Canadian-American Slavic Studies

"Russian Wanderer in the Post-Soviet Space: Homelessness in Ilichevsky's 'Matisse'"

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	
Full Title:	"Russian Wanderer in the Post-Soviet Space: Homelessness in Ilichevsky's 'Matisse'"
Short Title:	"Russian Wanderer in the Post-Soviet Space"
Article Type:	Full Length Article
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Abstract:	<p>In "Russian Wanderer in the Post-Soviet Space: Homelessness in Ilichevsky's Matisse," Jordan examines Aleksandr Ilichevsky's conceptualization of homelessness as a state of existential not belonging that beset the author and his peers when the Soviet system collapsed in the early 1990s. The novel's protagonist mitigates his metaphorical homelessness by embracing actual homelessness, using it as a "part of a flight to a deeper awareness" (Widmer); yet Jordan also shows that homelessness in Matisse draws on the Russian spiritual tradition of strannichestvo, or departure from the secular world in pursuit of a sacred destination. By bringing into the discussion the writings of Dostoevsky, Berdyaev, and Ioann Lestvichnik, Jordan shows that although strannichestvo in Matisse has lost its religious underpinnings, it remains primarily a spiritual concept that allows an individual to break free from a mass society and gain the kind of fulfillment that the Soviet state promised but failed to deliver.</p>
Keywords:	homelessness, strannik, Ilichevsky, Kitezh, Russia
Funding Information:	

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Homelessness in Ilichevsky's *Matisse*

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Shortly after its publication, the novel *Matisse* (2006) brought its author, Aleksandr Ilichevsky, the Russian Booker Prize. While opinions among readers as regards the novel’s message and artistic quality are still divided, in a radio interview Ilichevsky once tried to explain that his novel was “a synthetic attempt to evaluate what happened to [his]

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4 generation” (unless stated otherwise, all translations from the Russian are mine); he also
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6 added, “I wouldn’t say that the novel ends well; still, I thought that everyone would die off,
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8 but it turns out that there is life” (Sharyi). Those who, like the novelist himself, were born
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10 between 1968 and 1973, found themselves “atop a tsunami” as they witnessed the
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12 disintegration of the Soviet ideological system in the early 1990s, precisely at the time when
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14 they were entering adulthood (Ilichevsky 104). A vast majority of Russia’s population—the
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16 masses in whose name the revolutions were performed at the beginning of the 20th century—
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18 felt disillusioned and disoriented by the time “Russia’s Constitutional Revolution” occurred
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20 in the last decade of the same century (Ahdieh). Due to economic difficulties, many Russian
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22 citizens were pushed to the fringes of society, and in *Matisse* Ilichevsky turns his attention
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24 specifically to the problem of homelessness. While recognizing homelessness as a signal of
25
26 social disintegration and of individual devaluation, Ilichevsky looks beyond its socio-
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28 economic implications, conceptualizing it as a way of transcending societal constraints, or as
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30 what Kingsley Widmer identifies as “part of a flight to a deeper awareness” (78). Thus,
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32 Ilichevsky offers a new interpretation of the character type known as a wanderer (*strannik*) in
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34 Russian literary tradition.
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43 In his book *The Literary Rebel*, Widmer observes that over the course of centuries,
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45 homelessness in the Western literary tradition has been either romanticized as a form of
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47 escape for a character who seeks freedom and adventure or objectified and condemned as an
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49 outcome of economic negligence that, in its turn, leads to abjection and degradation of
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51 characters (see Widmer). These literary models are in one way or another linked to social
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53 practices accepted in a society, and although in *Matisse* Ilichevsky focuses on the homeless
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55 persons who are Russian, the images that he creates are informed by his first-hand
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4 observations of the vagrants that he met during his extensive travel abroad. He explains:
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6 “The homeless in America seem to be happier than the homeless in Russia. I think this is
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8 directly linked to society’s attention to them. When I arrived in San-Francisco, for about two
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10 months I walked everywhere, even in those areas where tourists usually don’t even look, and
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12 sometimes I found myself in rather dangerous places. It seemed to me that American bums
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14 are more willing to talk, but at the same time they are more malicious. At least those whom I
15
16 observed weren’t really kind. On one occasion someone even tried robbing me while we
17
18 were talking” (Orlova). In other words, Ilichevsky’s experience suggests that the Russian
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20 homeless are more charitable but less happy. Setting aside the apparent subjectivity of this
21
22 observation, the very fact that the novelist is looking for happiness and kindness in the people
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24 who themselves have almost nothing by way of material possessions underscores his non-
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26 materialistic approach to conceptualizing homelessness in his novel.
