has effectively reshaped *narodnost'* into a non-identity. I argue that by deconstructing established notions of the *narod* and *narodnost'*, he devalues these cultural myths. Applying Soviet terms and phrases to the myth of the *narod*, Erofeev creates a powerful assessment of the cultural trauma felt by disillusioned post-Soviet Russians. His narrator, who represents the post-Soviet Russian everyman, explains his identity crisis as a result of having to negotiate the ideologically-clashing elements of both the pre-revolutionary and Soviet identities pervading post-Soviet everyday life.

Erofeev's criticism of the *narod* begins with a cynical allusion to the Soviet term *vrag naroda* (enemy of the people) in a passage under the same title. The narrator suggests that despite the typical Russian's familiarity with the term *narod*, the word possesses a slew of conflicting meanings which mitigates one's ability to cultivate a sense of patriotism without simultaneously feeling like a traitor. For him, patriotism is not a sense of pride, but a fear of eventually being found guilty of disloyalty. His appreciation of the *narod* extends no further than "short and hesitant attempts to get a closer whiff" ("минуты недоверчивого принюхивания к

народу") to the point of nausea, which lingers in the form of a "dull hope for some indefinite idea" ("с тупой надеждой на что-то") (Erofeev 12).[27]

According to Erofeev, the Russian identity has always represented a nebulous problem rather than the straightforward concept that the word "nation" embodies in other countries. In a false etymological deconstruction of the word *narod*, Erofeev argues that the term was created in order to symbolize the indefinite (and/or multifarious) origins of Russianness. He sarcastically states that *narod* is "one of the most precise concepts in the Russian language" ("народ — одно из самых точных понятий русского языка") in the sense that everyone knows of it (Erofeev 14). He traces it from the words *na* ("onto") and *rod* ("kin"), which explains its "double transfer of responsibility" ("двойной перенос ответственности") from 'I' to 'we' and from 'we' to 'kin', which finally became "the 'us-them' people," an "external-internal factor" denoting an eternal quest […] for self-justification" (Erofeev 14). In contrast to the Western concept of nationhood in which the individual (the "I") is integral, the central idea of Russian identity is "we." This "we," however, evolved from Russians' understanding of themselves as Europe's Other ("they"). In other words, Russians have no concept of self outside the Eurocentric understanding of Russians as a nation of lesser others.

According to Erofeev, the meaning of *narod* is not ambiguous due to Russia's ethnic or ideological diversity, but because the word itself has been dissociated from its original, dictionary definition to an anomalous cultural term. Due to the centuries-long debate about what the narod ought to be, the concept now embodies a philosophical no-man's land. It is an emotionally-charged inquiry about what Russian nationhood might mean apart from mere

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[27] Note the similarity between Erofeev's description of Russian intellectuals' aspirations and Pelevin's recycling of Optina Pustyn', which I discuss later in this chapter.

citizenship, and perhaps even a desire to create a sense of self in opposition to political identification. Impassioned by their irrational ideals, the Russians confused self-government with arbitrary rule ("самоуправление с самоуправством") and became a sticky ball that has hurled itself interminably downhill in the name of "national emotion" ("национальный пафос") (Erofeev 14). The narrator comes to perceive the *narod*

> as a thick stew, according to the general mood that it ferments within itself. Goners, the intelligentsia, fatalistic impulses ("в сборной солянке, по общему настроению, которое он в себе квасит. Доходяги, интеллигенция, фаталистические позывы" (Erofeev 15).

Because the incompetent Russian intelligentsia have reduced the term from its representational value to the subject of a philosophical debate it lacks any potential beyond perpetuating a self-destructive national consciousness. In its powerlessness, the *narod* represents the Russian cultural elites' failure to detach themselves and, consequently, the entire Russian nation, from Eurocentric notions of Russia's purported backwardness. A historical overview of *narodnost'* and its continual reliance on European cultural theory "indicates the impossibility of" creating a Russian identity that is ideologically independent of Western values (Groys 186).

The Russian cultural elite and their hopeless ideals are not the only ingredients in Erofeev's "stew." The common people, who have found themselves with the choice to either abscond or stay and serve the intelligentsia's interests in the name of patriotism, have become a nation of the used and the abused. Russians are but a "union of the descendants of the whipped and the flogged" ("союз потомков, битых кнутом и плетьми"); they are "children of torture" ("дети пытки") (Erofeev 14). The *narod* is a powerless conglomerate: as the product of the Russian

elite's repeated miscalculations and blunders, it "captures the essence of an unjust cause" ("передает суть неправого дела") (Erofeev 14).

According to Erofeev, nation-building in Russia has always been a practice of failed ambitions. Having acquired various conceptions over the centuries that ultimately fell apart, the word *narod* represents the Russian elites' historical exploitation of the nation as a subject of experimentation. To this effect, Russians

> have fallen victim to their own virtues. […] They are no longer a people, but a blanket [lit. 'duvet cover'] into which you can shove, stuff, pour and hammer anything you like. A *sad-sack* people — binge-drinking, lewd, lazy, indifferent, without any common value or notions of good and evil. The intelligentsia's game of the good old ill-treated 'folk' and the bad old 'regime' ended in their own defeat. ("Русские стали жертвами собственных добродетелей. […] уже не народ, а пододеяльник, в который можно засунуть, запихать, влить, втемяшить все что угодно. *Хмурной* народ — запойный, развратный, ленивый, равнодуший, лишенный общей значимости и общих представлений о добре и зле. Интеллигентская игра в хороший несчастный 'народ' и плохую 'власть' кончилась поражением самой интеллигенции (179; original emphasis).

As opposed to falling short of their aims, Russians tend to push themselves too far; their attempt to reconstruct life according to utopian ideals turned the *narod* into an impossible nonesuch that was created in the heat of "[r]age [which is] the commonplace outpouring of feeling" ("[б]ешенство—расхожее объяснение в чувствах") (Erofeev 12). Erofeev's point of view corresponds to the idea that Russian cultural identity was formed from "certain elements and currents" that were created and then rejected by Western culture, which led to its reputation "as a kind of experimental region" rather than a legitimate nation (Cheauré 31). Instead of building upon existing concepts of Self, Russians have historically understood revolution to be the only reliable method of change.[28] Erofeev perceives the Russian nationality as a stunted

[28] This relates to the Lotman-Uspenskii "Binary Model" of Russian history (Lotman and Uspenskii 1985).

identity: due to periods of "tempestuous development" ("бурное развитие") followed by rapid decomposition and stalemates, *narodnost'* resembles some kind of mycelium ("такая грибница") (Erofeev 26).

In "История национального футбола" ("The History of National Soccer"), Erofeev compares the history of the Russian problem since Peter the Great to a soccer game in which the *narod* is the ball. The narrator blames the experiment-like history of the Russian nation on its leadership, which hastily made decisions "without knowing why" ("сам не зная почему") and in critical moments "just stood there, not knowing what to fight back against" ("[с]тоит и не знает — куда бить") (Erofeev 41). Though Erofeev primarily targets the intelligentsia for the demise of the *narod*, he also subtly blames the common people for failing to resist being thrown about like a soccer ball. Instead of exploiting the state's weakness as an opportunity to influence decisions that will inevitably affect them, the Russian common people behave as though they are incapable of acting on their own accord. Progress has been as a matter of happenstance rather than of prudence; the *narod* moves in an indefinite direction over time and remains in a state comparable to that of other archaic peoples in Third World countries (Erofeev 29).

As treated in *Encyclopedia*, the cultural myth of the *narod* embodies a national problem affecting the identity of post-Soviet Russians in general, not just the peasant-like inhabitants of provincial Russia. Given the intelligentsia's constant dispute about what constitutes *narodnost'*, and the masses' apparent indifference to how the former define them, the Russian identity entails a dysfunctional sense of self rather than a unifying, national consciousness. The author reduces the myth's cultural value as a symbol of patriotism to signify an ethnic bond to a deplorable country.

Erofeev's criticism of Russia's centuries-long seemingly deleterious attempt to define itself shows no sympathy toward the renewed relevance of the identity question in post-Soviet terms. In 1992, Boris Groys wrote that "'Russia and the West' appears to have been the central problem of the Russian philosophical tradition, Russian literature, and Russian culture" at least since the nineteenth century (182). Erofeev's *Encyclopedia*, no doubt, demonstrates the present re-contextualization of Russianness within this paradigm. His sardonic narrative reflects the bitter resentment that many post-Soviet Russians experience in their various efforts to reconcile with their nation's multiple past identities. Although Erofeev's criticism of the myth highlights the reasons for the the weak sense of camaraderie in today's Russia, the narrative also epitomizes Russian thinkers' proclivity to devalue themselves and their culture. In "Закат России" (The Decline [*lit.* Sunset] of Russia), the narrator calls the *narod* a "big rotting corpse" that the modern world ought to dispose of (Erofeev 34). Although he willingly denounces his own country, the narrator resents lacking a sense of loyalty that would probably positively influence his perspective about the national experience. He compares himself to "an emancipated gypsy with gold teeth, writing about the thievery of his own people" ("эманципированный цыган с золотыми зубами, пишущий о вороватости своей наций") (Erofeev 158-59). Ultimately, he feels no remorse for dissecting the *narod* like a cadaver because it already emits the "putrid smell" ("трупный запах") of a body past recovery (Erofeev 158). The narrator's harsh devaluation of the Russian identity, which has consequently diminished his own self-confidence, alludes to the deleterious effect of Russian thinkers' denigrative perspectives on the Russian question. Failing to appreciate the potential of their people's ideas, Russian cultural intellectuals

contributed to branding Russianness with the stereotype of suffering from an insuperable intellectual deficiency.

Erofeev defends his defamation of the *narod* as an attack on the cultural myth rather than a reflection of his antipathy to the Russian people (Erofeev 13). He argues that the term *narod* in the literal sense has never possessed any cultural authority on its own. Despite its impact on the nation's concept of self, the *narod* exists as a literary national type imbedded in nineteenth-century cultural ideals and consequently cannot embody any real demographic. The value of Russian cultural signs, such as the Optina Pustyn' monastery and the provinces, pagan rituals and beliefs that influenced the rich heritage of Russian folk music, and Russian national traditions, has depended on what Russian literature had to say about them. Erofeev suggests that the Russian literary canon has destroyed the meaning of *narodnost'* by placing greater value on the West's notions of "true" and "pure" culture than their own. In other words, Russian cultural heritage lacks a sense of authenticity outside the context of cultural myths. Russian cultural products that diverge from or oppose the myth of the *narod* tend to be considered as inauthentic rather than examples of Russia's diversity. Having failed to conform to the Western idea of nationhood as a phenomenon that is culturally and ideologically singular, the Russians "disappointed the West and in some ways themselves" ("разочаровали Запад и в чем-то самих себя") (Erofeev 35).

According to Erofeev, attempting to define *narodnost'* is not only foolish, but also a potentially fatal endeavor (Erofeev 34). In one sense it demonstrates the Russian intelligentsia's complete ignorance of the myth's harmful effect on Russia's multiculturalism; in another sense, to be of the *narod* presupposes identification with a national consciousness that exhibits both a

'communal orientation' ("общинность") and a "solitude complex" ("комплекс одиночества") (Erofeev 176).[29] Within the context of Russian Golden Age literature, the concept of being part of the Russian nation was strongly defined by the collective experience of Russian canonical writers and thinkers, which was in no way homogeneous. Gogol's portrayal of the peasant *narod* in *Dead Souls* as a population that is largely unaccounted for; Khomiakov's idea of the Russian folk as the global exemplar of universal, Christian brotherhood; and the Westernizers' perception of the Russian nation as an assemblage of the world's deserted, all constitute parts of the mythological frame within which the Russian people and their culture exist.

