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A. Zinov'ev's *The Yawning Heights* as an Anatomy

"The theme of encyclopaedic parody is endemic in satire," says Northrop Frye, "and in prose fiction is chiefly to be found in the anatomy, the tradition of Apuleius and Rabelais and Swift."[1] The most impressive example of the genre of anatomy in Soviet literature is, without any doubt, Aleksandr Zinov'ev's *The Yawning Heights* (*Ziiaiushchie vysoty*, 1976).[2] The work has inspired enthusiastic comments, but in the general acclaim little attention has been paid to the classification of this work. Thus, Aleksandr Nekrich, a historian, places the satire in "the tradition of Hobbes, Voltaire, Swift, George Orwell, Anatole France, and of Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin," but at the same time calls it "a profound sociological study"[3] and "the most important study of Soviet society, and of similarly closed societies, that has appeared since World War II."[4] Is it a "study" or a "novel"? Helen von Ssachno calls it "both the wittiest and most abstruse protest yet directed by the Russian spirit at the *Condition humain* [sic] in the world and in its own country."[5] She concludes that it is an enigmatic book that "makes too many rather than too few demands on the receptivity of a reading public."[6] Finally, the advertisement on the cover of the book tries to define the genre as a "burlesque epic" influenced by "Plato and Ionesco, Fonvizin and Kharms, the seventeenth century moralistic ode, and the twentieth century many-valued logic." We are also warned here not to see this work as yet another anti-Utopia of Zamiatin's type, but rather to see Zinov'ev as a Shchedrin of the age of totalitarianism. The tenor of these comments is that *Ziiaiushchie vysoty* is a satirical novel of the kind that Frye calls an "anatomy." In order to show that this generic identification might help to solve the "enigma" (as Helen von Ssachno saw

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1. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1973), p. 322.

2. Aleksandr Zinov'ev, *Ziiaiushchie vysoty* (Lausanne, 1976), transl. Gordon Clough (London, 1979). All page references are to the English edition.

3. Aleksandr Nekrich, "Inside the Leviathan," *The New York Review of Books*, 14 April 1977, p. 8.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

5. Helen von Ssachno, "News from Nowhere in Ibansk," *Encounter*, May 1977, p. 83.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

it) of the novel, I shall briefly discuss what Frye means by "anatomy" and how his ideas correspond to Bakhtin's concept of Menippean satire; I shall then indicate the roots and influences—predominantly Russian—of Zinov'ev's novel, the origin of his pessimistic philosophy, and, finally, the principal satirical device of his anatomy.

The term "anatomy" was borrowed by Frye from Robert Burton's vast treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), where it means "dissection or analysis, and expresses very accurately the intellectualized approach of his form."[7] The organizing principle of an "anatomy" is the "creative treatment of exhaustive erudition."[8] In *Ziiaiushchie vysoty*, apart from sociology, which reappears in the manner of a refrain, Zinov'ev deals with economics, history, the philosophy of science, logic, aesthetics, religion, literature, Utopia, new language, the military, the weather, dissidents, détente, and so on; the list seems endless. The organizing principle is sociology: to be more exact, Zinov'ev is interested "in the sociological laws which govern the lives of both men and women."[9] The difficulty of his work stems from the literary application of this principle to Soviet society as a whole.

In Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of genres Menippean satire is a "seriocomical" genre[10] with a new relationship to reality: it is based on *experience* and on *free imagination*, and its relationship to *legend* (in Zinov'ev's case, the official explanation of reality) is deeply critical. Finally, there is a deliberate rejection of stylistic unity and a use of "introductory genres," manuscripts, parodic quotations, and so on; there is a mixture of prose and poetry, slang,[11] and, in some cases, of scatology and obscenity as well. Like Frye's anatomy, Bakhtin's genre is able "to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent."[12] The application to Zinov'ev's work is evident: the mere fact that he uses characters with names such as *Pravdets*, *Mazila*, *Dvurushnik*, *Boltun*, and so on, points to the stylization: there is no characterization, nor is there an attempt to provide these "characters" with an

7. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 311.

8. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

9. "Zinoviev's Paradoxes," an interview with Helen von Ssachno, *Encounter*, February 1979, p. 85.

10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, transl. R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor, 1973), pp. 88-89.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

12. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 309.

individual voice. Further, there is no strict correspondence between the ideas and their spokesmen in real life, though some of them have been identified as Solzhenitsyn (*Pravdets*), Neizvestny (*Mazila*), Evtushenko (*Raspashonka*), and so on. It is for this reason that the author is a little worried about his reader's attempts at "deciphering" his literary characters.[13] Consequently, it is the mental attitude, rather than the human being, that serves as the focus of our interest.

A typical feature of anatomy is dialogue. In Zinov'ev, it is not separated from the rest of the text by quotation marks; it *is* the text. As a result, the structure of Zinov'ev's narative is that of a symposium, or a series of dialogues, punctuated by passages of a scholarly or pseudo-scholarly nature. There is little difference between the oral and written expression of ideas, and both forms are to be read as "reported speech."

Bakhtin also speaks about a separate genre of "Socratic dialogue" arising from the "Socratic concept of the dialogical nature of truth,"[14] contrasted with "the *official* monologism which claims to possess the ready-made truth."[15] As Zinov'ev has said: "I am trying to look at the problems of society from all sides by allowing the most diverse opinions to be expressed, without identifying myself completely with any one of them. My own opinions are reflected in all the characters, both the positive and the negative ones."[16] The heroes of the "Socratic dialogue" are ideologies.[17]

Bakhtin's theory also accounts for another element of the novel: the dreams, visions, nightmares, the science-fiction account of the future war—in a word—the fantasy. For *menippea*, according to Bakhtin, is characterized by an "*extraordinary freedom of philosophical invention and invention within the plot,*"[18] with fantasy "motivated, justified and illuminated here by a purely ideological and philosophical end."[19] These and other features, listed by both Frye and Bakhtin in their theories of genres, define the same kind of literary work. For that reason, their approaches are consonant despite the fact that they use different terminologies. They agree where it matters: Frye's "anatomy" is just another term for what Bakhtin calls "menippea"—namely, Menippean satire.

Zinov'ev has been called the Soviet Shchedrin, and if we look at

13. "Zinoviev's Paradoxes," p. 85.
14. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 90.
15. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*
16. "Zinoviev's Paradoxes," p. 86.
17. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 91.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Istoriia odnogo goroda (1869-70), with its fantastic twists and grotesque characterization, it is easy to see why. For in Shchedrin's novel, a work whose idea can be traced to Pushkin's fragment *Istoriia sela Goriukhina* (1830), we find the first Russian satire of totalitarianism or utopian ideas. Moreover, we find here as well the critical attitude of the author to his society, and a number of satirical devices that Zinov'ev was to follow rather closely.

Both writers represent Russia as a small town, Shchedrin calling it Glupov, and Zinov'ev Ibansk. Of course, Zinov'ev's name with its obscene connotation is more shocking than Glupov, yet, while Shchedrin had to defend himself against the charge of mockery (*glumlenie nad narodom*) raised by *Vestnik Evropy* (April 1871), Zinov'ev's more merciless treatment of the inhabitants of Ibansk has so far met with sympathy abroad and silence at home. The Aesopian language of Shchedrin, never too obscure to fool anyone, has become in Zinov'ev's novel more transparent still. But the main difference stems from the fact that while Shchedrin's view of totalitarianism was based on projecting certain historical trends into the future, Zinov'ev builds his Ibansk on an intimate knowledge of the recent past and on the survival of forms that resist change. While the ideological underpinnings of the Tsarist regime are demolished by Shchedrin's mordant wit, Zinov'ev is more radical: "There are no false ideologies. Nor are there any true ones" (p. 289).