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33 In her review of *Matisse*, Alla Latynina identifies for Ilichevsky’s readers two basic
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35 views on homelessness. According to one, people who do not have a permanent place to live
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37 are a “social ulcer on the body of a poor and indifferent society that allows its individual
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39 unfortunate members to lose their shelter and descend to the bottom, to drink, to wander, and
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41 to go begging” (Latynina). It is society’s task, therefore, to feed those who are struggling, to
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43 give them work, and to provide shelter. In contrast to this environmental view is the idea that
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45 an individual’s psychology makes him choose the vagrant way of living: “He becomes a
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47 vagrant not because he loses his apartment, his job, his documents, his social status, and out
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49 of grief begins to drink. He loses all of this because he chooses homelessness as a way of
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51 life” (Ibid.). Ilichevsky’s characters, and especially his protagonist, Leonid Korolev, fall into
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53 the latter category. To further clarify the point, Ilichevsky himself explains that Korolev’s
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4 decision to sever all his social ties and to leave his home in Moscow comes as a result of
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6 serious introspection: “the person turns inward because he understands that he is richer than
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8 the impoverished world that is subjugating him. This is why he becomes a wanderer” (see
9
10 Orlova). Whereas John Allen differentiates between depictions of actual homelessness
11
12 (living on the street) and a metaphorical or figurative homelessness (a state of mind) (12),
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14 Ilichevsky blurs this distinction in *Matisse* and presents actual homelessness as a means of
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16 overcoming the protagonist’s sense of existential not belonging.
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21 Having grown up in an orphanage, Korolev’s ties to other people are tenuous to start
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23 with. He does not know any of his relatives, and as he grows older, the social structure
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25 around him begins to gradually fall apart. He manages to buy a small apartment on credit in a
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27 large and featureless building in Moscow. A bright physicist by training, he works in the
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29 emerging private sector at a time when the Soviet economy is failing and funding for
30
31 research institutions has all but dried up. He has very little interaction with people beyond
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33 what is necessary in his line of work. He gradually embraces homelessness as a way of
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35 escape in a social, emotional, and philosophical sense. After a period of deliberate training,
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37 which is designed to increase his physical endurance and consists of running and fasting,
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39 Korolev leaves his job, abandons his apartment, and starts living the life of a transient. He
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41 joins Vadia, a homeless man who at one point used a stairwell in Korolev’s apartment
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43 building as a temporary home for himself and for his taciturn and mentally retarded female
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45 companion, Nadia. The three of them leave Moscow and begin to travel southward. At the
46
47 end of the novel, Korolev is struck by lightning during a rainstorm, and when he recovers a
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49 few hours later, he continues his journey alone, heading up the hill and through the woods
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51 toward the setting sun, leaving behind Vadia and Nadia, whom he sees walking in the
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4 opposite direction. This symbolic ending of the novel marks a new beginning in Korolev's
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6 life but gives no such promise to Vadia and Nadia.
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9 By identifying his protagonist as a *strannik*, Ilichevsky places Korolev into a vast
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11 category of male characters who feel out of place in Russian society. The sheer variety of
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13 homeless character types in Russian literature—*skitalets*, *brodiaga*, *iurodivy*, *bogoiskatel*,
14
15 *palomnik*, and *strannik*—illustrates the intricate nature of this phenomenon. While definitions
16
17 of the word *strannik* have varied slightly over the years depending on whatever ideology was
18
19 prevailing at the time, the basic underlying assumption is that such a person does not have a
20
21 permanent home and does not stay in any particular place for an extended period of time
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23 because he is undertaking a spiritual journey. Protopope Ioann Lestvichnik defines the
24
25 practice of *strannichestvo* as an “irretrievable abandonment of everything that in the
26
27 homeland resists our striving for piety ... a cutting off from everything, with the intent to
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29 make your thought inseparable from God” (13). Although *stranniki* more often than not came
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31 from the Russian Orthodox background, they were considered heretics by the Russian
32
33 Orthodox Church. Unlike a pilgrim, who also undertakes a spiritual journey, a *strannik*
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35 focuses “not primarily on reaching a sacred site in order to worship, but on the journey, on
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37 being under way” (Kolst 121), which takes him out of a settled community and therefore out
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39 of the flock to which he would otherwise belong, giving rise to heresy and religious
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41 sectarianism (Livanov 132). Nevertheless, Zoltan Khainadi thus explains the spiritual reasons
42
43 behind *strannichestvo*: “A Russian person is incessantly bothered by the question: how to
44
45 live piously? He is constantly preoccupied with finding ways to righteous living. Enormous
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47 is the literature about a wanderer who is weary of life, who is seeking freedom in wandering
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49 and begging—after all, ‘everyone living on this earth is a wanderer.’ The only condition of
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4 salvation of the soul is a departure from the church, from the world, from life into ‘caverns of
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6 the heart,’ for ‘the world lies in evil’” (18).