Even Tolstoi inadvertently promoted the myth of the peasant *narod* as an essential component of authentic Russianness. In fact, his disdain for the West—which has always been Russia's sole rival where cultural values are concerned—and his representation of the Russian folk contributed to what have become immediately recognizable and "evocative emblems of Mother Russia [and] manifestations of the national persona" (Hughes 172). After the Russian Romantics and Slavophiles, he became associated with the *pochvennichestvo* ('soilism') and other populist movements for idolizing the peasant *narod* in opposition to European "rationalism, Roman law, and the principles of private property" (Perrie 33).

It is around this premise that Pelevin constructs the subject of his novel, *t*. In addition to addressing the marketability of Russian nineteenth-century cultural myths in the post-Soviet era, the author demonstrates the extent to which Tolstoi's appreciation of the *narod* had more to do with his literary imagination than with real-life experiences with the peasantry. The hero of the novel, Count T. is a mascot of Lev Tolstoi's ambitious advocacy of the *narod*. As suggested by

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[29] The word *община* can be defined as "commune" or "community"; in a literary context, in reference to *narodnost'*, *obshchina* specifically relates to the social structure of the agrarian class.

his abbreviated name, T.'s character diminishes, rather than boosts, Tolstoi's image as a national hero for championing the cause of "the people." T.'s understanding of the peasantry turns out to be mere pretense, and the young count repeatedly makes a fool of himself by mistaking pretenders for real peasants because of how well they embody his notions of folk authenticity. In his mockery of Tolstoi's idolization of the *narod*, Pelevin suggests that the former's ideas are "particularly useless" to post-Soviet Russians (Pelevin 95). The myth of the *narod* functions as a secondary, if not tertiary, theme in the novel and serves to characterize the hero rather than facilitate plot development. As opposed to Erofeev's direct criticism of the *narod*, Pelevin playfully problematizes the populist movements' attempt to model society according to a literary cultural myth. The author incorporates events from both Tolstoi's private life and his most popular stories in which peasants are central characters into Count T.'s experience, creating an absurd summative and comical account of the nineteenth-century writer's contribution to transforming the literary ideals about the peasantry into a cultural myth.

As Tolstoi's caricature, Count T. emphasizes the nineteenth-century writer's status as a count and reduces his lifelong philosophical inquiry to a meaningless pseudo-intellectuality. T. is a young nobleman and in many ways resembles Tolstoi at the beginning of his literary career, approximately between *Записки Севастополя* (Sevastopol' Sketches 1855) and *Anna Karenina* (1878). T. appears to be cognizant of the problems concerning the peasantry, however his interest in the *narod* is entirely superficial. He considers himself to be a simple person, but his claim proves to be merely a self-bolstering mechanism among his philosophizing peers (Pelevin 28). At a lavish banquet with the pretender Princess Tarakanova, T. remarks that he prefers water and tea to alcohol because of his simple diet (Pelevin 21). Later during the same meal, however, he

compliments Tarakanova on the "extravagance of […her] impeccable taste" ("экстравагантность […] вашего безупречного вкуса"), which he has deduced from having sampled her "magnificent wine" (великолепное вино") (Pelevin 27). The inconsistency between what the count says and does suggests that he is not honestly concerned with anything other than following fashionable intellectual trends in order to maintain his reputation and popularity. Here, Pelevin implicitly criticizes the late writer for prioritizing his own myths about the peasantry and insisting that he knew what was best for this mythologized group as opposed to the actual peasantry. Pelevin maintains that the nobility, even in their empathy for the serfs that impelled their emancipation in1861, still perceived the national crisis from across the irreconcilable gap imposed by the cultural and ideological differences between the two classes.

Rather than demonstrating Count T.'s sincere appreciation for the peasantry's simple lifestyle, the count's fondness for the *prostoi narod* instead suggests that his assumptions about "the people" are naive. The only members of the *narod* he meets are actually pretenders whom he mistakes for real peasants because he cannot distinguish an impostor from a real member of the Russian folk. T. mistakes Fëdor Kuz'mich for a *starik* (peasant elder) and enthusiastically engages with him in folkish Russian.[30] After noticing Kuz'mich's well-manicured hands, T. feels ashamed of having spoken like a peasant with someone who was actually nothing more than a pure farce (Pelevin 329). The Countess Aksinia exploits the Count's penchant for the *narod* and, in rustic disguise, seduces him into a romantic liaison with her. Embarrassed by his poor discernment and conduct, T. admits to himself that he not only knows nothing about the real

[30] The controversy regarding the historical Kuz'mich's persona is summarized in Footnote 17 in Chapter One.

narod, but also that he is just as guilty of pretending as the other would-be peasants in the novel ("ведь не чувствую народной души, только притворяюсь") (Pelevin 82).

Lacking any connection to the actual peasant population, T.'s espousal of the mythological *narod* resembles a whimsical competition with other members of the cultural elite. At a banquet with Princess Tarakanova, T. remarks that his choice of tea or water is better than Maksim Gor'kii's *khlebnoe* (rye vodka) because, though drinking the homegrown spirits earned Gorkii favor in Slavophile circles, he was disliked at expensive restaurants (Pelevin 21). Besides failing to adhere to his own claim to having more sophisticated drinking habits, the count does not explain the moral significance of abstaining from alcohol. In this scene, Pelevin alludes to the nineteenth-century trend of espousing "the cause of the *narod*" by adopting peasant dress, growing a beard, using vernacular speech and altering one's dietary habits that had been highly fashionable among nationalist Russian elites since the early nineteenth century (Perrie 33). Gentlemen who were accustomed to elite society, including Tolstoi, never entirely gave up the amenities of hygiene and fine cuisine, which, in some instances served as an intentional distinction from the peasants and in others suggested a ludicrous naivety on the part of the gentry (Stanton 204).

Pelevin's caricature underscores the nineteenth-century intellectuals' problematic relationship with their own ideals. Count T. misinterprets the historical Tolstoi's philosophy about the benefits of performing manual labor for developing one's self-awareness and finding meaning. As he watches himself begin to disappear with the denouement of the novel, T. tries to hold on to his own "reality" by preoccupying himself with physical labor. However, instead of actually working with his hands, T. sits down to write a story about the history of the *muzhik* and

how the Fatherland produced this admirable character (Pelevin 172). Here Pelevin suggests that although Tolstoi idealized the peasant way of life, he was more dedicated to writing and thinking about it than practicing it, which made him, in Pelevin's estimation, a rather hypocritical person.

Pelevin also mocks the literary nobleman's claim to understanding the peasant class that manifests itself through the writer's absorption in his fictionalized peasant world. Tolstoi may not have considered his literary career as a true form of labor since it does not involve the sweat of one's brow, although judging by the size of his oeuvre over his lifetime it was his preferred activity. In a letter to his cousin, Countess Aleksandra Tolstaia, dated August 19th, 1862, he wrote that interacting with the peasantry was his escape from "the anxieties, doubts and temptations of life" (Tolstaia 151). Despite his peculiar espousal of the *narod*, Tolstoi never fully withdrew from the aspects of his life that distinguished him from the population he so strongly admired. As a debauched simulacrum of the nineteenth-century writer, T. undermines the Tolstoi's status as a cultural icon embodying the myth of authentic *narodnost'*. Pelevin's humorous, ideologically-uncommitted hero underscores the many accusations Tolstoi received from his contemporaries, both his disciples and his adversaries, as well as the writer's own quiet resentment of the contradiction between his "word and deed" (McLean 122). Pelevin's parodic T. also recalls the skepticism that some Tolstoy scholars have expressed about the late writer's integrity: perhaps he was ambivalent about completely withdrawing from high society because "a part of him never wanted to go" (McLean 122).

The novel *t* projects the nineteenth-century literary gentry's exploitation of the national identity crisis, which allowed them to enjoy the benefits of participation in the reactionary nationalism that idealized Russian backwardness without fully committing to resolving the class

disparities or offering any solution that was viable in the real world. Pelevin's rendition of Tolstoi's ardor for the simple folk illuminates the extent to which post-Soviet notions of Russianness depend on the nineteenth-century myth of *narodnost',* as absurd as this anachronism may seem. Indeed, post-Soviet Russians share a unique history that is inseparable from its literary legacy. The Golden Age conceptions of the *narod* will continue to shape Russian identity as long as the classics are read and recycled. Pelevin denies that the content of his novel has any philosophical value, undermining the actual potential of his narrative to change the reader's appreciation of past notions of Russianness (Pelevin 383). He undoubtedly contributes to the evolution of post-Soviet Russian cultural identity. Even if the nineteenth-century idea of the *narod* was indeed a cultural myth, Pelevin's novel suggests that appreciating it for what it was allows Russians to make sense of the otherwise meaningless national idea and avoid "disappearing without the slightest trace" ("пропасть безо всякого следа") (Pelevin 158).

By virtue of their diverse perspectives on the cultural myth of the *narod*, Prilepin, Erofeev and Pelevin serve as points of departure working toward reconciliation with Russia's fragmented cultural identity. They demonstrate a strong dependence on past conceptions of what it means to be Russian through the iconic nineteenth-century literary representations of the Russian folk. The image of "the people" that Russians have come to embrace as their own is in fact the image of Russia's Golden Age mavericks, who in many ways sharply contrasted with the common people. The word *narod* no longer relates to its dictionary definition, but to some vague idea defining a literary-utopian imagined community. As Erofeev writes in *Encyclopedia*, the term haunts Russians like a "discarded hide" whose now irrelevant, outmoded significance should relegate it to the museum (Erofeev 82).

Consciously relying on a fictional conception of self—especially one contrived by an outside force to satisfy external interests—may seem counterintuitive, but it is a substitute for authenticity in the absence of a viable option. Prilepin's reinterpretation of the *narod* to encompass elements of pre-revolutionary and Soviet cultural ideals demonstrates Erofeev's argument that *narodnost'* is a malleable concept. *t*, *Encyclopedia*, and *I Came From Russia*, all attest to the difficulties attending reconciliation with cultural memory, which simultaneously facilitates and inhibits the reconstruction of a new national identity. These works also communicate the emotional toll of returning to a traumatic past in order to part from it. The imperial Russian identity was represented as a state enterprise rather than an organic phenomenon and developed around the notion of being the West's Other and the irresolute struggle for and against authenticity versus acculturation. These three examples of post-Soviet Russian literature demonstrate the importance of constructing an identity that allows for multiple conceptions of self to thrive, whether or not they confirm or deconstruct cultural myths.

By recycling the cultural myth of *narodnost'*, these texts negotiate past conceptions of Russianness, their tropes and stereotypes. In the absence of a consistent, unifying idea with which to re-member their nation, these authors retrospectively examine the cultural myth of the peasant *narod* and its historical value as the quintessential core of the "Russian question." The theme of Russian identity continues to dominate the post-Soviet literary text, eliciting many different and equally unstable interpretations of proper nationhood. And yet it underwrites the nation's cultural quest for reconciliation with the loss even of its ersatz imperial identity.

Post-Soviet Russian writers' recycling of nineteenth-century cultural myths perpetuates their historical tendency toward cultural indeterminacy, which allows for accommodating

"mutually exclusive categories" of thought rather than expunging them (Bertens 29).[31] This process reinterprets the nation's historical condition of perpetual ideological incompleteness and permanent un-resolve as an identity in itself, rather than explaining it as a reason for the lack thereof. It reveals a nation curious about the possibility of conceiving a new identity even while it remains uncertain that any notion of Russianness and otherness can be applied to a nation as culturally and ethnically diverse as the Russian Federation.

