

Olga Sobolev

Boris Akunin and the Rise of the Russian Detective Genre

There are very few people in Russia who have not read at least one of Boris Akunin's nine *Adventures of Erast Fandorin*, do not have a couple of them lying on a coffee table or who are unable to discuss 'Erast' at social events. Akunin's detective novels have thousands of admirers all over Russia, and recently Fandorin has reached an even wider audience, with ORT¹ producing a television version of the first book in the series, *Azazel* (first published in 1988).² Not surprisingly, then, critics refer to 'Erastomania'.³ However, popularity and critical recognition are often mutually exclusive, and the opinion of Russian scholars is far from being unanimous. On the one hand, the virtues of Akunin's work were acknowledged when his *Coronation* (published in 1999) won the 2000 Anti-Booker Prize; on the other, this award gave rise to numerous objections, which can be briefly summarized in the question: why should a literary prize be awarded to a bestseller?⁴

Putting aside the tricky concept of 'worthy' literature, which causes much of the controversy surrounding Russian literary prizes,⁵ one might focus on the notion that awards such as the Anti-Booker (and, arguably, the Booker) attempt to identify the predominant and typical trends in contemporary literary life. Prizes are, therefore, often awarded to works embodying, or providing paradigms, of these trends, and it is against the background of such a generic notion that Akunin's work can best be discussed. In other words, Akunin's merits must be

¹ The acronym 'ORT' stands for 'Общественное российское телевидение', it is one of the main Russian TV channels.

² In 2003 the book was published in the United States (Random House, 2003) and UK (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003) under the title *The Winter Queen*.

³ Nadezhda Kozhevnikova, 'The New Crop of Russian Writers', *Pulse St. Petersburg*, October (2000).

⁴ Danila Davydov, 'The Boom in Prizes', *New Times*, June (2001).

⁵ See, for example, Илья Кукулин, 'Стихийное небедствие под названием Смирнов-Букер', *Ex Libris (Nezavisimaja gazeta supplement)* 39 (211), 18 October (2001); Лев Пирогов, 'Литература ползает по помойкам вместо того, чтобы брать свое на большой дороге', *Ex Libris (Nezavisimaja gazeta supplement)* 34 (206), 13 September (2001): 6–7.

analysed within the context of the detective novel, and its development in Russia today. The first question is to ask whether the idea of a specifically Russian detective text has a meaning here, as this prolific genre in Russia represents, arguably, a cultural drift towards globalization. This issue points to a second major concern of the detective genre: in today's culture, when the difference between 'high' and 'low' is becoming increasingly blurred, who actually reads such texts? Akunin's work suggests an attempt to create a new type of literature: an aesthetic and intellectual novel, which erases the distinction between the professional and non-professional reader, and so occupies a new cultural niche.⁶

Boris Akunin is a fairly prolific writer: he is the author of fourteen novels, two plays and a collection of short stories. As Grigorii Chkhartishvili (his real name), he was until recently deputy editor of *Inostrannaia literatura*, one of the most popular Russian literary journals. He is a specialist in Japanese culture,⁷ an acknowledged translator of Japanese authors, a literary critic and, as one journalist put it, a 'writer of bestsellers' rather than literature in its more traditional sense.⁸ Although in a number of interviews Akunin has also called himself a 'belletrist',⁹ he claims that he writes in three different modes. 'Моя романная деятельность — это треугольник: «литературная» серия «Провинциальный детектив», где главная героиня — монахиня Пелагия, «полулитературная» серия об Эрасте Фандорине и, наконец, новая, совсем «нелитературная» [*The Adventures of the Master*¹⁰]. В ней не будет никаких игр со стилем, постмодернистских фокусов — вся нагрузка приходится на

⁶ Екатерина Ефимова. 'Борис Акунин: чтение для умников или попса?' *Аргументы и факты* 30 (420), 25 July (2001).

⁷ His pseudonym apparently is not derived from the surname of the famous Russian anarchist Bakunin, but is a Japanese word for a 'villain': 'aku' means 'evil' and 'nin' — ман (Ольга Китаева, 'Детективы о прекрасном XIX веке', *Дипломат* 1 (81), January (2001)).

⁸ Davydov.

⁹ Марина Мурзина, 'Борис Акунин начал сочинять, чтобы развлечь жену', *Аргументы и факты* 44 (1045), 1 November (2000).

¹⁰ 'Действие этой серии происходит в наши дни,' — comments Akunin — 'так что теперь каждый читатель может сопоставить свои ощущения от современности с моими' (Алексей Макаркин, 'Россия, которой мы не теряли,' *Сегодня* 164, 28 July (2000)).

сюжет.’¹¹ As the author is still working on all of his series, it is too early to say whether he remains entirely faithful to his delineation of borders in creative writing. At present his ‘semi-literary’ series is the most complete one and it is certainly the one that brought the writer fame. Akunin has written nine books on the adventures of Erast Fandorin. The time period for the series stretches from 1876, when the first novel, *Azazel*, takes place, to the beginning of the twentieth century. Each of the nine books has a specific generic appellation. For example, *Azazel* is labeled ‘a conspiracy detective novel’, *Coronation* has a classification of ‘a high society detective story’, the last novel in the series, *The Lover of Death*, is called ‘a Dickensian detective story’. The others are all different types of the genre, subtly tuned to the variety of its manifestations.

‘Бульварная литература’, ‘литература для желудка’, ‘pulp fiction’, ‘potboiler’ — these are the categories of writing to which detective stories are commonly relegated.¹² In the Russian world of letters the status of this type of fiction is quite unenviable. Many critics traditionally dismiss it as the kind of work produced by half-educated or wholly incompetent writers, popular with readers devoid of culture and literary taste.¹³ Nevertheless in Russia today this so-called ‘light’ fiction dominates the publishing industry, while ‘high-brow culture’ is in danger of perishing. The general popularization of Russian literature has been noted by several authors;¹⁴ less attention, however, has been paid

¹¹ Макаркин.