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9 This search for righteousness reflects the character’s dissatisfaction with the reality
10 that surrounds him, but eventually it extends beyond strict religious boundaries and becomes
11 an all-encompassing yearning for “a state of perfectly realized self-transcendence” (Singleton
12
13 3). Ilichevsky’s characterization of Korolev as someone who first “turns inward” because his
14 inner world is richer than what he sees around him and then “becomes a wanderer” echoes
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16 Fyodor Dostoevsky’s description of the type of literary character that he calls a “Russian
17 wanderer” (“russkii skitalets”), which he defines in his famous Pushkin speech, delivered in
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19 1880, as an “unhappy wanderer in his native land, that historical, suffering Russian who
20 appeared with such historical inevitability in our educated society after it had broken away
21 from the people” (Dostoevsky 26: 137). Dostoevsky observes that this type is genetically tied
22 to the “superfluous man,” which first appeared in Russian literature in the 1830s and 1840s
23 and represents a well-educated and talented man who cannot find purpose in life and who
24 fails to reach his full potential (Ibid.). Joseph Frank points out that this description also
25 resonated with “the Socialist youth who were hanging from the rafters of the auditorium and
26 drinking in Dostoevsky’s every word” at the time when the speech was delivered (521).
27
28 Dostoevsky sees turning to the common people as the solution to the Russian wanderer’s
29
30 unease and dissatisfaction: he needs to go out on “a saving road of humble communication
31 with people” (“na spasitel’nuu dorogu smirennogo obshcheniia s narodom”). He also needs
32 to realize that “the truth” that he is seeking “lies first and foremost within himself” (“pravda
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prezhde vsego vnutri ego samogo”) (Dostoevsky 26: 138). Unlike Dostoevsky’s Russian
wanderer, Korolev stops short of tying his own spiritual tranquility to “the happiness of the

whole world in order to find his own peace of mind” (Ibid. 137); nevertheless, his awareness of his own intellectual superiority, his deep sense of not belonging, and his attempts to find a solution to his predicament by setting out on the road make him a post-modern instantiation of this character type and the latest descendant of the same literary line that produced Eugene Onegin, Lev Myshkin, Venechka Erofeev, and others like them (see Arndt).

Ilichevsky’s perspicacious decision to examine the events of the early 1990s through the eyes of three homeless characters is historically justified. The initial appearance of the wanderer type in the Russian context is believed to be connected with the political instability of the late 16th–early 17th c., known as the Time of Troubles. This period of interregnum from 1598 to 1613 began with the death of Feodor Ivanovich, the last Russian Tsar of the Rurik Dynasty, and ended with the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty. The Time of Troubles gave rise to vagrancy on the scale of a “national disaster” (Khainadi 19). The early wanderers were weighed down by their poverty, but their sense of being excluded from history (“oshchushchenie vykliuchennosti iz istorii”) was even more intense than the suffering they endured from their substandard living conditions (ibid.). A century later, another period of political turbulence exacerbated the situation even further. The reforms of Peter the Great detached the educated aristocracy from the peasantry and the Orthodox faith, this time making the cultural elite of Russian society “wanderers without roots, like tumbleweed, carried by the wind” (“skital’tsami bez kornei, kak perekati-pole, nosimoe vetrom”) (ibid.). Over time, such wanderers, who yearned for spiritual freedom and sought a higher truth, started coming from a variety of socio-economic strata, but all of them shared the sense of exclusion, regardless of the epoch in which they were born.

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4 The sense of being excluded does not always haunt Korolev. As a child growing up in
5
6 an orphanage, he felt quite content. He believed that the world is simple as long as he is good
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8 and honest (94). His teachers treated him “with condescension,” as one would treat “an
9
10 insane, but clever child” (Ibid.). Throughout his teenage years and early adulthood he clings
11
12 to his childhood memories, but he soon begins to recognize that his happy little world is
13
14 unraveling. His ability to notice and to be impressed by minute details of everyday life,
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16 coupled with his talent for mathematics, creates a distance between Korolev and his peers. At
17
18 some point, he transfers to a high school that specializes in math and physics, and then goes
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20 off to college, but fails to establish close connections with his peers. The day when he finds
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22 out that his favorite teacher at the orphanage has passed away marks a break with the world
23
24 of his childhood. Later, already in graduate school, he is abandoned by his dissertation
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26 advisor. Many of those he knew in school were imprisoned or killed, some emigrated, others
27
28 stagnated like Korolev (96). One of the girls he is in love with, Natasha, marries another
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30 man. The girl he meets some time later, Katya, is accidentally killed in a criminal shootout,
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32 which throws Korolev into a two-year bout of depression and turns him into “a living corpse”
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34 (“zhivoi trup”) (94).