Russia's historical attempt to define itself despite its ever-changing ideological, geographical and even ethnic composition, has arguably contributed to the idea that the Russian national character is essentially conflicted (Hosking 229; Boym 1995:133; Çeçik 2; Anisimov and Guliaihin 2013). The myriad of stereotypes that plague its reputation can be traced back to the nineteenth-century intellectual who embarks on an ambitious quest to find the truth after becoming disillusioned about the status quo. This literary type, known as the *pravdoiskatel'*, or truthseeker, was a recurrent figure in the nineteenth-century literary canon as well as among the educated elite (Newlin 66). It also embodies the exemplary Russian in that culture's literary and popular cultural contexts (Ellis 393, Piirainen 156-7). Known as the champion of the cultural myth of the Russian "soul," this character justifies the characterization of the Russian individual as innately mysterious and melancholic, but also self-destructive and tragically idealistic (Boym 1995:133-4; Chulos 119; Williams 1970). The following chapter investigates the extent to which the heroes in Prilepin's essays (in this case, the author himself), Erofeev's novel, and Pelevin's novel, perpetuate, recycle or problematize the *pravdoiskatel'* literary type and the myth of the Russian "soul."

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[31] For the theory of indeterminacy and its use in postmodernist literature, see Hassan 15-39; McHale 1992; and Bertens 26-47.

In Search of Relevance: The Post-Soviet *Pravdoiskatel'*'s Negotiation with the Nineteenth-Century Cultural Myth of the "Russian Soul"

In the canon of nineteenth-century Russian literature and philosophy the evolution of Russian identity begins with a national self-image as the West's Other, and then that gradually dissolves into efforts to universalize rather that distinguish Russians from the rest of humanity (Bethea 186, 206; Boym 1994:31; Boym 1995:142; Rzhevsky 115). Having eventually encompassed more than the original, nation-specific problem, the question of *russkost'* (Russianness) has come to be seen as Russia's "search for itself" (Billington 2004) or its "unattainable beloved" (Rutten 2004). What with the cultural authority that Russian writers possessed during the Golden Age, their ideas about identity enjoyed greater influence on Russian society than those posited by the church and state (Dovlatov 1981, 1991; Goloubkov 112). Their engagement with the national-cum-universal *russkii vopros* eventually ascribed the act of soul-searching to the Russian individual, especially the Russian writer (Billington 55-56; Boym 1995:142). The present chapter explores post-Soviet Russian writers' recycling of stereotypes and tropes of Russianness that permeate Russian cultural self-expression and the national image in both Russian and Western discourses. It identifies the use of the *pravdoiskatel'* ('truthseeker'), an important nineteenth-century literary type, as an agent of identity re-formation in post-Soviet Russian literature. In this analysis, the post-Soviet truthseekers wander the Golden-Age literary landscape in order to find aspects of the cultural myth of the "Russian soul" and negotiate their present value.

This chapter shows that in addressing the question of national identity, contemporary

Russian writers rely on nineteenth-century cultural mythology to re-conceptualize the post-Soviet Russian individual. Their works also illustrate how mythic notions of Russianness do "not encompass [the] richness, originality and diversity" of the actual ethnographic Russian population (Boym 1994:86). I begin with a literature review on how the myth of the Russian "soul" and the *pravdoiskatel'* literary type evolved from the experience of the Russian literary gentry. Then, I identify the key components of the "Russian soul"; I demonstrate how the *pravdoiskatel'* became not only the bearer of the myth of the "Russian soul," but also the archetype of Russian thought and the model Russian individual.

The analysis of the primary texts proceeds as follows. I argue that Prilepin revives the traditional *pravdoiskatel'* by assuming the role as the narrator of his text, reifying the myth of the collective "Russian soul". Recounting his personal experiences among the post-Soviet *narod*, he highlights the aspects of post-Soviet Russian life that reflect Russian romantic and realist portrayals of the Russian national character and folk spirit. Erofeev's *Encyclopedia* deconstructs the cultural myth by highlighting its ambiguity as a result of embodying various conflicting notions and ideals. By conflating the narrator-*pravdoiskatel'* with various other protagonists including Seryi (discussed in the Introduction), the author demonstrates how the myth of the Russian soul is itself a complex, multifarious body of myths about Russian people and their culture. Pelevin portrays Lev Tolstoi as a *pravdoiksatel'* who embarks on a quest to find Optina Pustyn' (not to be confused with the historical monastery of the same name); a mysterious place that is purported to embody God, meaning and truth. The author conflates this fictionalized Optina Pustyn' with the popular myth of Kitezh, Russia's lost Atlantis, as the spiritual home of the Russian people. This makes the historical Tolstoi's legendary last journey to the actual

monastery all the more enigmatic; "reality" is contaminated and yet enhanced by the stuff of legend. He also illustrates how the "Russian soul" mirrors the iconic cultural figure's personality, attesting to how Tolstoi (and the canonical writer in general) helped shape the reputation of the nation as a whole.

Scholarship on Russian literature, culture, history and politics has long supported the cultural myth of the Russian soul as an important factor in shaping the Russian experience (Asimov and Guliahin 2013; Boym 1995; Franklin and Widdis 2004; Hellberg-Hirn 1998, 2002; Kleespies 2012; Morozov 2015; Pesmen 2000; Peterson 1997; Stein 1976; Williams 1970). I investigate its use in post-Soviet literature not only to determine its cultural legitimacy, but also to understand how contemporary Russian writers evaluate its continued pertinence to the notion of the Russian national character. In fact, the myth itself is not entirely fictional: it embodies a Eurocentric vision that exoticized the Russian people and objectified their culture and way of life as a "primitive other" (Cheauré 25-42; Chulos 115-18). Unable to overcome the West's hegemonic influence, Russian national identity continues to evolve as that of a subaltern empire within the Eurocentric world (Morozov 2015).

An inferiority complex, so to speak, has historically influenced Russia's subconscious self-identity on the state level, which has vacillated between the attempt to fit in with the now-outdated notions of the "First World" and to stand alone as its superior (Rzhevskii 1998:94). The literary text served as a platform for intellectuals to express anxieties stemming from these impossible and irreconcilable extremes (Rzhevskii 1998:114-15). At the same time that Russia was searching for an ideal national identity with which to better assert its relation to the West, a number of "enlightened nobility" had begun to express a growing concern about their private

sense of superfluousness outside the framework of service (Newlin 66). This existential crisis, which can be seen as having arose from the quiet pastoral revolution of 1762[32] and remained unresolved through the nineteenth century, became a popular philosophical theme in Russian literature and philosophy. Understanding the problem's relevance on both the personal and national levels, writers addressed the notions of identity and purpose. Their works reflected the melancholy felt by the educated public, which was not only dissatisfied with the status quo, but also concerned that Europeanization promoted an unpatriotic national consciousness and "was alien to and in important ways opposed to something particularly Russian" (Cross 91; Rzhevskii 1998:114-15; Sternberg 814-26). Even the Slavophiles, who identified true Russianness with the peasant *narod* and Russian Orthodoxy, were later rejected for having selected and re-stylized the Russian ethnographic material to accommodate Western cultural standards (Frolova-Walker 121). The "literary and moral wanderings" of the cultural elites reflected the merging of the national issue of cultural authenticity and political legitimacy with private, philosophical questions of meaning and truth (Newlin 66-67; Jeffrey 2000).[33] The heroes of nineteenth-century Russian literary masterpieces, whose melancholy experience reflected their sensitivity to the national experience with loss and uncertainty, attributed to the characterization of the Russian consciousness (Steinberg 819, 826).

The collapse of the Soviet Union reaffirmed the importance of the Russian question. The cultural trauma that resulted from the loss of the Soviet identity also justified preconceptions

[32] The literary pastoral movement was thematically, a celebration of rural life and rustic values as "the counterstandard of the 'urban'" (McKeon 268). It was fundamentally representative of the passive, unrefined way of natural life, as opposed to artifice (or simply art), redirecting the conception of "true" values back toward the notions of simplicity, innocence, contemplation, contentment, private retirement, peace, and communal affiliation (ibid.)

[33] Phrase taken from Apollon Grigcr'ev's autobiographical work, *Мои литературные и нравственные скитальчества* (My Literary and Moral Wanderings 1864). The work connotes a sense of the vicissitudes and extremes felt by the gentry of Grigcr'ev's epoch.

about the Russian national character, including its historical tragic experience, its unending quest for identity, and such innately "Russian" traits as nomadism, orphanage and homelessness, a superior capacity for spirituality and a connection to the land and innate Russian qualities (Boym 1995:134-39; Frolova-Walker 129; Hellberg-Hirn 1998:126-31; Hudspith 106; Kleespies 2004:94-97; Rzhevskii 2012:5; Steinberg 819, 826). These constitute the cultural myth of the "Russian soul," which originated in German Romanticism and became "a very Russian idea" through the nineteenth-century Russian literary imagination (Williams 573).[34] In effect, the "Russian soul" is an amalgam of "cross-cultural and heterogeneous" ideas that devalued the Russian people and their culture on account of their distinctiveness from European traditions and relatively recent heritage (Boym 1994:77; Boym 1995:135-36, 139-42; Franklin 99).

The Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth century had not developed a sense of patriotism that might have "immunized them against foreign opinion"; they were strongly influenced by the West's judgment of their country's cultural and social traditions and institutions (Cross 81). Their reactions were twofold: the Westernizers perceived Europeanization as the sole remedy for Russia's supposed shortcomings; those on the defensive (the Slavophiles and populists) re-appropriated the elements of its purported backwardness to evidence Russia's superiority over the West (Boym 1994:74, 77; Chulos 120). These two schools of thought underwrote conflicting values attributed to the "Russian soul."

Among the Westernizers, Petr Chaadaev was arguably the most influential in catalyzing the debate about Russian national identity, particularly in view of his negative perceptions of Russian culture. In the first of his *Eight Philosophical Letters* (1836), Chaadaev wrote:

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[34] Three important German philosophers who influenced the Russian national self-concept are Schelling, Johann von Herder, and Hegel.

> We are not related to any of the great human families; we belong neither to the West nor the East, and we possess the traditions of neither (20).

It was Chaadaev who developed the ideas of "homelessness, lack of roots […] and cultural legitimacy" as the permanent conditions hindering Russia's modernization, these, he argued, stemmed from Russia's "geographical position between Europe and Asia" (Boym 1994:77). Later, Russian cultural elites adopted the role of arguing for or against these assumptions, which in turn affirmed rather than undercut Eurocentric notions of Russia's intrinsic, debilitating qualities (Boym 1995:135-36; Çiçek 1). By way of contrast, the Slavophiles and populists reevaluated Russia's folk cultural orientation and lack of individualism and materialism as proof of its heightened spirituality (Boym 1994:74; Lavrin 307; Chulos 120; Perrie 28). Differences aside, these two anti-Westernizer camps entrenched Chaadaev's (and the West's) suppositions about the "traditional Russian way" (Call 217; Hudspith 129). The myth of "soul" in Russian thought was 'nationalized' later through the works of Russian writers, in opposition "to Enlightenment reason as well as to the cultivation of the body" (Boym 1995:139).