¹² Detective stories (even the acknowledged classics of the genre) are still considered part of the ‘escapist’ literature rather than that of realism and depth of thought.

¹³ Viktor Miasnikov, however, argues that detective stories were always popular among the Soviet intelligentsia (despite the fact that very few of them were published and people had difficulty getting them) (Виктор Мясников, ‘Бульварный эпос’, *Новый мир*, 2001 (11), 150–158).

¹⁴ Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov, ‘The ABC of Russian Consumer Culture’, *Soviet Hieroglyphics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Stephen Lovell and Rosalind Marsh, ‘Culture and Crisis: The Intelligentsia and Literature’, *Russian Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

so far to one of its most interesting and prominent trends, namely to the proliferation of detective novels. Detective fiction occupies a very special place in the vast spectrum of 'популярная литература'. Since early 1989 the circulation and print-run of detective novels have dramatically increased, and until recently maintained the readership monopoly (which has been broken by suspense and political thrillers and romantic fiction).¹⁵ It is not an overstatement to say that today detective stories are, in fact, the only literature that many Russians read, and it is worth reflecting on the reasons for such an unprecedented vogue.

One reason for the popularity of detective fiction in Russia may be its appropriate nature within the new 'market' of Russian culture. After the collapse of the state-financed system of cultural production and distribution in the 90s, writers, now free from censorship, had to start looking at the marketable value of their writings: economic imperatives replaced former ideological constraints. To sustain large print-runs, authors had to please a wider audience and devise elaborate strategies more appropriate for a commercial rather than cultural activity. Immediate profitability, regular production and satisfaction of demand became a priority in the conquest of the market.

In these new circumstances detective stories sold fast. One of the main reasons for such success consists in the novelty of this genre for Russian readers. Soviet generations have never been fully exposed to the conventional style of detective fiction, where the main intent is to delight the reader with an intellectual puzzle of a mysterious crime, and to thrill with suspense. The first Soviet detective novels were Yuri German's *One Year* (1940) and Lev Sheinin's *Diary of a Criminologist* (1945). Both hailed the heroism of Soviet militia servicemen who solved intricate crimes. Because of ideological constraints the Soviet detective genre went beyond the framework of pure entertainment: the emphasis was not on the exposure of a criminal, but on the moral assessment of human behavior. Unlike their foreign counterparts, most prominent Soviet detective authors, such as Yulian Semenov and the Vainer brothers, accentuated the moral aspect of crime, focusing on how a repentant criminal can return to a normal way of life and on the responsibility of

¹⁵ Condee and Padunov, 155; Александр Гаврилов, 'Смерть Бешеному', *Аргументы и факты* 37(1090), 12 September (2001).

society for every citizen. But even so, the authorities never considered the detective genre as particularly serious in terms of the transmission of socially valuable qualities to the masses, and in general there were few detective novels that were written and published in Soviet times.

In this context contemporary Western detective fiction was strictly out of bounds. It was regarded as aesthetically poor, ideologically subversive and stimulating an unnecessary predilection for criminal themes. Thus it is not surprising that soon after the fall of authoritative censorship, Russian bookstores were flooded by numerous translations of foreign detective stories, satisfying the readers' appetite for 'forbidden fruit'. In 1994–1995 there was, however, a move away from Western novels, as the latter became too expensive for Russian publishing firms,¹⁶ but the niche was immediately filled with domestic fare. At present Russian publishing houses still turn out thousands of detective novels written by literary professionals (Viktor Pronin, Boris Akunin) as well as people of other professions (most of them law enforcement workers: Nikolai Psurtsev, Aleksandra Marinina, Daniil Koretsky), and the demand for their work remains high despite the fact that the market seems to be saturated.¹⁷

Novelty, however, on its own cannot possibly account for the now decade-long, persistent popularity of Akunin's detective stories. It is therefore necessary to turn to those qualities that lend these writings their special appeal and mark them out from the numerous works of his literary colleagues.¹⁸ Without neglecting his other works, the focus will be on two novels of Fandorin cycle: *Azazel'* — the first of Akunin's novels where his style was being established; and *Coronation*, which, as suggested by the title, is, perhaps, the culmination of the series.

In Akunin's work one can find a number of strata: the subject matter or the development of the formal story; the historical and cultural layer, which consists of cultural codes, literary reminiscences, inter-

¹⁶ According to Universal Copyright Convention Russian publishing houses had to pay for the rights to any foreign work (Lovell and Marsh, 81).

¹⁷ Гаврилов.

¹⁸ Marinina — traditional police detective novels, Dashkova — adventure stories with a detective line, Poliakova and Dontsova — feminine detective novels; Neznanskii — political detective stories, Leonov and Voronin — 'superman' detective series.

textual references and mind games that create a multi-dimensional intellectual space; and finally the philosophical level — the subtext of the discourse, the themes of eternal conceptual questions, interpreted by the author. This multi-layered approach creates a polyphonic artistic space, so characteristic of postmodernist writing, and suggests the possibility of an extensive dialogue with the audience on various cognitive levels. We shall start with the basic level of the formal plot.

Roman Jakobson pointed out that in any text there is a sovereign principle that governs and deforms all the other textual elements and guarantees the integrity of the structure.¹⁹ For a detective story this principle (Jakobson calls it the dominant) is not difficult to define. In its purest form the plot of a detective novel is an argument conducted under the guise of fiction, and the further it escapes from pure analysis, the more difficulty it has in achieving artistic unity. In effect, it is a purely intellectual exercise, and its morphology (to use the term that V. Propp applies to any popular tale²⁰) is simple. The construction of a detective tale easily falls into three main stages: a definite and single problem is set, investigated and solved. For each of these stages the detective novel has drawn up its own rules and created its own form and technique.²¹ The canons of genre can be traced back to the works of such masters as Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins, Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, Gaston Leroux and Émile Gaboriau. Even now two thirds of all published detective stories still adhere to formulas of these classics²² (which have invariable proved successful with the reading public), and Akunin's works are no exception.