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43 Living alone, he often ponders his own place in life, but he also tries to comprehend
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45 the unique place of his generation. He notices that those who were born even two or three
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47 years before or after him were either “not quite” or “no longer” like those who, like him,
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49 were born in 1970. He explains the difference by the fact that he and his classmates “learned
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51 to think at a time when there was hardly anything to think about, that is, there was no time to
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53 think: the flood valves of the prison ship have been opened and the crew has sailed off,
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55 having left not a single life boat” (“Odnokashniki ego ... uchilis’ dumat’ togda, kogda
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4 dumat' bylo pochti ne o chem, to est' nekogda: kingstony arestantskoi barzhi byli otkryty,
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6 komanda uzhe otplyla, ne ostaviv ni odnoi shliupki") (103-4). When pressed for a
7
8 clarification, Ilichevsky only adds that his own impression of his generation, of those who
9
10 turned twenty in 1990, is similar to Korolev's: "When we became twenty years old, we, like
11
12 all other young people, hit the peak of our intellectual and spiritual development. This peak
13
14 happened exactly during a wave of perturbations that were crushing everything that was
15
16 happening here. And this turbulent time left a rather serious impression, specifically on the
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18 minds of our generation" (Rykovtseva).
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24 The tumultuous time that left such a lasting impression on Ilichevsky himself, on his
25
26 generation, and on his protagonist began in the late 1980s, with Mikhail Gorbachev's new
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28 policies of Glasnost and Perestroika, designed to revive the Soviet economic, political, and
29
30 legislative systems. The same impression continued to form through the years as Gorbachev
31
32 became the first president of the Soviet Union in March 1990, as the Communist hard-liners
33
34 attempted a coup in August 1991, as Gorbachev resigned in December of the same year, as
35
36 the U.S.S.R disintegrated, and as Boris Yeltsin became the first president of the Russian
37
38 Federation. All of these events lead to a legislative deadlock, eventually causing Yeltsin's
39
40 opponents to barricade themselves inside the Russian Parliament building with a stockpile of
41
42 heavy weapons and ammunition. This resulted in the shelling of the Parliament by pro-
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44 Yeltsin troops and, most tragically, lead to the death of over a hundred people in the course
45
46 of two days in early October 1993 (see Ahdieh 66-68).
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53 Ilichevsky locates a major part of the novel's action in the Presnia district of Moscow.
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55 Dubbed as a "district of three revolutions," Presnia received its original name from a small
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57 river that was used by a variety of manufacturing works located in this area. For more than
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4 two centuries, thousands of tradesmen and factory workers lived and worked in the Presnia
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6 area. Because of these demographic factors, Presnia became a sight of numerous, both
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8 spontaneous and organized, proletarian uprisings in 1905 and in 1917. In March 1917,
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10 immediately after the February Revolution in Petrograd, the Bolsheviks who were based in
11
12 Moscow established their first Worker's Committee in a residential building in Presnia,
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14 which later was included in the Museum of the Russian Revolution of 1905, now known as
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16 The Historical and Memorial Museum "Presnia." In October 1917, Presnia was the sight of
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18 the most violent fights between factory workers and government forces, causing some
19
20 historians to consider these clashes the beginning of the Russian Civil War (Volodikhin and
21
22 Mikhalkov 51). In 1979, Presnia became the home of Russia's chief legislative body, the
23
24 Russian Parliament, when a multi-story white oval building, often referred to as the Russian
25
26 White House, was erected in Presnia less than a mile away from the former headquarters of
27
28 the Worker's Committee. This building acquired a special significance for millions of
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30 Russian citizens in August 1991 when, during a failing government coup, it loomed in the
31
32 background of the iconic image of Boris Yeltsin standing on top of a military tank. Few
33
34 failed to notice the irony of the situation as this image of Yeltsin reminded them of another
35
36 historical image, Irakli Toidze's painting "The Call of the Leader" (1947) that depicts Lenin
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38 standing on top of an armored vehicle following his return to Petrograd from Finnish exile in
39
40 1917. The same oval building, only half-covered in soot, was featured in the news again
41
42 when army tanks shelled it in October 1993.

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44 In *Matisse*, Ilichevsky blurs boundaries as he layers historical events and
45
46 superimposes one location over the other. We are told that Vadia and Nadia take shelter for
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48 the night in the boiler house of the Museum of the Russian Revolution of 1905 (64). Only a
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4 few pages later he adds that one of several sources of their income consists of “keeping up a
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6 makeshift memorial dedicated to those who fell during the days of the October uprising”
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9 (72). One has to pause to realize that the second reference is to a more recent event, which is
10
11 the standoff that took place in and in front of the Russian Parliament on 3–4 October, 1993,
12
13 and not to the mass uprisings of October 1917.