By pouring their intellectual energy into answering the question of national identity, the Russian literary gentry earned the reputation of philosophizers (Billington 55-56). By the turn of the nineteenth century, Russian writers by and large represented the educated nobility, and posited unique solutions to the national problem (Newlin 66). They tended to fashion their literary heroes after themselves and employ the literary text to ponder the questions of meaning and truth, conflating their private, prolonged crises of conscience and the national issue into a single discourse. In Russian nineteenth-century psychological prose this engendered the conscience-stricken nobleman-*pravdoiskatel'* ('truthseeker') literary type (Bethea 206; Lavrin

309; Newlin 66). This hero is *zetetic*; he engages in constant inquiry in an attempt to find meaning and truth outside the framework of everyday life; his journey is simultaneously physical and spiritual (Newlin 66-7; Bethea 206; Aslanova 289). Some examples of the *pravdoiskatel'* include Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* (Tolstoi), Fëdor Lavretskii in *Nest of the Gentry* (Turgenev), and Makar Devushkin in *Poor Folk* (Dostoevskii). He is defined by two key traits: his status as a writer and his aimless wandering. His philosophical inquiry, which also turns out to be acutely practical, ultimately resembles a quest that has neither beginning nor end; it becomes a lifelong pursuit that is consequently unresolvable.

The *pravdoiskatel'* can be seen as an archetype of Russian thought because it embodies an important Russian literary type and embraces the role of the iconic literary nobleman of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the truthseeker possesses the traits of the so-called national character, which is modeled after the cultural myth of the "Russian soul." The national character arguably comprises the personalities of the most renowned Russian Golden-Age writers, such as Puskhin, Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, whose biographies epitomized the tropes and stereotypes of Russianness, and became representative of the Russian collective conscious as a whole. Some of the characteristics that these writers share are their fatalistic view of life, their attraction to death, long-suffering and self-sacrifice (modeled either on their personal beliefs or their literary oeuvres), and their hyper-emotionality.

The stereotypical Russian individual so closely resembles Tolstoi's internally-conflicted persona, which is often broken into the categories of man, writer and philosopher, that Nikolai Berdiaev's description of the Russian mentality is essentially Tolstoi's own. In the section titled "The Soul of Russia" in his iconic work, *Русская идея* (The Russian Idea 1947) Berdiaev

defined “the properties of the Russian people” as “mutually contradictory” and thus entailing a predisposition to:

> despotism, the hypertrophy of the State, and on the other hand anarchism and license; cruelty, a disposition to violence, and again, kindliness, humanity and gentleness; a belief in rites and ceremonies, but also a quest for truth: individualism, a heightened collectivism: nationalism, laudation of self; and universalism, the ideal of the universal man: an eschatological messianic spirit of religion, and a devotion which finds its expression in externals; a search for God, and a militant godlessness; humility and arrogance; slavery and revolt (21).
>
> The exploit of non-resistance—that is the Russian exploit. Simplicity, humility—these are Russian traits (23).

All of these behavioral tendencies can be found throughout Tolstoi’s fictional and autobiographical texts; the juxtaposition of which, it has been said, led to his internally conflicted and perpetually irresolute nature, rendering his quest for meaning and truth a naive ambition to achieve the impossible (Billington 62; Çiçek 1; Rutten 2).[35]

The *pravdoiskatel’* also embodies the most important elements of several other major Russian nineteenth-century literary types. Like the Holy Fool, he embarks on a mysterious mission to “to go nobody knows where to find nobody knows what” (Boym 1995:133). He compares to the village prose *pravednik* (‘righteous man’) for his preoccupation with moral issues, even though the *pravdoiskatel’* does not “act justly in all matters” (Parthé 91). The truthseeker is prone to err due to his disproportionately weak human essence and has an intellect that resembles a “psyche without a psychology” (Boym 1995:139). This drives his irrational desire to realize “aesthetic-psychological” ideals (Askoldov 225; Spieker 28; Steinberg 818-19). His Sisyphean plight and his willingness to suffer and sacrifice in the name of a doomed mission

[35] See also the complete biography of Tolstoi by Aylmer Maude (1987).

renders him both naive and brave in equal measure (Bethea 206; Kelly 1998:303; Piiranen 156, 160-68). He possesses the primary trait of the iconic Russian hero whose *toska* ('melancholy,' 'longing,' or 'angst'), according to Nabokov, colors his worldview and arises "often without any specific cause," heightens his "physical or metaphysical dissatisfaction," and makes it impossible for him to enjoy everyday life (Nabokov 2:141, 337).[36] In his debilitating preoccupation with *toska*, *tragizm* (a propensity for tragedy), uncertainty, confusion, and chaos, the *pravdoiskatel'* embodies the traits of the mythological "Russian soul," installing it as the bearer of the cultural myth of the Russian soul.[37]

Together, the cultural myth of the "Russian soul" and the *pravdoiskatel'* archetype perhaps best represent the prevailing stereotypes and tropes about the Russian character. The myth of the "Russian soul" "provided Russians with the intellectual categories of nationalism which enabled them to describe themselves as different from, hostile to, and superior over the West" (Williams 573). The *pravdoiskatel'* connoted historicocultural relevance by reflecting both the Russian messianic vision of Russia as a nation with a mission and the folkloric quest for the invisible city of Kitezh (Boym 1994: 87; 1995:143).[38] His tendency to act according to his Russian consciousness, which, as Gogol' wrote, knows "all the strengths, the abilities and the depth of [human] nature," suggests not only his soulfulness, but also a natural disinterest in worldly affairs and tendency to be drawn "toward the higher [spiritual] life" (302-03).

Prilepin, Erofeev and Pelevin recycle these two important elements from the nineteenth-

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[36] See also 2:151-56 and 1:25.

[37] See Boym 1994:87; Frolova-Walker 129; Steinberg 826.

[38] See also Berdiaev (1990).

century literary canon, conflating their own perceptions of them with the established tropes and stereotypes. Participating in the discourse on post-Soviet Russianness, these writers help re-form Russian self-identity from fragmented cultural memory, creating a link between the past and present; come to terms with irreconcilable losses as a postcolonial nation; and negotiate the value of mythic cultural narratives (Boym 1995:134; Eliason 1991; Gandhi 9; Kelly and Shepherd 278-279).

As the narrator of *I Came From Russia*, Prilepin retains the traditional role of the Russian "writer, particularly the poet, as a model human being and a model Russian."[39] He characterizes himself as a young Russian writer and intellectual who, driven by his nostalgia for the lost sense of community, wanders in search of authentic Russianness amidst the post-Soviet chaos in order to restore his faith in his nation's future. The tone of the work resembles a trend found in post-Soviet nostalgic films, which present an "artistic and journalistic investigation and re-creation of the cultural, political, and historical contents" that comprise Russian cultural memory (Ivanova 61). A similar tone was used by Russian nineteenth-century writers, such as Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, who followed a "didactic, journalistic approach" to literature, which earned them the status of reliable witnesses to Russian society's moral problems, as well as reputable sources of information on how to solve them (Boiko 289). Prilepin recounts his experiences in three important landscapes whose cultural legacies grew from their use in the Russian literary canon to encapsulate the essence of Russia's national soul (Boym 1994:87; 1995:143). These are the countryside, the home, and the cities of Saint Petersburg and Moscow, all foundational centers of national feeling and cultural identification (Helberg-Hirn 35-53; Hughes 179-80). Prilepin's

[39] See Boym 1995:142.

portrayal of everyday life within these localities exemplifies "the current Russian new-nationalist and revivalist discourses, in which, according to Hellberg-Hirn, the traditional family and the supreme moral and social qualities of the collective body and its togetherness (*sobornost'*)" are central themes (Hellberg-Hirn 1998:175).

Prilepin begins *I Came From Russia* with a patriotic essay titled "Кровь поёт, ликует почва" ("The Blood Sings, The Soil Rejoices"). In it, he contends that the Russian people are bound to the land by blood. Alluding to the idea of the Russian geographical space as the *rodina* (Motherland), he personifies the land as the womb that has borne an "innumerable quantity of Russian hearts" (бесчисленное количество русских сердец") (Prilepin 8). He states that Russian "soil and blood are […] one and the same" ("Почва и кровь […] одно и то же") and have sustained the Russian people for centuries (9). In a sentimental vein, the author expresses his resentment of the unpatriotic, "second" sort of Russians ("вторые"), who haughtily denounce the land despite its sacrifices and feats of glory (Prilepin 9-10). In the remaining portion of the essay, he describes his childhood memory of a summer day that he spent at the summerhouse with his friend, Valia. He relates that in his youth, "my soil" ("моя почва") evoked not the sad story he now senses, but pure bliss: twenty-five years ago, it was

> happy, light as fluff, bearing joy, dancing to [its own] beat, opening its arms wide to meet you (счастливая, лёгкая, как пух, несушая радость, танцующая в такт, распахивающаяся навстречу) (Prilepin 11).

In anticipation of his friend Valia's grandmother's arrival, the boys run out into the forest and pick berries in the middle of a thunderstorm. Having experienced being drenched in rain and covered with mud, and having eaten fresh fruit from the forest floor, he knows the land through and through ("о почве […] знаю все") (Prilepin 12). Portraying his knowledge of the *rodina* as

a cultural legacy, he relates his efforts to pass it on to his two-year-old son, who has already begun to exhibit an appreciation for the land's role in his upbringing as well as that of his father, his "grandfather and great-grandfather" (Prilepin 13).

Such scenes of Russian familial and communal interactions demonstrate a reverence for traditional values and way of life that prioritizes the welfare of the community over the individual. These include the capacity to respond to fellow human beings, goodness and sincerity, and "the ability to communicate, understand, share, suffer, and sacrifice" (Piirainen 156-62). Prilepin describes a tender moment in the Moscow subway, in which he spots a couple carrying their two slumbering children on their shoulders while they "collect alms" (16-17). The author is moved to send a text message to his own wife to remind her of how precious life is that they should relentlessly strive for "happiness, at least for ourselves" ("к счастью хотя бы самих себя") in order to make up for the "unbearable sadness and bitterness" of the world around them (Prilepin 16-17). The stifling environment of Moscow's bustling, overcrowded underground metro system, where people tend to move about oblivious to the existence of passersby, is no place for a family. This sad and poetic scene suggests the Slavophile notion that the culture of the capital, which has lost its Russianness due to the infiltration of Western individualism, threatens to usurp the fragile spirit of the *narod*.

Prilepin depicts the dynamic in his own home as an example of how the ideal Russian family lives. During a case of the flu that infects his entire family, his young wife tended to their sick children as a true paragon of maternal devotion. Despite being severely ill herself, got out of bed to feed her children, give them their medicine and apply drops to their ears and noses "with her eyes closed" ("с закрытыми глазами"), stopping only when she had finished, at which point

she “dropped down helplessly and lay motionless” (“упала без сил и лежала без движения” (Prilepin 21). The author describes the last ten years his life as a married man as ones filled with happiness and plenty, not because of material possessions but because of their unwavering devotion to each other and the family unit (Prilepin 22). For Prilepin, the meaning of life is to be found in: “Father and mother. Wife and children. The *rodina*” (“Отец и мать. Жена и чада. Родина”) (214).