A detective story involves a problem, which must nearly always be criminal, not because a crime is an attractive subject, but because it

¹⁹ Roman Jakobson, Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics* (Cambridge MA: MIT University Press, 1971), 82–87.

²⁰ Владимир Пропп, *Морфология сказки* (Москва: Главная редакция восточной литературы, 1969), 7.

²¹ See, for example, H. Douglas Thomson, *Masters of Mystery: A Study of the Detective Story* (London: Collins, 1931), one of the first full-length studies of the detective genre that followed the development of detective novels in England and America during the 1920s.

²² Summarized in a classic essay by Van Dine *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (in S. S. Van Dine, *Philo Vance Murder Cases* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936)).

forms the most natural occasion for an investigation required by the genre. Considering the formal level of Akunin's texts, one should say that his plots are straightforward. Investigation of a fraud (*The Jack of Spades*) or a suicide (*Azazel'*), chasing a maniac (*The Decorator*), disclosure of a spy (*Turkish Gambit*) or a terrorist organization (*The State Councillor*) do not offer any generic originality, and it is due to its sensational development that the narration is so engaging and appealing; the reader is led from bewilderment to further bewilderment until everything is explained in the last chapter.

Akunin's texts are full of unexpected moves (so pleasing to lovers of the detective story and so challenging for those, who prefer to treat it as an intellectual exercise for themselves²³) and are saturated with mystifications and thrills, presented in a series of highly dramatic descriptions. For example, *Coronation* begins with the kidnapping and blackmail. The action takes place in 1896, during festivities on the occasion of the coronation of the Russian tsar Nicholas II. The members of the royal family arrive in Moscow to take part in the celebration, but on the seventh of May, a week before the coronation, the four-year-old son of one of the ducal princes is kidnapped. In exchange for the life of the prince, the Romanovs have to sacrifice the most precious item of the imperial regalia: the Orlov diamond, which belongs in the scepter. This diamond symbolizes the divine right to rule, and the failure to get it back would not only mean a worldwide scandal, but would be symbolically ominous for the Romanov dynasty as a whole. Nicholas II and his imperial uncles hire Erast Fandorin, a well-known detective, to track down the kidnapper, the evil Dr. Lind (known for his ruthlessness and his deadly precision with a stiletto), to get back the abducted prince and to recover the imperial treasure. Dramatic tension is high from the start, and the level of suspense is maintained throughout: there is an abduction, a gang of bandits from the Moscow criminal underworld, ransom notes delivered by arrow, the threat of the downfall of

²³ In *Azazel'*, for example, Ivan Frantsevich Brillung, a teacher-protector of the young Fandorin, suddenly claims: 'Вы слишком хороший сыщик, мой юный друг, мне придется вас убить' (Борис Акунин, *Азазель* (Москва: Захаров, 1998), 172).

the monarchy, and a final death scene played out on a rope bridge over a ravine.²⁴

Judging from the above, Akunin's skills as a detective story craftsman are remarkable, and at first glance the novels appear to be pure suspense fiction. However, the author himself does not put much emphasis on the development of the subject line as such: 'У меня, конечно, есть математический расчет' — says Akunin in one of his interviews — 'но довольно замысловатый, многослойный. Скажем, есть слой исторических шуток и загадок. Есть слой намеренных литературных цитат — так веселее мне и интереснее взыскательному читателю'²⁵ This brings us to the deeper level of Akunin's texts where the dialogue with the reader is constructed as an intellectual game. It is based on various cultural codes, historical allusions and inter-textual associations. The historico-cultural level of Akunin's works is of prime importance and plays a double role in their textual organization. On the one hand, the carefully maintained historical setting of his writings²⁶ strongly contributes to the mimetic precision of the narration — an indispensable attribute of the genre. On the other hand, numerous historical puzzles, inter-textual reminiscences and literary quotes bring in the dimension of virtual reality and suggest an interesting example of postmodernist conceptual writing.

The setting of a detective story is of cardinal importance. The plot must appear to be an actual account of events conducted with journalistic precision. The reason for this is simple: the objective of a detective novel — the mental reward attending its solution — would be lost unless the sense of verisimilitude was consistently maintained. A familiarity with the terrain and a belief in its existence give the reader the

²⁴ Although the main plot twist hinges on the true identity of Dr. Lind, the secret must be disclosed for the purposes of our discussion. The merciless mastermind turns out to be a member of the imperial household, — what is more — it is a woman, mademoiselle Declique, who hides behind the masculine guise of Dr. Lind. Offering a truly unusual aspect to the revelation of the villain, Akunin makes the criminal into the French governess of the kidnapped prince.

²⁵ Борис Акунин, 'Так интереснее мне и веселее взыскательному читателю', *Независимая газета*, 23 December, 1999.

²⁶ As already mentioned, Akunin's novels are set in the second half of the nineteenth century, the time when in the West the canons of the detective genre were developed and affirmed.

feeling of ease and freedom in manipulating the elements of the plot to his own ends. Therefore a detective novel is nearly always more popular in the country in which it is set than abroad where the conditions, both human and topographic, are unfamiliar to the reader. Ellis Peters' historical detective stories, for example, received only moderate acclaim when published in Russia a couple of years ago; the same can be said about Robert Van Gulik, to whom Akunin is often compared,²⁷ and whose detective tales, due to their foreign locales, have never been particularly popular in Russia.²⁸

For exactly the same reason, historical fiction, referring to the past of their own country, has always appealed to Russian readers.²⁹ In the nineties the fascination with Russian history and especially the reverence for Nicholas II grew even further. This reached its apogee with the ceremony of reburial of Nicholas II in the Cathedral of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg (in July 1998), widely discussed in the Russian media and warmly received by public opinion. At present publishing firms are confident of getting high profits from historical fiction by contemporary writers: for example, the publishing house Armada put out a series entitled *The Romanovs: A Dynasty in Novels* consisting of nearly a dozen volumes, each with a print run of over 100,000.³⁰

Akunin's novels, therefore, are a clever take on a popular topic; this concerns *Coronation* in particular as it relates to the personal life of the last Russian tsar. *Coronation* is not historical fiction in the or-

²⁷ Китаева.