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16 Presnia’s tumultuous past comes to the fore as early as the opening scene of the
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18 novel. Chapter one, entitled “Presnia,” opens with a street fight between a teenage gang and
19
20 two homeless people, which Korolev observes through his car window while sitting in a
21
22 traffic jam. By placing his protagonist inside a vehicle, Ilichevsky does what all major
23
24 Russian writers from Pushkin to Pelevin have done before him: he sends his protagonist on a
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26 journey from point A to point B, while being more interested in the spiritual journey that the
27
28 hero will undergo than in his successful arrival at his geographical destination. By having
29
30 Korolev’s metaphysical journey begin with him in a driver’s seat, Ilichevsky creates the
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32 impression that this character has already gone farther than his literary predecessors.
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34 Pushkin’s Onegin and Gogol’s Chichikov relied on their carriage drivers’ expertise.
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36 Dostoevsky’s Myshkin and Tolstoy’s Koznyshev were passengers in a train car. Erofeev’s
37
38 Venechka, despite his efforts to get “to the end of the line,” gradually loses consciousness
39
40 during his train ride. And it remains a mystery what happens to Pelevin’s Andrei in *Yellow*
41
42 *Arrow*. By contrast, Korolev, who is sitting in the driver’s seat of his own car, is actually in a
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44 position of control over both the velocity and the direction of his journey. This impression,
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46 however, is quickly dispelled once we realize that he is powerless in the face of an external
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48 force in the form of a traffic jam that tremendously slows down his progress.
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4 Unable to move, Korolev has nothing left to do but passively observe the world
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6 outside his car. What he sees is a conflict between representatives of two social groups that,
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8 at least on the surface, appear to be very different from him. Korolev is a thirty-five-year-old
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10 merchandize coordinator at a small wholesale company, who owns a car and consistently
11
12 makes payments on his apartment mortgage (6). By all appearances, he is a successful
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14 representative of Moscow's middle class, who is fortunate to live in an area that is becoming
15
16 more and more prestigious with every passing year. Korolev is also aware of the rapid
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18 stratification that has been working its way through all levels of Russian society and touching
19
20 even the poorest groups. He knows, for example, that teenage gangs have been fighting with
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22 the homeless for several winters in a row, trying to clear for themselves larger territories, and
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24 that the homeless were powerless before their young and organized enemies.
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31 The road allows Ilichevsky to reach his goal, which is, by his own admission, to build
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33 a narrative around a handful of characters whom he knows personally in order to see what
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35 has happened to his generation in the fifteen years that have passed after the collapse of the
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37 Soviet system (Sharyi). With the help of the road chronotope, in the opening scene Ilichevsky
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39 brings together representatives of three different social groups, those who under normal
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41 circumstances would be "separated by social hierarchy and spatial distance" (Bakhtin 490).
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44 To the scientist-turned-salesman, the two vagrants, and the teenage gang in the opening
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46 scene, Ilichevsky in the course of the narrative adds artists living in a commune, criminals,
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48 university students, religious sectarians, factory workers, and others who, when taken
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50 together, represent a cross section of Russian society. Yet the number and variety of
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52 backgrounds of the people with whom Korolev crosses paths do not mitigate his loneliness—
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54 in fact, they only intensify it.
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4 The existential homelessness that Korolev experiences while living surrounded by
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6 thousands of people from all walks of life manifests itself on several levels. He does not
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8 know his biological parents. Having grown up in an orphanage, he loses contact over time
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10 with his teachers and classmates. A talented and trained physicist, he loses all connections to
11
12 the scientific community. His romantic relationships do not last. Korolev lacks a strong
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14 emotional connection to any person or any place, and without roots, as Edward Relph
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16 reminds us, one cannot have “a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm
17
18 grasp of one’s own position in the order of things” (Relph 38). Gradually, Korolev realizes
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20 that aside from his mortgage payment and a meaningless job, he has nothing to lose.
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22 Moreover, the country in which he has been living and which has been providing a larger
23
24 social structure is falling apart before his eyes. This transition is particularly devastating for
25
26 Korolev not because of his socio-economic or political convictions, but because of the all-
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28 permeating sense of chaos that the political transition of the early 1990s in Russia creates.
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33 Hoping that home ownership would give him some consolation, Korolev buys an
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35 apartment in Presnia. Pleased to finally have his own place, and still remembering his earlier
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37 transitory lifestyle, he is hospitable to the homeless people he meets in his stairwell. After
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39 noticing that Vadia and Nadia were neater than other vagrants, Korolev would give them old
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41 newspapers to cover the concrete floor they slept on, and he would bring them tea in plastic
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43 cups. He even pleaded on their behalf with the neighbor who was displeased by this
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45 arrangement (9). In the end, however, instead of continuing his efforts to share a part of his
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47 own lifestyle with Nadia and Vadia, Korolev adopts their lifestyle. The impetus for making
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49 this decision came in the form of an increasing claustrophobia that could be triggered by
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51 almost anything. Being in an underground tunnel, standing in a line in a supermarket, visiting
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4 an office building with low ceilings, and even riding an escalator would trigger shortness of
5
6 breath (208). Just as with his sense of homelessness, Korolev's claustrophobia quickly
7
8 acquires a metaphysical quality, forcing him to renew his international passport "in order to
9
10 break the oppressive conspiracy of enclosure" ("daby razorvat' daviashchuiu poruku
11
12 zamknutosti") (209).