Prilepin distinguishes between the communal Russian experience and that of the single individual to demonstrate the mythic, dichotomous nature of Russian emotionality and self-consciousness. Despite his attachment to his homeland and imagined community, the Russian’s ability to truly enjoy life is suppressed by his subconscious awareness of his nation’s “doleful history of sorrow and sacrifice, tears and terror” (Hellberg-Hirn 1998:171). According to Prilepin, the Russian person exists within the coordinates of “courage and patience, pity and malice” (“Мужество и терпение, жалость и злость -- меж этих координат помещён русский человек” (26). This portrait of the Russian as a simultaneously strong and weak individual (in both the physical and spiritual senses) directly correlates to the relationship between the private self and the national self as mediated by cultural memory. Recurrent cultural narratives about the great yet suffering collective Russian soul, have cemented into the Russian’s self-identity the contradictory “feeling that he is no good and that he is superior to all the rest of mankind” (Dicks 638).

Prilepin provides examples of Russians from various classes to suggest that the mythic, bipolar personality is real and justifies the Russian individual’s reputed tendency to fluctuate between the moral extremes of good and evil. The author purports to show that in a country as

permanently miserable as Russia, it is natural for people to exhibit such dysfunctional behavior. According to the author, it is not only the West that seeks to perpetuate the mythic Russian type: "in Russia, in fact, everybody loves men of the rugged type, who are at once courageous and wretched" (Prilepin 58). He details a conversation with the post-Soviet Russian poet, Vsevolod Emelin—whom he calls the "the [Russian] people's last poet" ("последний народный поэт")—about the Russian personality to demonstrate that his views on Russianness correspond to those of other typical Russians (67). Prilepin describes his contemporary as the exemplar of Dostoevskii's idea that the Russian is an ambivalent, internally-conflicted person because Emelin is concurrently famous and unknown, happy and unhappy, with sad-cheerful eyes (85).

Emelin, who considers himself a real Russian, describes the Russian as a person of dishonorable-yet-principled character:

> The Russian is no Orthodox [Christian], no blue-eyed blond, nope. He is a drinker, a pilferer, burdened by his family and troubles. But, at the same time: he doesn't take the last piece of bread, he doesn't put an empty bottle on the table, he doesn't declare his love for the authorities. He has firm opinions about life. But certainly not the sort they usually pin on him (Русский человек—не православный, не голубоглазый, не русый, нет. Это пьющий человек, приворовывающий, отягощённый семьёй и заботами. Но при этом: последний кусок не берет, пустую бутылку на стол не ставит, начальству вслух о любви не говорит. У него твёрдые понятия о жизни. Но вовсе не те, которыми его обычно наделяют…) (Prilepin 85).

In other words, what distinguishes a Russian from everyone else entirely depends on a set of behavioral characteristics rather than physical traits. Indeed, the notion of Russianness has never defined *russkie* (Russians) as an exclusively ethnic category: "being Russian is, in the first place, perceived to be something akin to a mental state and not a status that is determined by ethnic origin" (Piirainen 160). It is about identifying with the national imagination, the tropes and

stereotypes—both positive and negative—and cultural myths that have shaped the meaning and value of "being Russian" over a thousand years. For this, Emelin, Prilepin, and, according to the latter, real Russians, are proud of their nationality.

Prilepin demonstrates that an important part of the Russian individual's experience entails understanding the causal connection between the nature of his private self and historical trends. He states that "Russian history is as ambivalent as the Russian character" ("Русская история так же амбивалентна, как и русский характер") (Prilepin 144). For the author, the strong similarities between private (individual) and public (national) Russianness attests to the expansiveness of the Russian spirit. According to the cultural myth, the "Russian soul" is an entity unto its itself; it unifies the common Russian people with their native soil and "all the Russias" that have existed and will exist in the future (Franklin and Widdis 1-6). Prilepin compares Russia's slow recovery from its most recent collapse to a deep frost that struck the nation while it was still recovering from a viral infection (Prilepin 158). The use of the metaphor of chronic sickness to explain the nation's repeated periods of ruination and its slow recovery from them reiterates pre-revolutionary nationalist discourses that justified Russia's historical shortcomings as the result of its extraordinary circumstances. Chaadaev explained the Russian civilization's retarded progress as a result of "its neglect of all the comforts and joys of life" and "the absence of any idea of art in […] home life," which he interpreted as a cultural adaptation to the harsh climate that is unique to Russia's geographical position (32-33). Prilepin reiterates the Slavophiles' and populists' romanticization of Russia's natural perils as an endearing element of their national identity; conversely, he equates the West's encroaching influence on Russian culture to chronic illness that weakens Russia's spirit.

Prilepin expresses chauvinistic pride about his kinship with an intrinsically conflicted people and his unwavering patriotism for his country, tainted by a wounded sentimentality about lost certainties and the apparently inescapable conclusion that it will never fully conquer its own weakness. He goes as far as to portray the negative stereotype of disorderliness as an endearing aspect of the Russian national character. He professes his love for "[his] dear, rough-hewn [*narod*]…" ("милый мой, корявый…") and justifies Russia's lack of modernity as a sign of is timelessness (Prilepin 241-42). Alluding to his own proclivity to backwardness, he notes that every Russian writer is something of a country bumpkin (Prilepin 245). Lacking the discipline, orderliness and efficacy of Europeans and Americans, the Russian people have a spirit that is made of more than *papier maché* (Prilepin 198). Its invisible excellence, which has been simmering for a thousand years, will soon "boil up and splash over" onto Europe (242).

Prilepin's nationalist essays turn negative tropes and stereotypes of Russianness into sources of national pride. He portrays the post-Soviet Russian collective experience of revisiting cultural memory and self-identity as homogenous and criticizes Russians who self-exile as traitors. This type of nationalism fails to appreciate cultural identity as a phenomenon whose manifestation varies from person to person. At the same time, it suggests the one benefit of nationalism which is essential to the preservation of culture: it allows an imagined community to collectively determine which cultural products are representative of its values and which are not; which of them foster a national identity that does not threaten that of the private individual. Finally, it creates a sense of home and of belonging—two abstract ideas that, though potentially harmful in their power to categorize people into groups of "us" and "them," are essential

components of human consciousness that provide a sense of safety and enable people to exist among others.

Encyclopedia is much less appreciative of the notions of Russianness. Satirical in tone, the work exemplifies the homegrown anti-Russian narrative that Prilepin so vehemently criticizes in his essays. It problematizes the continued influence of mythic ideas of the Russian people and their culture on the Russian collective conscious. The underlying theme of the novel is the supposed expansiveness of the "Russian soul." *Expansiveness* primarily conveys the Russian person's ability to be in communion with the transcendent or divine, enabling him to communicate with his fellow human beings on a higher, spiritual level. Its negative quality, which is understood as a consequence of the Russian soul's transcendental orientation, is its incompatibility with Western cultural social norms, including discipline, orderliness and punctuality (Jahn 67; Piirainen 156). According to Erofeev, this unwelcome pervasiveness of the Russian soul, which has historically functioned as a substitute for a real identity, now prevents its development.

The *Encyclopedia* itself embodies the trope of disorderliness. Though its long-form title describes the work as "A Novel With An Encyclopedia," the key elements that normally appear in a novel are conflated, mirroring the mythic characterization of the novel's antagonist, Seryi, and its overarching theme (the Russian soul). Its plot is fragmented, with an insufficiently detailed exposition and an inadequate climax; the author highlights the element of complication and completely omits a resolution. The terms are arranged in non-alphabetical order and some are repeated (in this case, they contain non-identical information); they are non-explanatory, open-ended, philosophical and lack objectivity; some of the entries are written in essay form

while others resemble excerpts of a larger novella and a personal diary. *Encyclopedia* serves to complicate, rather than clarify, the ideas and problems it addresses. The narrator's refusal to produce a catalog of the "Russian soul" attests to the myth's supposed insoluble mysteriousness. In his analysis of *Encyclopedia*, Bastrikov argues that the absence of a proper plot beginning and end connotes the ideas of absence, death, inconsistency and restlessness associated with the myth of the Russian soul (63). I would add that the rough patchwork-like narrative and opaque, pseudo-definitions allude to the reputed chaotic nature and incomprehensibility of the "Russian soul" itself.

The narrator embodies an everyman-*pravdoiskatel'* by representing the various nineteenth-century Russian thinkers who philosophized about the Russian national question. He is an anonymous protagonist who identifies himself as a private investigator who previously, in the Soviet era worked as a "a certain 'young writer'" ("'одним молодым писателем'") for an influential newspaper (Erofeev 66). The newspaper is run by an American journalist named Gregory Peck,[40] who, in the fictional context has been compiling information about Russia for his ten-year-old project on the so-called "Russian formula" (Erofeev 66). During his employment at the newspaper, the narrator meets Cécile, a French coquette, who has been charged for smuggling *tamizdat* (banned literature written by exiled political dissidents) and *Русская мысль* (Russian Thought, an émigré newspaper then based in Paris) back into Russia. The narrator's interaction with these foreign expats alarms an *intelligent* named Pal Palych, who hires him to search for Seryi, a personage who began as a mere rumor but was brought into existence after the

[40] Gregory Peck (1916-2003) was an American actor and political activist who opposed the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation of Communist espionage in the film industry during the second Red Scare (1947-1957).

Russian authorities' preliminary findings (Erofeev 194). Convinced by Peck's and Cécile's suppositions that Seryi is a real person, the Russian authorities employ the narrator, who identifies himself as an ambivalent Europeanized Russian intellectual, to solve the case (see Erofeev 107-08). The narrator's skepticism and doubt, which create his delusional sense of reality, make him unfit for the job because he is unable to demarcate the boundaries of his imagination and consequently lacks faith in what he understands to be true (Erofeev 49-50, 53-54).

Although Erofeev appears to employ the Western detective hero in his novel, the narrator bears little, if any, even remote resemblance to this stock character. An important distinction between the classic detective and the *pravdoiskatel'* is the former's pursuit of the truth (the whodunit) in the name of justice. The *pravdoiskatel'* searches for the unadulterated truth, above and beyond any and all contexts, which is naturally subject to interpretation and therefore eternally debatable. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Russian word *pravda* combines the ideas of truth and justice, which serves to further complicate the purpose of the truthseeker's quest. Another important facet of the truthseeker's character is that he does not discover anything of practical use, nor does he eventually come to any greater understanding of the problem he sets out to resolve. Unlike the *pravdoiskatel'*, the classic detective hero begins with a clear problem and seldom fails to solve the mystery. Erofeev's apparent recycled and conflated detective-style truthseeker can be seen as a slighting reference to the *pravdoiskatel'*, as yet another poor adaptation of Western (here, English) culture. In its evolution from two curious Europeans' (Gregory Peck and Cécile) conjectures about Russia, the plot conflict alludes to the idea that the Russian "soul" was originally a Western concept. The narrator's wavering

enthusiasm in the search for Seryi can be interpreted as Russian intellectuals' historically dichotomous attitude toward established notions of Russianness (Erofeev 50). One of the figurative meanings of the Russian adjective *seryi* is "bland, commonplace, mediocre"; what the West and Russia perceived as the latter's distinctiveness turned out to be nothing peculiar to Russian culture, with respect to their notions about the Russian folk and even Russia's francophilia (Cross 81).

The narrator's pursuit of Seryi establishes and then falls short of the whodunit template. In this whodunit-manqué the detective only manages to investigate red herrings, rendering his search an aimless pursuit of an undefined target. Like the traditional *pravdoiskatel'*, the narrator in *Encyclopedia* is alone in his doomed quest: his guiding light is an inexplicable "pathological feeling" ("патологическое чувство") (Erofeev 57). The people from whom he gathers information confuse rather than counsel him. Lacking the necessary information needed to look in the right places, the narrator's mission to find Seryi wanders through various places in vain. Gregory Peck conjectures that Seryi is a "metaphysical actor" ("метафизический деятель") as opposed to human being (Erofeev 74). Sasha, the assistant to Pal Palych, brings the narrator to the most sordid places, such as the imaginary "Fecal Station" ("Фекальная станция") and suggests that Seryi will be easy to find there as he is the "one very suspicious guy" ("один очень подозрительный мужик") who frequents the station (ibid.). Later, Sasha flies the narrator to Europe and San Francisco supposedly in order to catch Seryi in the event that he has emigrated (75). Seryi's identity remains elusive, so that even when the narrator does, on several occasions, encounter him, Seryi manages to either pose as a false helper, and further mislead him, or slip away before his pursuer can obtain enough information about him (47, 89-90).