²⁸ This phenomenon is not something specific to Russia: the French detective novels by Gaston Leroux, *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, *The Perfume of the Lady in Black*, *The Secret of the Night*, had indifferent sales in the United States due to that very unfamiliarity of settings (Alain-Michel, Boyer, *La paralittérature* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 92).

²⁹ We can recall, for example, the spectacular success of Valentin Pikul' in the eighties. Although not a member of the Union of Soviet Writers (which was already an unprecedented matter), he was the author of more than twenty best-selling historical novels; these novels received a minimum print-run of 150,000 hardbacks that would sell out within a week (Klaus Mehnert, *The Russians and Their Favorite Books* (Cambridge MA: MIT University Press, 1983), 155–160).

³⁰ Lovell and Marsh, 81.

thodox sense:³¹ it is not based on any historical evidence, and all characters, apart from Nicholas II and his wife, Empress Alexandra, are the product of the author's imagination. Even the members of the imperial family who bear some features of the real Romanovs³² (this adds to the idea of 'intellectual puzzle' discussed below) have fictional names and biographies. However, despite these historic infelicities, the sense of reality in *Coronation* is carefully maintained. There are several factors that contribute to this.

Firstly, the plot of the novel incorporates the Khodynka tragedy, which is familiar to any Russian from school history. Secondly, the style of narration skilfully imitates nineteenth century writings. One can compare, for example, an excerpt from the memoirs of Sergei Witte, one of the most prominent statesmen of the late nineteenth century, with a passage from *Coronation*. 'Отличительные черты Николая II' — Witte writes — 'закljučаются в том, что он человек очень добрый и чрезвычайно воспитанный. Я могу сказать, что я в своей жизни не встречал человека, более воспитанного, нежели ныне царствующий император Николай II.'³³ Note the striking resemblance of style in Akunin's text: 'Изысканная вежливость его величества и поразительная способность запоминать имена и лица общеизвестны. . . . Что же до вежливости, то из всей августейшей семьи только царь и царица говорят прислуге «вы».'³⁴ In the same way we can compare the descriptions of the Khodynka tragedy. In Witte we read: 'Меня мучил прежде всего вопрос, как же поступят со всеми искалеченными людьми, как поступят со всеми этими трупами убитых людей, успеют ли

³¹ Akunin is often severely criticized for his frivolous manipulation of Russian history (Галина Ульянова, 'Пародия на правду', *Ex Libris (Nezavisimaa gazeta supplement)* 15 June (2000)).

³² Simeon Aleksandrovich, the Governor-General of Moscow, is better known to history as Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich; his elder brother (in the novel) Georgii Aleksandrovich can be related to Grand Duke Aleksander Mikhailovich who indeed had six sons and a daughter Irina (though born just one year before the *Coronation* events) whose features are glimpsed in the image of Princess Ksenia.

³³ Сергей Витте, *Воспоминания* (Минск: Харвест АСТ, 2001), vol. 1, 72.

³⁴ Борис Акунин, *Коронация, или последний из романов* (Москва: Захаров, 2001), 46.

поразвозить по больницам тех, которые еще не умерли;³⁵ and the passage from *Coronation* sounds almost like an answer to his thoughts: 'Государь и государыня распорядились произвести похороны за казенный счет, а семьям, потерявшим кормильца, назначили вспомоществование. Поступок в высшей степени благородный.'³⁶ Akunin is acclaimed for his style, and though often labelled as that of 'elitist prose',³⁷ it certainly succeeds in creating a semblance of realism.

Thirdly, the type of narrator is carefully chosen: the story is written in the form of the memoirs of an imperial servant, Afanasii Zukin. Zukin is a devoted confidant of the Romanovs and inevitably takes part in the investigation, but as his main duties are still those of a butler, he pays a lot of attention to the mundane details of the domestic life of the royal family. He gives minute descriptions of their daily routine and personal habits, the way they dress and bring up children, their meals and the quality of the cutlery on the table. Viewed through Zukin's eyes, the Romanovs are 'domesticated', brought closer to real life. As a result the reader can easily relate to the action, and at the same time his interest in it is constantly stimulated by some piquant details of the royal private lives. The device is not new,³⁸ but very effective in terms of impersonating historical voice and enriching the text, which therefore plays on various socio-cultural ideas.

Finally, a touch of historicism is created through allusions to well-known people of the time, who are recognizable in the characters of the book. The names of these people are changed, but still transparent enough not to be mistaken and the biographical facts inserted into the text do not allow any confusion. Thus, the ballerina Snezhnevskaya, the former mistress of the Tsar,³⁹ the current mistress of the Grand Duke Georgii and of his elder son, refers to Matilda Kshesinskaya, the ballerina of the Imperial Theatre, who was known to be a mistress of Nicho-

³⁵ Витте, 140.

³⁶ Акунин, *Коронация*, 328.

³⁷ Павел Бассинский, 'Штиль в стакане воды', *Литературная газета* 21 (5834), 29 May (2001).

³⁸ For example, *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins is narrated by the family butler.

³⁹ Акунин, *Коронация*, 180.

las II and one of his brothers; Lasovsky, the bad tempered chief of the Moscow police, points to Vlasovsky who was famous for having the bad manners of a ‘хам-держиморда’.⁴⁰ All these references suggest a different reading of the text: it appears as a historical puzzle-game, which works on various intellectual levels and is appealing to history-lovers.