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16 At the same time, Korolev recognizes that regardless of where he finds himself in the
17
18 civilized world, he cannot feel completely free. He draws reassurance from a book written by
19
20 an American vegetarian who quit his job at a bank and spent two years wandering in the
21
22 woods of Vermont with nothing but a knife, a rain poncho, and a supply of salt. After reading
23
24 his account, Korolev gains confidence that his idea to "attach to himself, to his journey by
25
26 foot, the freedom—the whole country, its fields, shores, hills, valleys ... is a perfectly
27
28 feasible act of imprudence. He envisioned himself free from oppression, from the stress of
29
30 paying off debts, lightweight, even airborne, wandering along the edge of a field with a staff
31
32 and a backpack, spending nights on slippery fir twigs" (222).
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41 The story of the American wanderer is transformed in Korolev's mind in accordance
42
43 with Russian cultural models. The image of a lonely traveler walking in the Russian
44
45 countryside with all of his belongings in a knapsack and only a staff to help him brings to
46
47 mind a depiction of a *strannik* one would find in a late nineteenth-century painting, such as
48
49 Grigorii Miasoedov's "A Road in the Rye" (1881). As Nikolay Berdiaev explains, the
50
51 *strannik* "walks about the immense Russian land, never settles and doesn't attach himself to
52
53 anything ... [he] is seeking truth, is seeking the Kingdom of God, he is fixed on what lies
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55 ahead ... [he] does not belong to an abiding city on the earth; he is fixed on the City that is to
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4 come” (Berdiaev, *Russkaia ideia* 239). According to Berdiaev, the main reason for this
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6 practice lies in an eschatological bend of the Russian mentality: “the Russian people by its
7
8 metaphysical nature ... is a people of the end” (“russkii narod po metafizicheskoi svoei
9
10 prirode ... est’ narod kontsa”) (Ibid. 235). As Korolev obsessively ponders how his own life
11
12 and the existence of everyone and everything around him will end, homelessness becomes a
13
14 logical outcome. He solves all the meaningless problems that oppress him in everyday life by
15
16 removing himself out of their midst.
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21 At a time when Russian society is undergoing a turbulent transition, the centrifugal
22
23 forces that are tearing the old social order apart make Korolev’s flight not only possible, but
24
25 almost convenient. Following the first two Russian revolutions, the Soviet government began
26
27 suppressing all manifestations of individualism in an effort to build a new world. The idea of
28
29 collectivization as a way of arranging social life quickly permeated every sphere of life in
30
31 Soviet Russia even before it became an official economic policy adopted by the government
32
33 in 1927. Writing in 1926, René Fuceloop-Miller observes: “The impersonal mass is lord of
34
35 Russia” (1). Whether in intimate settings or large public spaces, people had to remember that
36
37 they were part of a collective. From the practical standpoint, housing shortages were so great
38
39 that large numbers of people found themselves cramped with strangers living in close
40
41 quarters. At the same time, mass celebrations that took people out on city streets and squares
42
43 became an integral part of Soviet culture, beginning with the first Labor Day parade on May
44
45 1, 1918 (Shapovalov 289; also see Rolph). While depriving people of their individuality,
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47 these practices instilled life into a new form of being:
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4 the “nameless beast” ... has set up its kingdom ... it is the most important new phenomenon
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6 which Bolshevism has produced, a reality which no one can disregard. Whether, like some
7
8 monstrous creature of fable, it rolls through the streets of the great cities, now growling
9
10 happily, now roaring with rage, or whether it lies down comfortably on one of the wide
11
12 squares to enjoy, like an animal, the sun, life, and its own exuberant strength—the many
13
14 thousand isolated personalities of which it is composed disappear, and we no longer
15
16 recognize the simple worker in his workaday blouse, the soldier, the typist, the student, or the
17
18 navy. A mighty and powerful organism has absorbed them all into itself, and a single
19
20 rumbling voice, incomprehensible and terrifying as the roar of the elements, has swallowed
21
22 up all their individual cries, their joyful or angry words. (1)
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31 This conglomerate thinned out significantly during Stalin’s purges, relaxed somewhat
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33 at the time of the Khrushchev Thaw, became rancid during the Brezhnevian Stagnation, and
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35 experienced a sense of unease tinted with weak hope when Gorbachev introduced Perestroika
36
37 and Glasnost. By the early 1990s, the country as Korolev used to know it no longer exists,
38
39 and the ideological structure, flawed as it was, can no longer provide meaning: “The
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41 locomotive had already fallen into an abyss, while the rest of the train was still flying and
42
43 accelerating by the inertia of a free fall, in vain hoping that with a jolt it could jump over the
44
45 parabola of the wreck” (“lokomotiv uzhe sorvalsia v propast’, a sostav vse eshche letel,
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47 uskorialsia inertsiei svobodnogo padeniia, vtune nadeias’ ryvkom peremakhnut’ parabola
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49 krusheniia”) (232). The outlines of the new order that is being established are still unclear,
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51 which adds another facet to Korolev’s sense of homelessness and drives him to choose self-
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53 exile. As Widmer observes, “Surely not all who made much of the road can be considered
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4 rebels, literary or otherwise. But wandering itself seems to provide a degree of exile from,
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6 and violation of, established society, and therefore an implicit defiance” (78). By embracing
7
8 *strannichestvo*, Korolev rebels and breaks simultaneously with two evils. On the one hand,
9
10 he breaks with the “impersonal collective man” of the past who possesses “not the slightest
11
12 moral independence, but merely blind mechanical obedience,” and thus makes an ideal
13
14 citizen of the Bolshevik State (Fueloep-Miller 19). On the other, he breaks with the new
15
16 culture of individualism that is being fostered by the outside political and cultural forces that
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18 flooded Russian society at the time of the collapse of the Soviet system.