The narrator's pursuit of Seryi symbolizes Russian thinkers' philosophical quest to capture the Russian spirit. Seryi is a phantom that dissolves, reforms, dies and comes back to life numerous times in the text. Erofeev suggests that despite having pondered the question of Russian identity for centuries, the cultural intelligentsia have proven to be more or less ineffective. Their ideas had only an ephemeral value which, after their moment of influence, lost their cultural authority and became obsolete or subject to re-interpretation, as all the other notions of Russianness that preceded them. In the section titled "Мишень" ("Target"), Erofeev suggests that the Russian people, having existed as the subject of criticism, compares to an amorphous mass devoid of self-understanding. The narrator calls himself a "living, warm lump" ("[ж]ивой теплый комок") who is constantly shot at by "anyone out there," ("стреляют кому не лень"). Taking no time to examine himself, the typical Russian pours all his energy into defending himself, though without any hope of success (Erofeev 21). The problematic evolution of Russian identity has ultimately attributed greater cultural authority to a vague amalgam of ideas than to the actual, common experience of being Russian. When the narrator finally catches Seryi unawares in a peasant's cabin, the phantom turns into multiple, stock symbols of Russianness. He transforms into a tractor driver, a hefty peasant woman, an Orthodox priest eating black caviar, the literary aesthetic values of revolutionary modernist poets "Chapaev, the great whale, Chkalov-Chaikovskii in a velvet jacket and quite simply Russian literature" (Erofeev 187).

In his search for Seryi, the narrator comes to understand the extent of the Russian problem and what now constitutes the stock Russian. The Russian character according to *Encyclopedia* mirrors that of the cultural myth of the Russian soul. Russian emotionality is symptomatic of

intellectual ineptitude; it exhibits melancholy, ambivalence, ignorance, and excessive pathos. Seryi tells him that "*toska* is Russian meditation," which has several levels of intensity that "every Russian is predisposed to sense" within himself, first as a distant howl, then as a "silver agony" and finally an incessant, "golden anguish" (Erofeev 107). The Russian person possesses a "proclivity to dishonor" ("[c]клонность к бесчестию") (Erofeev 30-31). The author describes Russians' sensitivity as another negative attribute, in addition to this predisposition (Erofeev 110). By way of proof, he reduces the intimacies of love to animalist and saccharine terms:

> Russians are predisposed to endearments. Before fucking, they meow and after fucking they coo. Russians are soppy and pathetic. A ton of fatty cream. Women call men "kitten," to which they answer "my bunny." Mothers lisp. Everything is so soulful, and an excuse to gush. […] Sharp, unwarranted mood swings are the [very] foundation of our schizophrenic life. ([р]усские расположены к нежностям. Они до ебли мяукают, после ебли—воркуют. Русские слащавы и пафосны. Тонна жирного крема. Женщины называют мужчин "котик", а те им в ответ— "моя зая". Матери сюсюкают. Во всем задушевность и клич умиления. […] Резкое, ничем не обоснованное изменение настроения — основа здешней шизофренической жизни.)

Like Nabokov's commentary on *toska*, this description suggests that mushiness, rather than empathy, pervades the Russian's emotional experience. Juxtaposing the concepts of "dishonor" and "endearment" debases every aspect of the Russian mentality. Erofeev's introducing the metaphor of a ton of fatty cream emphasizes the notion that there is nothing refined (in other words, sophisticated) about the Russian character and its penchant for excess. The author's treatment of Russian sexual behavior (natural, human social interaction at the most basic level) as perverse suggests that Russians are incapable of expressing themselves as normal human beings.

The irony of Erofeev's problematization of Russian love language, so to speak, is that there is nothing truly repulsive about these endearments, nor are they unique to Russian culture. For example, calling someone a type of sweet food, such as "honey" or "sugar," is no more logical than addressing someone by the name of a cute furry animal, as both express emotional connection. For Russians, addressing someone as *mëd* (honey) or *sakhar* (sugar) would imply objectification, not romance. Erofeev's unstated commentary is that the mere difference between Russian and Western linguistic codes implies that the former is inferior. From the culturological perspective, there is nothing superior about European culture, and the very deprecation of Russian (or any other) culture on the basis of its distinctiveness is a fallacy based on Western hegemonic categories of "high" culture. The underlying problem, therefore, is not Russian emotionality, but Russians' (in Erofeev's context, the Russian cultural elites') tendency to be unduly judgmental of their culture on the mere basis of its distinctiveness from its Western counterpart.

This self-denigrating narrative reflects the paradoxical dynamic of the Russian subconscious, which is characterized by alternating feelings of aversion and attraction to his identity and a sense of spiritual homelessness. In one instance, the narrator calls Russia an "Asian ass" (азиятская жопа") and states that he is indifferent to its fate (Erofeev 156). Yet, recognizing that Seryi is the "enemy of Russian progress," he hopes that capturing him will save the nation from destruction and make him, the narrator, a national hero (Erofeev 12-14, 33-34, 155). He is disappointed by the quality of life in Russia and, despite having the means to emigrate, chooses not to because Russia has pulled him toward her ("Меня тянула к себе Россия") (Erofeev 57). Knowledgeable in Western culture, the narrator is "that [much discussed]

Russian who is neither European nor Russian" ("тот самый русский европеец, который и не европеец и не русский") who wants "to live in both houses" ("жить на два дома") (Erofeev 108). The narrator identifies himself as "Russian to the bone" (Русский до мозга костей") who, despite having "plunged" ("уткнулся") into the Russian problem, cannot make any sense of it (Erofeev 93). In post-Soviet Russian culture, nostalgia relates to a longing "for a utopian motherland, the Russia that never existed" outside Russian literary and cultural myths (Boym 143). In his rejection of his own cultural norms, the narrator denies himself the sense of comfort that comes with belonging to the only community that shares his language.

What the narrator does come to understand about the enigma behind the so-called "Russian formula" is that both foreign and homegrown narratives about the Russian individual have historically served to demonstrate how this persona encapsulates the whole of Russia. In the section titled "Видение" ("Vision"), Erofeev reveals that all the Russian characters in the novel, including Pal Palych and his assistant, and the narrator—are merely different versions of the same Seryi:

> "All in all, I myself am we. "We" are the Russian soul. I, too, am inclined to dishonor. […] I, too, *am* Seryi. (По большому счету, я сам—это мы. "Мы" и есть русская душа. […] Я тоже склонен к бесчестию. Я—и Серый.") (Erofeev 59).

In its broad conflation of historical and cultural diversity, the myth of the "Russian soul" is amorphous: it includes everyone and defines no one. Every kind of "real" Russian— including peasants, workers, the *intelligentsia*, politicians—has been portrayed at some point in time as the source of Russia's backwardness; even the Westernized, or "*elegant* Russian" has become a kind of joke ("*элегантный* русский — вообще анекдот") (59). Being educated, or sophisticated is

considered as having succumbed to foreign (Western) culture and produces only a questionable "hybrid" (108).

Erofeev insists that Russians have been historically objectified. The narrator describes Russians as a "little notebook of stereotypes," ("[т]етрадка стереотипов") that has not evolved since the preconceptions about it were first normalized (156). The list reduces the Russian person into an undifferentiated mass of "chest-thumping emotionality, stone-age naivety, flabbiness, cloddish behavior" ("пафосной эмоциональности, пещерной наивности, пузатости, поведенческой неуклюжести") (35). Russians are, in effect, represented not as the real human beings that they are, but as a homogenized collective. The author implies that maintaining this unsuitable, mythic conception of Russianness defies the very purpose of creating a national identity because it serves to dissolve rather than build character. Erofeev suggests that the deleterious effect of the myth has affected the Russian person's physical being in "Описание внешних особенностей" (Description of External Features"). The narrator states that he has committed the "traditional mistake" of even attempting to define the Russian person who is, in fact, "shapeless" ("бесформен"); without a backbone and only the illusion of appendages, in reality he is only a "beast" ("зверь") (149).

Erofeev emphasizes structurelessness as the predominant trait of the stock Russian. According to *Encyclopedia*, the archetypal Russian is innately incapable of working or thinking systematically: he can only carry out sporadic, one-time actions (35); chaotic by nature, he does not understand his own interests and consequently catalyzes his own demise (43); he is the type of person to whom education "doesn't stick" ("к кому не прилипает воспитание") and is "weaker than [his] circumstances" ("слабее обстоятельств") (59); drunkenness is his normal

state of being ("[н]ормальное состояние русского—пьяное") (149); "hard-wired" for loneliness (закодирован изначально комплекс одиночества); he is neither social nor sociable ("необщинный и […] необщительный") (93-4, 176); he is also tied to life in the here and now ("привязан к бытию") (237). In their type-cast (and increasingly crumbling) form, Russians are above all unpredictable:

> He'll be late. Or forget. Or lose [something]. Or say something stupid. Or blow your mind. Or take it into his head to fuck someone up. Or puke on the floor. (Или опоздает. Или забудет что-нибудь. Или потеряет. Или сморозит чушь. Или блеснет умом. Или кого-нибудь возьмет и выебет. Или наблюет на пол) (Erofeev 48).

According to this conception of Russian mentality, a Russian can react to a single situation in an infinite number of ways because there is no logic in his thinking; his behavioral responses are random. The passage containing this quote is titled "Гордость" (Pride), although the essay suggests nothing to be proud of.

Encyclopedia perpetuates the idea of Russia's identity problem as an infinite quest, just as Erofeev's *pravdoiskatel'* fails to arrive at any conclusion about the "Russian formula." In addition to his timelessness and embodiment of multiple personalities, Seryi represents the chief agent (and destructive force) in the Russian subconscious. Disguised as Pal Palych's *referent*, or assistant, Sasha, Seryi murders Gregory Peck on the same day that the journalist finishes his work on the "Russian formula," and then makes the document disappear (Erofeev 225). According to Cécile, knowing the Russian formula "will make the world safer" ("сделает весь мир безопаснее") and "stop the collapse of Russia" ("остановит распад России") (ibid.). By preventing Russians from understanding themselves, Seryi keeps Russian intellectuals like the narrator, who would be happy to do away with Russia's centuries-long affliction, from further

relapses into a debilitated state. The narrator realizes that Seryi has fooled him: not only were Pal Palych and Sasha both Seryi in disguise, Seryi *is* the Russian formula. Seryi employed the narrator to carry out the investigation in order to remind him of the futility of attempting to solve the Russian question.

Although *referent* functions first to add body to Sasha's persona, the word also pertains to the narrator's evolution of consciousness through conceiving the semantics of form. Within the fields of semantics and semiotics, it signifies a person or thing to which a linguistic expression or other symbol refers. In *Encyclopedia*, the narrator states that he first became aware of Seryi "through the Russian language," which he identifies as the "kingdom of Seryi" ("царство Серого") (Erofeev 58). Here, the author alludes to the early-nineteenth-century Romantic philosophy of language, which "established a link between a nation's language and its self-consciousness and identity" (Gasparov 132). The Minister of Education, Aleksandr Shishkov (1754-1841), and the writer Nikolai Karamzin (1766-1826) led the polemic concerning the evolution of language, the former (later supported by the Slavophiles) arguing for an emphasis on adherence to the Slavonic tradition in order to preserve and enhance the differences between the Russian identity and its European counterparts (Gasparov 133).