The game is further extended on a literary level: Akunin’s texts are constructed as a network of quotes and literary reminiscences. Here are but a few examples from *Azazel*. The novel starts in one of the parks in Moscow on a hot spring day in May⁴¹ — Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*. Erast Fandorin falls in love with ‘poor Liza’ and is to be blamed for her tragic death — Karamzin, *Poor Liza*. There is a description of a portrait in a silver frame, which captivates Fandorin even before he is acquainted with the original — Dostoevskii, *The Idiot*. Count Zurov, a rabid duelist, a gambler and brave rider, saves Fandorin from unavoidable death — Pushkin, ‘The Missed Chapter’ of *The Captain’s Daughter*. Amalia Kazimirovna, whose attention is precious to a lot of men, gives a reception, where the guests while playing forfeits discuss the renowned ‘hundred thousands’ — Dostoevskii, *The Idiot*. The conversation on ‘spiritual oxygen’ (‘о духовном кислороде’), which is missing among ‘the best of the educated youth’ (‘лучших среди образованной молодежи’), and the whole theory of Lady Astair, concerning the bright future of humanity and the ways of reaching ‘the universal harmony’ — Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov*.

Apart from presenting an exciting cultural game, an attempt is made to create a closed literary space, based entirely on inter-textual associations — an autonomous textual domain, which requires nothing but itself to define it. By entering this level, the reader is transferred into virtual reality, where apparently he is no stranger amongst familiar cultural codes. Such experimentation with the possibilities of representation, a desire to extend the limits of the text is very much in the tradition of postmodernist writing, however it is hardly ever seen in the

⁴⁰ Витте, 143.

⁴¹ ‘В понедельник 13 мая 1876 года, в третьем часу пополудни, в день повесенному свежий и по-летнему теплый, в Александровском саду’ (Акунин, *Azazel*, 7).

works of formula genre.⁴² It gives a whole new dimension to the text and certainly raises it to another cognitive level.

The duality of perception concerns also the character drawing. On the one hand, Erast Fandorin is a dream of modern liberals. He saves Russia from crafty plots and foreign machinations, but does not allow it to be turned into a Slavic dictatorship. He is a man of the world, who is capable of decisive actions, who values social morals and at the same time is very keen on his own privacy. 'Fandorin is a new type of a hero, but, on the other hand, he is just a masked librarian, who does not unravel crimes, but deals with migrant themes and tangled motifs.'⁴³ His existence is enclosed in the literary space of the author's texts and should be perceived within these boundaries.

On the question of character delineation it is worth dwelling a while longer, as this domain conceals the entrance to the third level of Akunin's texts — the subtext. As far as generic formula is concerned, the detective novel stands outside the rules governing ordinary fiction. Characters in detective stories should merely fulfil the requirement of plausibility, since to the plot — the dominant of the genre — personality is irrelevant and action is all-important. Any closely drawn character analysis, any undue lingering over details of temperament, will act to clog up the narrative machinery. In the case of Fandorin, this prerequisite of the genre is faithfully observed.

In *Azazel'* the reader does not learn much about Fandorin. A hereditary nobleman, he is a descendent of the German officer Cornelius Von Dorn,⁴⁴ who came to Russia in the seventeenth century and served at the court of Tsar Aleksei Michailovich. Erast Fandorin became an orphan at the age of nineteen. As his father did not leave him anything but his debts, Fandorin could not go to university and started his career as a collegiate registrar in the police. He is presented as an ordinary young man; even his appearance does not seem to deserve any special attention and is described only in passing: 'Раз уж речь зашла о ресницах, уместно будет описать внешность Эраста

⁴² In this context the parallel can be made with the works of Umberto Eco.

⁴³ Лев Данилкин, "Послесловие", in Б. Акунин, *Особые поручения* (Москва: Захаров, 2000), 316.

⁴⁴ The surname of the detective, however, also refers to the journalist Fandor, the protagonist of the famous French thriller *Fantomas*.

Петровича подробнее.⁴⁵ As far as his personality is concerned, nothing is known about it apart from the fact that he is very lucky in gambling and bets. Fandorin is a flat character. In the course of the series of novels his biography is enriched,⁴⁶ his personality becomes more distinct, but still remains very close to the expected scheme.

In *Coronation* Fandorin appears as a freelance detective, 'sent by God' to help.⁴⁷ He is forty years old; he has great talents, both mental and physical. He is extremely attractive to women and has a debonair flair and dashing mustachios, plus a hint of the exotic with his sidekick who is a Japanese martial arts expert. He is irresistible, sophisticated and yet close to the cliché of the genre. All successful detective novels have invariably produced a protagonist of attractiveness and interest, of highly fascinating attainments — a man at once human and unusual, colourful and gifted. The best examples of such personalities would be August Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Thorndyke, Hercule Poirot and, certainly, Erast Fandorin.

From the habits of the great detectives of fiction it is also possible to draw some general rules, and Fandorin does not deviate from the pattern. One of them is that the romantic interest is rarely foregrounded in such novels: the true beauty of a detective story is in intellectual exercise, and to mix romance with it is to introduce an irrelevant ornament without any structural value. All Fandorin's affairs, including the one with Princess Ksenia in *Coronation*, are more likely to contribute to his reputation as a lady-killer, rather than to uplift his emotional life: 'Я не согласен с вами в том, что все, кроме любви, неважно.' — he claims — 'Есть вещи более существенные,

⁴⁵ Акунин, *Азazel*, 12-13.

⁴⁶ In a year he was promoted to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for his brilliant operation against the international antigovernment organization 'Azazel'. He married a young lady whom he passionately loved, but on their wedding day she died in an explosion engineered by the defeated organization. Fandorin could not overcome this loss and left Russia on a diplomatic mission. His services to the state were highly rewarded. After eight years he returned to Moscow to acquire a very high post at the governor-general's office and the title of State Councillor. At the age of thirty-five Fandorin resigned — he did not want to work under Grand Duke Simeon Aleksandrovich, the newly appointed Governor-General of Moscow, whom he did not consider to be a man of honour.

⁴⁷ Акунин, *Коронация*, 53.