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23 Vadia, the character whom T.L. Rybal’chenko describes as “a mass man turned
24
25 marginal” (Rybal’chenko) and who serves as a foil for Korolev, also contemplates the
26
27 possibility of a revolt. According to Vadia’s calculations, however, the revolt is going to take
28
29 place in the future and on a massive scale. He believes in “an abstract idea of an abstract
30
31 Revolt, conditioned by unknown powers” (“otvlechennuiu ideiu otvlechenogo Bunta,
32
33 obuslovlennogo neizvestno kakimi salami”) (61). It is unclear whether Vadia has developed
34
35 this idea of a mass revolt independently or if he has heard it from other homeless people, but
36
37 he assigns special significance to a prophetic myth about a ship with powerful weapons that
38
39 “unassailably has gone to raise—from the fringes towards the heart—people’s righteous
40
41 indignation” (“nepristupno ushedshego podnimat’—po okrainam k serdtsu—liudskoi
42
43 pravednyi gnev) (61). The plan of revolt that Vadia believes in is dramatic and deliberate,
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67 Unlike Vadia, Korolev is unwilling to passively wait for the Future. He is convinced
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69 that one must be proactive in order to succeed: “A revolt must be internal, directed inward,
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4 and of such force that your guts would straighten up. Only then we will have a chance to
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6 become our own children—the children of our own thought, when we decide to become
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8 different” (“Bunt dolzhen byt’ vnutrennim, napravlennym vnutr’, takoi sily, chtoby kishki
9
10 raspriamilis’. Tol’ko togda u nas poiavitsia shans stat’ sobstvennyi det’mi—det’mi
11
12 sobstvennoi mysli, kogda my reshimsia stat’ inymi”) (Ibid.). The only way to liberate oneself
13
14 from the “million-headed impersonal mass” observed by Fueleop-Miller is by undergoing an
15
16 internal revolt, the one that springs from an individual’s personal conviction and is
17
18 specifically directed at the liberation of that same particular individual.
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24 No matter how arduous the task of self-liberation is, Korolev consciously rejects the
25
26 idea of suicide as a way out. Even the extent of the chaos that he and his compatriots are
27
28 plunged into is not enough to make him want to end his life. In a moment of complete
29
30 honesty with himself, he writes down his thoughts on the subject:
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35 I love my motherland.
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38 But I cannot embrace it or even touch it. It is inside of me.
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41 The Motherland is burning like my heart.
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43 The outside world is removed and anesthetized ...
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45 The world is proud of its goodness, justice, prosperity.
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48 But good intentions are taking the world to hell ...
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50 Everything has turned upside down: now there is no kindness, no corporeal discipline,
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52 nothing—only an abyss of hopelessness.
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54 The news is such that around us is a wall of misinformation.
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57 Deceit rules history.
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4 The breath of the world is feverish.
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7 Now people more often end their lives due to external circumstances.
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9 But not me. (225-6)
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14 His love for his country is indefinable; it is simply part of his identity, and as such it
15
16 keeps him alive. At the same time, his restlessness drives him to abandon his customary way
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18 of living and to go outside at first, then to go underground, into the tunnels of the Moscow
19
20 metro system, as if in an effort to get deeper into the heart of his motherland. He envisioned
21
22 his wandering underground as a descent into “true reality,” “some sort of a pilgrimage into a
23
24 not yet comprehended and therefore blinding city, whose holiness was indubitable” (“nekim
25
26 palomnichestvom v neobdumannyi eshche, i ottogo oslepitel’nyi gorod, sviatost’ kotorogo
27
28 byla nesomnenna”) (223). The narrator is careful to inform us of the lack of a religious
29
30 motive behind Korolev’s actions, for it is “not Kitezh that he is looking for” (“on ne to
31
32 chtoby iskal Kitezh”) (275). Nevertheless, the descent into the underworld is deliberate,
33
34 because Korolev believes there he can “peer into the essence, into the eyes of darkness”
35
36 (“zaglianut’ v sut’, v glaza potemok”) and to meet those who have already departed this life,
37
38 like Katya (Ibid.).