Encyclopedia is a difficult metatextual work that deserves its own study: it is full of cryptic allusions and cultural references interwoven with recycled commentary about Russianness dating back to nineteenth-century discourses on Russian national identity. By portraying Russianness as an identity that has from the outset embodied shame-invoking ideas, the work suggests that an important Russian cultural attribute is a paradoxical sense of pride in the lack of pride. (Compare Prilepin's declaration of love for his "clumsy" country (241-42).) By recasting the "Russian

soul" as a menacing phantom who manipulates the narrator's thoughts and actions, Erofeev suggests that the cultural myth has a palpable influence on the way Russians behave, even if they don't believe in it.

The denouement of the novel suggests that the only way to deal with this indomitable, destructive force is to surrender to it. The narrator comes to see Seryi as a part of Russia's existence, its *sine qua non* (Erofeev 82-83). In the last essay, titled "Новый бог" ("A New God"), the narrator and Seryi carry a cornerstone to the top of Vorob'ëvy Hills and set it to roll down to symbolize the arrival of a new era. They look down on Moscow with a fresh sense of admiration and accept Russia's global position as a fledgling country (Erofeev 242). The tone of this final paragraph suggests the narrator's renewed hope for Russia's future in spite of its traumatic cultural memory. Seryi's presence at the stone-rolling ceremony suggests the narrator's willingness to reconcile with and accept the cultural myth of the "Russian soul" as a defining element of both his historical and post-Soviet cultural identity. Erofeev's refusal to eradicate what he has identified as a fantastic affliction of the Russian mentality, even within the fictional realm, suggests his reluctance to completely emancipate his identity from the cultural myth of the Russian soul. Perhaps this is because even traumatic cultural memory acquires sentimental value with time and, in fact, cannot be expunged from history.

The novel *t*, published ten years after *Encyclopedia*, illustrates a significantly lighter perspective on the pre-revolutionary past than both Prilepin's melancholic, nostalgic essays and Erofeev's sardonic novel. In a way, its playful tone suggests the author's acceptance of his cultural memory in its permanency, despite its role in engendering the mythic conception of Russianness. A humorously recycled account of Tolstoi's lifelong quest for consciousness,

meaning and truth, Count T.'s journey to find Optina Pustyn' highlights how the nineteenth-century writer became a cultural icon. Pelevin's existential non-hero undermines Tolstoi's contribution to Russian literature and philosophy and emphasizes instead how his persona epitomized the *pravdoiskatel'* archetype and reified the cultural myth of the "Russian soul."

Count T. embodies a perfect parody of the traditional *pravdoiskatel'*. At the beginning of the novel, he is found on a train after having secretly fled his estate, Iasnaia Poliana, in protest against an apparent lockdown order based on rumors that he wanted to run away. As he admires the sky in solitude, T.'s peaceful reflection on the universal order of things goes awry when he suddenly realizes that he knows neither who he is nor where he is headed (Pelevin 14). The demiurge, Ariel', interrupts T. existential crisis to assure him that he is in fact "Count T." and that his mission is to find Optina Pustyn' (Pelevin 19). Although Ariel' asserts his position as the creator of Count T.'s world, he does not provide T. with any information to help him reach his destination and merely instructs him to continue his journey. As a result, T. wanders around, asking about Optina Pustyn' to no avail. As in the case of Erofeev's narrator, Count T.'s encounters fail to provide any useful information. He discovers that the count was given a final destination for the mere formality of ritual (Pelevin 124). Despite learning of the meaninglessness of his pursuit, Count T. must continue his quest for the sake of the novel. Additionally, Count T. himself was created and entrusted with the task not to find Optina Pustyn but to lend value to this otherwise meaningless enterprise.

Pelevin models Count T.'s persona after the stereotypical Russian character. T.'s emotional state changes drastically at the slightest provocation. He is above all fixed on the metaphysical realm and tries not only to understand it but also to conquer and surpass it (Pelevin 56).

Disillusioned by the facts of his existence, Count T. comes to understand his situation as a punishment for some prior sin (76). Above all, T.'s character is marked by his conflicted persona: his behavior entirely contradicts his teachings. He drinks heavily and whenever the opportunity presents itself (75-76, 213). He is also theomachist in his approach to the powers that be. Like the historical Tolstoi, Count T. is dramatic, constantly anticipating his death and writing Tolstoi's famous phrase, "[u]ntil tomorrow, if I'm still alive" in his diary (133, 157, 319). From the beginning, T. is engulfed in his fear of discovering that he is superfluous (which is in fact the case) and attempts to find the higher meaning of "I" despite having been told numerous times that meaning is relative and therefore nonexistent (14, 56, 157). When T. realizes that creative imagination influences his reality, he tries to surmount it by behaving as if "there were no such thing as either Ariel or his handymen" (164).

Pelevin portrays the Russian thinker's philosophical quest for meaning outside the limits of his reality as a pointless, obsessive impulse. For a substantial portion of the novel, Count T. travels with Dostoevskii and speculates with him on the possible meaning of Optina Pustyn' and the "longstanding and painful" ("давняя и мучительная") problem of the soul (Pelevin 213). T., who believes himself to be wiser than his traveling companion, attempts to enlighten Dostoevskii by explaining that the concepts of the soul, meaning and truth, are worldly conventions (Pelevin 213). However, in so doing, he realizes that this means Optina Pustyn' is also an empty idea. Once again tormented by his existential vicissitudes, he agrees to consult a "spiritual beacon" named Konstantin Pobedonostsev,[41] who is working on the second volume of his,

[41] Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev (1827-1907) was an arch-conservative statesman. During the reign of Aleksandr III, he held the position of Ober-Procurator of the Most Holy Synod. He was responsible for Tolstoi's ex-communication in 1901.

Pobedonostsev's, work called "The Vanities of a Boiling Intellect" ("Тщеты кипящего разумения") (Pelevin 218). After deducing from their encounter that Solov'ëv knows best what Optina Pustyn' means, Count T. finally meets with Solov'ëv in order to obtain more information about Optina Pustyn'. After failing to obtain any useful information about his mysterious destination from the mystic philosopher, T. is overcome with unbearable angst, at which point the writer, Lev Tolstoi, briefly awakens and realizes that Count T. and his quest are elements of a novel he had been composing in his sleep (Pelevin 358).

Perplexed by the various peculiar elements of his dream, the writer consults a number of his contemporaries, including Gandhi, about its meaning during a dinner. Throughout the chapter, Pelevin heightens the effect of his portrayal of the discussion as an absurd speculation by interlacing the conversation with elements of comedy (351-61). As Tolstoi recounts his dream, his dinner guests share dubious glances at each other and break out into fits of nervous laughter. Pelevin repeatedly uses the sentences "people at the table laughed" ("за столом засмеялись") and variations of the verbs *smeiat'sa* "to laugh" and *ulybnut'* "to smile" to describe the characters' individual and collective feelings of amusement in reaction to the details. He places prolonged moments of abrupt, complete silence ("the table fell silent") ("за столом установилась тишина") and ("за столом стих") between conjectures about the meaning of Tolstoi's dream. Tolstoi falls into a meditative state and unintentionally thinks aloud, which reveals that what he claims to be enlightened reasoning is merely "muddle talk" (Pelevin 354). While Tolstoi compares himself in his philosophical quest to the "wandering" Christ (Pelevin 354), his wife and guests arrive at various conclusions about his dream. Sof'ia decides it is a sign of the imminent Apocalypse (Pelevin 353); Gandhi believes Tolstoi has begun to rewrite the

Book of Life and has witnessed the boundaries of divine truth (Pelevin 356-57). Although one might excuse Pelevin's characterization of Count T. as a naive nobleman, his recasting of the historical writer's ideas as comically exaggerated conjectures can be seen as a direct criticism of Tolstoi's ideas as well as the writer's self-exalting perception of himself.

The fictional Tolstoi's philosophical accomplishments further affirm the postmodernist approach to the idea of truth: that it has an infinite number of meanings makes all definitions of truth equally meaningless. For Pelevin, truth is an aspect of one's creative imagination, a "metaphysical reality" that is unique to each individual soul and exists beyond the artificial constructs of our mundane life (Genis 297, 305). Hence, Tolstoi must fall back to sleep in order to reenter his own transcendental world that turns according to his own reasoning. In this realm, Tolstoi's simulacrum, Count T., can determine his own fate: he overthrows the powers that be and mounts a horse-drawn carriage to go home. He decides not to return to Iasnaia Poliana; the horse drawing his cart suggests that he "pick a name" ("подобрать […] название") for his new home. Count T. chooses Optina Pustyn' as his now-attainable ideal destination. According to Pelevin, "Optina Pustyn'" is rooted in the Latin verb *optare* (to choose, to will) and the Russian noun *pustota* (emptiness) (Pelevin 380). T. interprets this to mean that he has an "infinite number of possibilities" (бесконечный ряд возможностей") from which to choose and ascribe meaning to the emptiness he will call home (ibid.).

Although Pelevin portrays truth as an element of virtual reality, he still demonstrates his own doubt that one can truly overcome the transcendental boundaries that delimit the human experience, even within the context of one's imagination. Pelevin maintains that the post-Soviet world is "a sequence of artificial constructs, in which man is forever doomed to search for a

'pure', 'archetypal' reality" (Genis 297). Because we must rely on our mental (in other words, neurological) capacities to connect to the metaphysical realm, we cannot fully understand truth in its full essence. For Count T., truth remains a vague idea far off in the distance, still to be pursued:

> A familiar darkness appeared in front of him, full of unknown light, which made itself felt through a multitude of subtle reflections. It was impossible to focus his attention on any singe one of them— it immediately disappeared, but together they turned the blackness into something else, which resembled neither darkness nor light. T. imagined that this is the sole image of God […]. And there, if you look closely, are all the answers to all questions… (Перед ним возникла знакомая тьма, полная неведомого света, который давал о себе знать множеством неуловимых отблесков. Ни на одном нельзя было задержать внимание — он сразу исчезал, но вместе они превращали черноту в нечто другое, не похожее ни на тьму, ни на свет. Т. подумал, что это и есть единственный образ Божий […]. И там, если смотреть внимательно, есть все ответы на все воспросы…) (381).

The count does not come to know the answers, nor see God, nor perceive anything. At the end of his journey he finds himself before a "familiar darkness." Having run out of time, he satisfies his desire to demystify the unknown by giving it a new referent. The meaning of nothingness (the void) now equates to everything (the absolute), though the meaning of everything remains undefined. T.'s journey has brought him back to the "familiar darkness" whence he came. He will not arrive at this meaningless place he calls home: the novel ends with Count T.'s cart drawing a wide circle in the dirt beneath its wheels, while Optina Pustyn' lies somewhere beyond the horizon.

Although Pelevin portrays Count T. in good spirits at the end of the novel, the existential hero's story is melancholic in its embodiment of the truthseeker's hopeless pursuit of something that is so futile in its subjectiveness. Pelevin's recycling of the historical Tolstoi's (and many

other Russian thinkers') lifelong attempt to make sense of their seemingly purposeless existence resonates with the post-Soviet Russian intellectual's search for substance in the remaining fragments of their past identities. As Count T.'s fictional home, Optina Pustyn' symbolizes the Russia's hope to eventually attain its national ideals of stability and continuity and finally justify its painful history of meandering through its own and Western concepts of truth.