чем любовь.⁴⁸ In the course of the investigation Fandorin remains single: his decisions and resolutions are never obstructed by any amorous dreams or ungoverned emotional reactions. Another trend that can be considered characteristic of any decent detective is his relationship with the police. Dupin and Holmes were civilians with an extreme contempt for their salaried rivals, and Fandorin is no exception. In *Coronation*, for example, Fandorin initially was regarded only as an external counselor, but in due course the incompetence of police leaders, which, of course, is aimed to highlight Fandorin's superiority, becomes obvious even to the imperial family. Fandorin is given *carte blanche*, and Akunin adheres to another rule of the genre: great detectives are not team players; they deal with the adversary on their own.

It seems that every effort is made to convince the reader that in Erast Fandorin the archetype of the genre finds its most perfect representation. In this context any deviation from the ideal scenario would certainly evoke a question; and one cannot help but notice that in Akunin's writings the investigation is not brought to its traditional conclusion, namely to the happy end and undisputable triumph of justice. In *Azazel'*, for example, Fandorin's operation is essentially a failure: although formally rewarded, he is marginalized from the case; furthermore, he has to face the horrible revenge of the disclosed organization: his young wife is murdered on their wedding day.⁴⁹ In *Coronation* Fandorin also has three failures: he does not get Princess Ksenia, he has not been able to recover the missing prince alive and his services are not appreciated (on the contrary, the Romanovs want to forget about him as soon as possible).

On the one hand, this departure from perfection certainly makes this 'nineteenth-century James Bond' more human, more real and more convincing: it is difficult to deny that this cheerful cynicism better suits the spirit of the times than the sentimentality which ends in wedding bells. On the other hand, this surprising deviation from the happy ending cliché of the genre suggests the possibility of another reading. The latter is cleverly put forth through the idea of 'identity' in the text — a concept which causes the close identification of the novel with the detective genre to be rendered, even if only fleetingly, 'suspect'. Perhaps

⁴⁸ Акунин, *Коронация*, 192.

⁴⁹ The same tragic episode also occurred in the life of James Bond.

this tale is really a piece of social criticism revealed through an unmasking not of a murderous kidnapper, but through the stripping away of the respectable masks worn by those victimized by the villain.

In the final pages the devoted servant tells us rather caustically that Grand Duke Simeon Aleksandrovich appears not to be mourning the death of his nephew, but the loss of his male English lover. Zukin also notes that the Empress, although dressed in mourning, is happily wearing one of the ransom jewels, which presumably means more to her than her nephew did. We cannot mistake the irony here and the fact that there is a double meaning in the subtitle of the novel: a meta-mystery enclosed in a simplistic thriller. 'A high society detective story' not only implies the disclosure of the crime related to this circle, but also unmasks the true nature of the latter. When it turns out that Dr. Lind is part of the imperial household it becomes clear that the rot is from within. The Romanovs emerge as a group of rather unappealing egoists who do not really seem to be upset about the missing prince, even when the kidnapper starts sending him back in pieces or when they realize that he is no longer alive. 'Бедный маленький Мика.' — said the Tsar — 'Светлый агнец, злодейски умерщвленный гнусными преступниками . . . Спасти его нам не удалось. Но зато спасена честь и репутация Романовых. Кошмарное происшествие не имело никакой огласки. А это главное.'⁵⁰

The main conflict of *Coronation*, the one that is behind the crime puzzle, is the conflict of human relations. Fandorin's attitude, rooted in mutual respect, dignity and honour is opposed to the Romanovs' one, based on a strict code of conduct, hypocrisy and blind devotion. The inner problem is not in the murdered boy, but in the life principle: ceremony and impeccable facade is preferred to privacy, independence of thought and human rights — everything that is vital for the development of Russia. The royals fail to understand this and have to face the Khodynka tragedy, the Russian-Japanese War and subsequently the Revolution. The novel, therefore, carries an important social message, which in the atmosphere of moral confusion is essential for the formation of a new Russian identity: 'Мой герой не всегда побеждает и

⁵⁰ Акунин, *Коронация*, 346.

иногда ошибается,' — says Akunin in one of his interviews — 'но он всегда ведет себя достойно в любой ситуации.'⁵¹

It is also worth noting that in the novel, both of the opposing attitudes that form the essence of the conflict are subtly mocked and parodied. The members of the gay club are extremely protective of their privacy and emphatically scrupulous in the matters of honour. The drag ball contains a highly dramatic camp moment when a feckless Columbine (Prince Glinskii) stands up for his male lover, Grand Duke Simeon Aleksandrovich, slaps Lord Banville in the face and, burning with indignation, challenges him to a duel. The second line, the Romanovs' idolatry of an empty image, is ridiculed in Zukin's pathetic dithyrambs to the impeccably polished door handles and shining windows as essential hallmarks of well-being. There is a classically comic moment when Zukin and Lieutenant Endlung find themselves half-naked in a cellar used for sadomasochistic practices. The situation could not be worse, because they are going to miss the coronation ceremony. To compensate for the loss, Zukin recites the protocol of the event, which he, of course, knows by heart to the very minute. The contrast between Zukin's glamorous rhetoric about the sacred investiture and the sadomasochistic cellar is strikingly bizarre.

This element of the grotesque is widely exploited in the text: Fandorin and Zukin often appear in a peculiar disguise; the notion of gender is transgressed in gay pairings, in the drag ball and in the sexual ambiguity of Dr. Lind. None of these carnival episodes are accidental, as they hint at one of the central ideas of the text — that of identity. It seems that Akunin suggests looking deeper for the real identity of this work in genre terms — there is a faint carnival element, which implies that this work subtly subverts itself. Akunin is certainly a man of culture and taste, a professional, whose ability to draw characters and create atmosphere is praiseworthy. However it is this mocking element which shows Akunin's skills to best effect. He produces a work to all intents and purposes perfectly akin to a paradigm of the detective genre, but with just the faintest flaw. Thus what is essentially a cult work is nevertheless able to operate at various cognitive levels.