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45 The mentioning of Kitezh, even if only by way of dismissing the idea, is nevertheless
46
47 significant, because it points to a differentiating factor between a traditional Russian religious
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49 *strannik* and Korolev as a post-Soviet wanderer. Once known as a real town in medieval Rus,
50
51 Kitezh has become a symbol of Russian holiness in Russian religious thought. Hidden
52
53 underground from both foreign aggression and from native Russian sinfulness, Kitezh “will
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55 never be accessible to proud, avaricious, licentious, and deceptive people” (Pereverzentsev
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4 202). Unattainable, this “home unseen,” Kitezh makes a perfect destination for a *strannik*:
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7 “The Russian soul sits not in one spot, this is no small-place soul, no locale-bounded soul. In
8
9 Russia, in the soul of the people there is a sort of endless searching ... Distances open up
10
11 before the Russian soul, and no traces of an horizon are there before its spiritual eyes. The
12
13 Russian soul is ablaze in its fiery search for truth, for the absolute and Divine truth and for
14
15 the salvation of all the world and the universal resurrection unto new life ... This soul is
16
17 absorbed in finding resolution to the ultimate and accursedly difficult questions concerning
18
19 the meaning of life” (Berdyayev, *The Fate of Russia*).
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26 Korolev is being honest with himself when he says that he is not looking for the
27
28 actual Kitezh, but rather, even if his soul is not “ablaze,” he is looking for the truth—the
29
30 chance to “look into the essence”—and, as it turns out at the end of the narrative, he
31
32 experiences a personal “resurrection unto a new life”; the “unsubmissive aspect” within
33
34 Korolev’s soul refuses “to be appeased [or] satisfied by anything temporal, relative or
35
36 conditional” (Ibid.). For this reason, he becomes a wanderer, and by doing so, Ilichevsky
37
38 explains, Korolev “chooses himself, and it turns out that he chooses his motherland too”
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42
43 (Orlova).
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46 After wandering around and under Moscow, Korolev begins to travel south. As
47
48 Ilichevsky explains, “Korolev with his companions were moving in the direction of
49
50 Jerusalem, but in reality they got only as far as Crimea, I think” (Ibid). At some point, they
51
52 find themselves near a high-voltage overhead power line during a rainstorm. Instead of
53
54 seeking shelter, Korolev runs out towards a transmission tower and is hit by lightning. A
55
56 powerful electric discharge throws Korolev up in the air and blinds Vadia. Miraculously,
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4 Korolev regains consciousness the next morning, gets up off the ground, and continues his
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6 journey “ahead, towards the sun that was nearing the horizon. Towards the sun, harnessed to
7
8 the future” (“vpered, za kloniashchimsia k gorizontu solntsem. Za solntsem, vpriazhennym v
9
10 budushchee”) (438). Korolev is feeling lighter after the incident, and no physical injury is
11
12 mentioned. Thus, we may suppose that Korolev will keep going “to the very end, to the limit,
13
14 to the exit point from ‘this world,’ from this earth, from everything merely local, narrow,
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16 attached to it” (Berdyayev, *The Fate of Russia*).
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21 The novel remains open-ended. If a distinction can be made between an earthly
22
23 dwelling and a heavenly home, then in essence everyone is homeless until through self-
24
25 transcendence the person achieves a “home-paradise” (Singleton 3). While not being tied to a
26
27 particular earthly dwelling liberates an individual spiritually, Singleton argues, “the prospect
28
29 of arriving at a home-paradise can inhibit the process of becoming ‘at home’ in the world”
30
31 (Ibid.). For Korolev, metaphorical homelessness leads to actual homelessness and becomes a
32
33 necessary step on his way to the “home-paradise” that he does not find during his journey as
34
35 it is described in the novel. Doing so would have put an end to his *strannichestvo*. Instead, as
36
37 an eternal wanderer, what he gets, in the words of Khainadi, is “not a Home, but house-
38
39 lessness” (“ne Dom, a bezdom’e”), being “expelled” out of “the belly of history” instead of
40
41 being devoured by it (Khainadi, 22). Thus, if *Matisse* is Ilichevsky’s attempt to find out what
42
43 has happened to his generation in the fifteen years following the disintegration of the Soviet
44
45 system, he finds his answer at an intersection where the Russian spiritual *strannik* meets the
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47 homeless man.
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