The prevalence of the melancholic hero and his uncompensated suffering and sacrifice in post-Soviet literature also signifies the "recognition of the tragic and, at the same time, heroic existential situation of Russia" (Piirainen 165). The theme of the wandering truthseeker, heroic in his unwavering pursuit of his ideals, appeals to the post-Soviet nostalgic reader, who delves into pre-revolutionary cultural memory subconsciously hoping to find a sense of meaning in her fragmented identity. However, the post-Soviet truthseeker does not offer any help. The truth remains unknown to him; he neither learns anything new, nor can he communicate in meaningful terms what he purports to know about the grand scheme of things. When he meets his end (or, when he realizes the futility of his quest), the truthseeker relents and comforts himself either by coming to an imaginary resolution or by converting the semantic value of "the unknown" to signify "truth." The point of the journey remains the act of searching; reaching a goal is secondary, if not entirely trivial. The emphasis on *pursuit*, as opposed to achievement, is perhaps one of the ways post-Soviet Russian culture continues to resist the Western "happy ending" in literary-cultural idealism.

Russians certainly continue to question where they are headed as a nation and within which context or cultural parameters they should recreate their national identity. The pressure of globalization to accommodate diversity juxtaposes the sense of urgency to define themselves as a

distinct culture that has something unique to offer which others can appreciate. In the twenty-first century, Russia's centuries-long attempt to catch up with the West is complicated by its new task of recovering the aspects of itself that it lost to the revolution. In their recycling of nineteenth-century cultural myths, post-Soviet Russian writers revisit Russian imperial conceptions of Russianness and their lasting cultural value as a component of post-Soviet Russian identity.

As authors, Prilepin, Erofeev and Pelevin are undoubtedly influential in shaping the way the Russian public perceives their historical and current cultural problems. The simultaneous presence of these various understandings of what has constituted Russianness allows for national identity discourse, at least within the context of literature, to represent a heterogeneous body of ideas that attest to Russia's diverse national cultural roots, all of which deserve equal opportunity to express themselves as examples of Russianness.

Conclusion

The motif that is perhaps most commonly associated with the idea of Russianness in both Russian and Western criticism is its existence as a global political and cultural anomaly. Russia's historical tendency to rely on Western hegemonic values in order to create its own sense of self has produced its fragile identity. Having prioritized Eurocentrism, the Russian people have been, in effect, enslaved to a slew of cultural myths since the rise of their own modern national consciousness. These notions portray Russia as a country without its "own" heritage; as a people whose society, culture and the land which bore them form not a true nation by Western standards, but an amorphous mass engulfed in an insoluble enigma that prevents it from truly becoming part of the "First World." Despite its similarities to the East and West, the argument continues, Russia is distinct from both regions, though not in the positive sense of the word. Russia's centuries-long journey to become itself has entailed primarily the justification of self-colonizing measures,[42] which began with the Petrine Reforms.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about the end of the Communist identity. The fall of the Iron Curtain brought down with it the official censorship imposed on artistic expression and cultural production. This measure had been implemented since the imperial era in order to suppress dissidents as well as to produce an image of national unity. Other significant changes to Russia as a whole since the collapse include the shrinking of its geopolitical territory, its ethnographic composition, and its political and ideological orientations. With the loss of the

[42] The voluntary absorption of the basic values and categories of colonial Europe; "hegemony without domination" (Kiossev 2010). See also the summary of the open seminar, "Russia and the West: Lost in Translation" (2006). http://www.polit.ru/author/2006/07/12/tex/html (in Russian).

Soviet ideology, the centuries-old *russkii vopros* has again become a topic of controversy, and the intellectual class has returned to the debate about authentic Russianness. Relieved of the ideological constraints during Soviet times, post-Soviet Russian writers have begun to articulate their views on the meaning of Russianness in both historical and current terms and address the cultural trauma caused by the loss of the Soviet identity (Ivashkiv 38). A particular trend is the recycling of nineteenth-century cultural myths underlying the imperial concept of Russian nationality in both official and cultural terms. The revival of Russian Orthodoxy suggested that it is an enduring tenet of Russianness and underscored the Church's place in Russia's historical and cultural foundations. However, it undermined the extent to which the nation's fundamentally religious culture was a result of official measures and dismissed the nation's secular movements as well as the number of post-Soviet Russians who did not identify with religion at all.

This thesis presents three post-Soviet literary texts written by Russians for the Russian "imagined community" in which the topic of Russian identity is the overarching theme. While Pelevin, Prilepin, and Erofeev each appeal to post-modernist, new-sentimentalist, and new-nationalist audiences, respectively, they collectively illustrate post-Soviet Russian society's diverse views on and appreciation of their cultural memory. The present study investigates how these authors recycle the pre-revolutionary cultural myths of *dukhovnost'*, *narodnost'* and the "Russian soul," in order to negotiate their place in post-Soviet Russian identity. In its analysis of both fictional and non-fictional samples of contemporary Russian literature, this thesis demonstrates that despite their diverse perspectives on the issue, these authors portray (Orthodox) spirituality, the folk *narod*, and the so-called Russian national character as lasting components of Russian national identity.

The present analysis of post-Soviet Russian cultural identity accounts for points of view within the movements which Prilepin, Erofeev, and Pelevin represent, demonstrating a rapprochement with, and aversion and indifference to pre-revolutionary Russianness, respectively. It argues that new-nationalism emphasizes the appreciation of shared cultural memory as a determining factor of one's membership in the Russian "imagined community," upholding pre-revolutionary notions of Russian ideological and cultural oneness. Postmodernist and new-sentimental perspectives problematize the mythic traits that have historically characterized the Russian people and their culture. They also highlight how Russia's cultural icons have contributed to a literaturocentric self-identity and accommodated Western interests in devaluing Russia as an Other.

The analysis of *I Came From Russia* demonstrates the author's conservative approach to Russian identity. It shows how Prilepin upholds Russian Romantic and Slavophile mythic conceptions of the Russian people and their culture as "true" longstanding Russian national values. As Makarychev states in his analysis of *San'kia* (2006), another of Prilepin's works, the writer "aptly draws a picture of a dysfunctional state, which is essentially an empty place without a soul" (243). Concerned with the task of relieving the sense of ideational emptiness left by the dissolution of the Soviet socialist realism, Prilepin assumes the traditional role of culture creator who sets out to re-establish a bond between the post-Soviet individual and pre-revolutionary "normative resources including national values, beliefs, and ideology" in order to create a viable post-Soviet identity that will fill the ideational emptiness plaguing Russian society (see Makarychev 246-47). For him, re-centering Russian cultural values, beliefs and the national ideology around the Orthodox faith will restore the sense of national community and fellowship

that in his opinion once characterized Russian everyday life. In his exploration of the themes of spirituality, nationhood, and the mythic Russian soul in his semi-autobiographical essays, Prilepin engages with fictional representations of Russianness and his re-imagination of Soviet life during childhood to create an idea of historical Russia as a morally and culturally pure nation.

Erofeev's *Encyclopedia* makes an argument for "new, non-didactic, apolitical literature which would transcend the boundaries of realism, as well as socialist realism" (Marsh 37). The author employs parodic cynicism to recast the cultural myths that pervade the notion of Russianness as the defining features of what has kept Russian nationality a non-identity. Employing highly provocative language in an unapologetically sardonic tone, he cites important ideas originating from the Russian literary tradition as well as Soviet culture to refute the nationalist idea that Russia was ever a culturally or ideologically united nation. In so doing, he emphasizes the extent to which the outdated notions of Russianness do not apply to and actually harm the post-Soviet Russian national consciousness. Erofeev's vehement satirical self-criticism draws on Russians' cultural tendency to denounce themselves, thereby reinforcing the West's purportedly superior culture, despite their outward rejection of European hegemonic values. The comical element in *Encyclopedia* serves to dilute the novel's criticism and demonstrates the re-hashing of cultural myths as a means to reconcile with their permanency in cultural memory.

In its recycling of Tolstoi's private persona and philosophical quest for meaning and truth, Pelevin's novel, *t*, diminishes the great nineteenth-century author's national value as an iconic figure. He emphasizes how the writer by many accounts upheld Romantic and messianic ideals and consequently epitomized mythic cultural narratives, despite claiming to be a universalist and

Christian-anarchist. Pelevin focuses on Tolstoi's contribution to the conceptualization of the morally pure peasant *narod*, the wandering truthseeker archetype, and the mythic national character. The author's caricaturization of Tolstoi the man, the writer, and the philosopher is neither accusatory nor purely comical. Tolstoi's grave concerns which caused him much anxiety over the course of his life turn out in this account to be a symptom of insanity; what he came to believe by the end of his life becomes completely meaningless. Subtle criticism is evidenced in the novel's evaluation of Tolstoi's beliefs as irrelevant to post-Soviet Russians. Pelevin's approach to Russian cultural norms is somewhat postmodernist in its rejection of the idea that any one system is truer than another. He problematizes the Russian literary tradition's projection of the *pravdoiskatel'* as a hero in his pursuit of absolute truth and the meaning of life.

The presence of these multiple perspectives on nineteenth-century cultural myths suggests that post-Soviet Russian authors enjoyed greater freedom to create an ideologically-pluralistic literary culture (Genis 297). Even though Russians have returned to their nineteenth-century religious and cultural heritage, they have shown greater interest in cultivating their unique regional, ethnic and sub-national aspirations, all of which had previously been seen as antithetical to the integrity of national spirit (Chulos and Remy 11-12; Jahn 64; Kelly 135; Marsh 10). By reposing the question of Russian identity, Russian writers continue to influence the direction of national discourses, reinforcing their traditional role as leaders of cultural and ideational currents. Their divergent perspectives do not suggest that they are experiencing difficulty in creating a new identity. In her work on post-colonialism, Gandhi states that the "colonial aftermath is marked by the range of ambivalent cultural moods" that eventually produce "a decisive departure from the […] past" through the successful re-imagination of it (5).

Such diversity not only illustrates the variation typical of countries of Russia's vast size and multifarious composition, but also the recycling of cultural memory in order to put together the dismembered past and make sense of the trauma of the present (Bhabha 63). It also demonstrates contemporary Russian writers' interest in conceiving a new national identity that recognizes the various cultures, ethnicities, and belief systems that have existed in Russia's historical and current geographical space. The authors resist the consequences of imperialist identity by inaugurating their own set of values to replace existing narratives of Russianness with notions that serve their individual enterprises, thus asserting their independence from their historical Self.

The primary texts chosen for this thesis constitute a heterogeneous assortment of fictional and non-fictional works. The diversity of genres it includes—a collection of semi-autobiographical essays, a pseudo-encyclopedia, and a novel—offers a preliminary purview of post-Soviet Russian discourse on pre-revolutionary cultural myths. As a survey of contemporary literature intended for various audiences that do not necessarily overlap, it emulates as best as possible within the scope of literary analysis the population diversity typical of culturological case studies.

One possible avenue of research suggested by this study would involve examining the popularity of each author and their readers' responses to the texts in order to determine the degree to which their authors' perspectives represent those of the nation as a whole. It is in the interest of this cultural study to investigate the perspectives of ethnic minorities on the question of Russian national identity. Accordingly, future studies should incorporate a comparative analysis of perceptions on Russian identity that include works by non-ethnic Russian writers.

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