Unfortunately, this aspect has not attracted much attention from literary critics, and at present there is only one work that focuses on

⁵¹ Мурзина.

the philosophical level of Akunin's texts. In his article 'Зло, возникающее в дороге, и дао Эраста Фандорина',⁵² Georgii Tsiplakov argues that the conceptual grounds of the novels can be found in Daoist philosophy. This thinking has two main streams: the wisdom of Lao-Zi (revealed in the *Dao De Jing* manuscript⁵³) and the teaching of Confucius. According to Tsiplakov, the author himself is the bearer of the former, and Erast Fandorin is an embodiment of the latter; his failures, therefore, are the result of holding the wrong views.

The focal principle of the *Dao De Jing* philosophy is 'naturalness', the universal harmony of nature and its basic elements; any resolute action leading to its transformation is considered to be against the wisdom of Lao-Zi. Tsiplakov claims that the Daoist principle is expressed in the novels in a number of ways.⁵⁴ Firstly, it manifests itself in the general organization of the setting: the action is placed in patriarchal Moscow, where tradition is respected; the natural course of events is preferred to progress and all innovations (telegraph, construction of the underground) are poorly received. Secondly, the General-Governor of Moscow, Prince Dolgorukii, is very inactive and prefers to leave things

⁵² Георгий Циплаков, "Зло, возникающее в дороге, и дао Эраста Фандорина," *Новый мир*, 2001 (11), 159–181.

⁵³ Lao-Zi, who lived in the sixth century BC in the state of Chu in China, is believed to be the author of the collection of 84 verses — the *Dao De Jing* manuscript; see Laozi, *Dao De Jing, The Book of the Way*, trans. Moss Roberts (University of California Press, 2001).

⁵⁴ In Tsiplakov's words, Akunin's adherence to the *Dao* tradition is a reflection of the author's concern about the consequences of globalization. In his articles, Grigori Chkhartishvili (Boris Akunin) questions the advantages of human activity, leading to the loss of natural compartmentalization of the society; he points out that any homogenization of a system is characterized by an increase in entropy — an irreversible sign of ageing: 'Слияние Запада с Востоком и все прочие слияния, как наметившиеся, так и уже произошедшие, неминуемо превращают наш мир в ту самую «изолированную систему», где энтропия необратимо растет. Собственно это означает, что человечество начинает стареть. Когда-нибудь оно умрет. Думать об этом грустно, но лучше уж в вялом андрогинном состоянии от прогрессирующей энтропии, чем в бодром и расколотом — от допрогрессировавшей до ядерного деления полярности. Или не лучше?' (Григорий Чхартишвили, "Но нет Востока и Запада нет," *Иностранная литература*, 1996 (9), 262).

to be resolved naturally by themselves. In Akunin's novels he is always opposed to the energetic officials of St. Petersburg, and the sympathies of the author are clearly not on the side of the latter. Finally, in *Coronation* the author's disapproval of an active stand is articulated through Mr. Freyby, the English butler: 'Live your own life'⁵⁵ — he says to Zukin, the imperial servant who is actively involved in all the affairs of the court. Freyby when typed in Cyrillic font on an English keyboard appears as Akunin, and can be seen as an embodiment of the author's voice.⁵⁶ According to Daoist philosophy the ultimate wisdom of the True Way (*Dao*) is in the natural course of events, and only due to their ignorance men believe that they can affect it.

This concept was contradicted in Confucian teaching, which is a modification of the *Dao De Jing* wisdom. The principle of naturalness is of background importance and the emphasis is on the best qualities of human nature:⁵⁷ honour, sense of duty, dignified behaviour. Confucius put forth the idea of a 'humanistic *Dao*': 'A man can make the Way great, but the Way cannot make man great.'⁵⁸ In the course of the novels Fandorin is moulded as an ideal representation of this wisdom. In *Azazel* he rushed into the investigation with Romantic exuberance and was punished for thus contradicting the principles of *Dao*. However, starting from the second novel, Fandorin's attitude changes; he does not put much effort into his activity as a detective. He is considerate, focused and observant, and the villains seem to be trapped by their own wrong moves. He wins the day each time, but in all circumstances remains a man of honour and duty, an embodiment of the best moral

⁵⁵ Акунин, *Коронация*, 153.

⁵⁶ There are quite a few details that point to the similarity of the author and his character: Mr. Freyby constantly reads belletristic novels, which is an allusion to the literary activity of the author; he also demonstrates an interest in translation by offering Ziukin a Russian-English conversation book.

⁵⁷ These values are based entirely on one concept: *jen*, which is best translated as 'humaneness', but can also mean 'humanity', 'benevolence', 'goodness', or 'virtue'. This humaneness is a relatively strange concept to Western eyes, because it is not primarily a practicable virtue. Rather, the job of the 'gentleman', *ch'ün tzu*, was to concentrate on the highest concepts of behaviour even when this is impractical or foolish (James Legge (ed.), *The Analects of Confucius, the Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971).

⁵⁸ *The Analects of Confucius*, 15.28.

principles. He is very conscientious and refuses to devote his services to two masters at any one time; later on he even rejects the offer of Grand Duke Simeon Aleksandrovich (the newly appointed Governor-General of Moscow) whom he does not consider to be a man of honour. In this context one can also quote a quintessential dialogue from *The Death of Achilles*: «Фандорин, обещайте, что не используете свой детективный талант во вред отчизне. Здесь на карту поставлена честь России». Эраст Петрович помолчал. «Обещаю, Гукмасов, что ничего не сделаю против своей чести, и думаю, этого достаточно».⁵⁹ As one can see, Fandorin is a true bearer of the Confucian 'humanistic *Dao*', which is rejected in *Dao De Jing* teaching (and the author, as shown, is one of its followers) as a superfluous speculation on the concept of naturalness. It is worth pointing out that in Daoist literature Confucius often appears as a character instructed by the great master Lao-Zi. In the same way Akunin (the Daoist author) made his opponent (Fandorin the Confucian) the main character of his writings.

Tsiplakov's reasoning is difficult to argue with, as Akunin himself is indeed an expert in oriental philosophy. However one cannot but notice a couple of contradictions. Sometimes the villains in Akunin's text also comply with Daoist principles: Dr. Lind in *Coronation* is a criminal by nature, not interested in money and not moved by the idea of dominating the world; in *The Decorator* the villain is fascinated by the natural beauty of the human body (it is another matter that he applies his concepts in the manner of Jack the Ripper). Furthermore, it is difficult to explain why after such a tremendous development in personality, after changing from an energetic romantic (which is in total disagreement with ideas of Dao) to a wise Confucian (which in fact is a branch of Daoism), Fandorin is still 'punished' in the same way: in *Azazel* he loses his wife, in *Coronation* he loses the child entrusted to him. One can also speculate further why the author happens to be a promulgator of Daoism. All these questions evoke an array of interpretations and certainly demonstrate that Akunin's texts have much more to offer than just an exciting detective story.

With the advent of postmodernist theory scholars have gradually come to agree that the originality of artistic expression and the formu-

⁵⁹ Борис Акунин, *Смерть Ахиллеса* (Москва: Захаров, 1998), 37.

laic requirement of genres do not necessarily contradict each other. Both genre and *auteur* work came to be considered merely as tools for a more adequate understanding of creative writing, rather than manifestation of a value judgment. Akunin's writing clearly is that rare hybrid capable of bridging the gap between popular fiction and literature. His works play on various levels: generic — cultural — philosophical. One can say that they are like multidimensional slide shows: either the shots are projected onto the screen or the ray is lost in darkness; and it is the reader himself who adjusts the focus: the way he rotates the slide projector will determine what he sees on the slide. It is owing to the creativity of such writers that today popular fiction has acquired a higher literary standing, representing a new layer in Russian culture, a layer of 'artistic works orientated towards mass success'.⁶⁰

References

- Акунин, Борис. *Азazelь*. Москва: Захаров, 1998.
- Акунин, Борис. *Смерть Ахиллеса*. Москва: Захаров, 1998.
- Акунин, Борис. *Коронация, или последний из романов*. Москва: Захаров, 2001.
- Акунин, Борис. 'Так интереснее мне и веселее взыскательному читателю.' *Независимая газета*, 23 December (1999).
- Бассинский, Павел. 'Штиль в стакане воды.' *Литературная газета* 21 (5834), 29 May (2001).
- Boyer, Alain-Michel. *La paralittérature*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992.
- Condee, Nancy, and Padunov, Vladimir. 'The ABC of Russian Consumer Culture,' in *Soviet Hieroglyphics*, ed. Condee, N. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995: 130–172.
- Данилкин, Лев. 'Послесловие', in Б. Акунин, *Особые поручения*. Москва: Захаров, 2000.
- Davydov, Danila. 'The Boom in Prizes.' *New Times*, June (2001).
- Ефимова, Екатерина. 'Борис Акунин: чтиво для умников или попса?' *Аргументы и факты* 30 (420), 25 July (2001).

⁶⁰ Bassinskii.

- Epstein, Mikhail. *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*. Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.
- Гаврилов, Александр. 'Смерть Бешеному.' *Аргументы и факты* 37 (1090), 12 September (2001).
- Jakobson, Roman, Matejka, Ladislav, and Pomorska, Krystyna. *Readings in Russian Poetics*. Cambridge MA: MIT University Press, 1971.
- Китаева, Ольга. 'Детективы о прекрасном XIX веке.' *Дипломат* 1 (81), January (2001).
- Kozhevnikova, Nadezhda. 'The New Crop of Russian Writers.' *Pulse St. Petersburg*, October (2000).
- Кукулин, Илья. 'Стихийное бедствие под названием Smirnoff-Букер.' *Ex Libris (Nezavisimaia gazeta supplement)* 39 (211), 18 October (2001).
- Laozi. Dao De Jing, *The Book of the Way*, trans. Moss Roberts, University of California Press, 2001.
- Legge, James (ed.). *The Analects of Confucius, the Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean*, New York: Dover Publications, 1971.
- Lovell, Stephen, and Marsh, Rosalind. 'Culture and Crisis: The Intelligentsia and Literature,' in *Russian Cultural Studies*, ed. Kelly, C. and Shepherd, D. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998: 56–87.
- Макаркин, Алексей. 'Россия, которой мы не теряли.' *Сегодня* 164, 28 July (2000).
- Mehnert, Klaus. *The Russians and Their Favorite Books*. Cambridge MA: MIT University Press, 1983.
- Мурзина, Марина. 'Борис Акунин начал сочинять, чтобы развлечь жену.' *Аргументы и факты* 44 (1045), 1 November (2000).
- Мясников, Виктор. 'Бульварный эпос.' *Новый мир*, 11 (2001), 150–158.
- Пирогов, Лев. 'Литература ползает по помойкам вместо того, чтобы брать свое на большой дороге.' *Ex Libris (Nezavisimaia gazeta)* 34 (206), 13 September (2001).
- Пропп, Владимир. *Морфология сказки*. Москва: Главная редакция восточной литературы, 1969.

Thomson, H. Douglas. *Masters of Mystery: A Study of the Detective Story*. London: Collins, 1931.

Цишлаков, Георгий. 'Зло, возникающее в дороге, и дао Эраста Фандорина.' *Новый мир*, 11 (2001), 159–181.

Чхартишвили, Григорий. 'Но нет Востока и Запада нет.'
Иностранная литература, 9 (1996), 258–262.

Ульянова, Галина. 'Пародия на правду.' *Ex Libris (Nezavisimaia gazeta)* 22 (145), 15 June (2000).

Van Dine, S.S. 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories', in *Phil Vance Murder Cases*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

Витте, Сергей. *Воспоминания*. Минск: Харвест АСТ, 2001 vol.1.