The difference between them is illustrated above all by the radical change brought about in language by the victory of an ideology with an entirely new vocabulary, in which even such old words as "freedom," "peace," and "friend" have acquired new meanings. Zinov'ev's *Ziiaiushchie vysoty* carries on the tradition of *Kotlovan* and *Chevengur*, where Platonov

> speaks of a nation which in a sense has become a victim of its own language; or more precisely, he speaks of this language itself—which turns out to be capable of generating a fictive world and then falling into a grammatical dependency on it.[20]

The gloominess of Zinov'ev's satire emerges from the triumph of this new language inside Russia and its partial victories abroad. His skill in parodying this official language has few equals.

In particular, we find that paradox is the principal satirical device of Zinov'ev's anatomy. It is announced already in the oxymoron of the title

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20. Joseph Brodsky, "Preface," in Andrei Platonov, *Collected Works* (Ann Arbor, 1978), pp. xi-xii.

The Yawning Heights; and oxymoron is a condensed paradox. According to de Quincey, paradox besieges those who search for truth: "No man needs to *search* for paradox in this world of ours. Let him simply confine himself to truth, and he will find paradox growing everywhere under his hands as rank as weeds."[21] Or, as we read in the following conversation in our anatomy:

> "But all the same we can't get by without any hopes and illusions at all," said Dauber. "We can't get by any more with hopes and illusions," said Chatterer. "Anyway, to all intents and purposes there aren't any left. And people are no worse off for that." "You deliberately put everything into the form of a paradox," said Dauber. "On the contrary," said Chatterer. "From the monstrous paradoxes of existence I try to extract more or less straightforward statements" (pp. 414-5).

A paradox may be defined as a "statement which seems untrue but proves valid upon close inspection."[22] But in Zinov'ev's case, the "close inspection" is superfluous: he supplies the explanation by being explicit where others would leave the paradox alone to work its way to the reader's consciousness. This can be seen in the following passage, where Zinov'ev tackles his favourite topic, sociology, in a section entitled "Social Laws:"

> It is widely accepted, wrote Schizophrenic, that human society is one of the most complex of manifestations, and that as a result, the study of human society is beset with unusual difficulties. That is a delusion. In fact, from a purely cognitive point of view, society is the easiest manifestation to study, and its laws are primitive and accessible to all. If it were not so, social life would be totally impossible, since in society people live by these laws and must necessarily realise what they are (p. 52).

Thereupon, yet another striking statement: "The social progress of society has been by and large an anti-social progress" (p. 38).

If there is one element of this complex novel that is easily accessible by way of a striking quotation, it must be Zinov'ev's paradoxes. They often dispel the gloom that can be attributed to his fear that "Ism"—the ideology of Ibansk—will conquer the world forever (p. 594). Further, he says that the tragedy of the past, far from being an accident, is really a part of Ibansk's

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21. Quoted in "Paradox," in A. Preminger, *et al.* (Eds.), *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, (Princeton, 1972), p. 598.

22. *Ibid., loc. cit.*

fundamental nature (p. 548). Here we may detect a link with Chaadaev's first *Philosophical Letter* (1829):

> Alone in the world, we have given nothing to the world, taken nothing from the world, bestowed not even a single idea upon the fund of human ideas, contributed nothing to the progress of the human spirit, and we have distorted all progressivity which has come to us.[23]

The Western semblance of Russia is, according to Chaadaev, only a thin veneer. Zinov'ev goes further: for him, Westernization via Marxism is anti-civilization (p. 361). Zinov'ev's tool for countering this anti-civilization is logic. His only absolute in this quest is "truth." Logic in search of truth can occasionally dispel the pessimism: "Of course, my position is pessimistic from the point of view of one life. History disregards the fact that life is short. But from the point of view of eternity, there is no pessimism here" (p. 169). And this brings us to the paradox of Zinov'ev, a liberal thinker, rejecting Russian liberal thought. In order to free himself from the morass of the accumulated progressive thinking of the past hundred years, Zinov'ev adopts positions that recall those of Chaadaev, who also started by rejecting liberal thought. But then, Zinov'ev thrives on paradoxes.

The identification of *Ziiaiushchie vysoty* as an anatomy helps us to see it in a wider perspective. It is not an enigma, a freak of a literary work, but an example of an already established genre. We encounter in it the dialogue, the symposium, the parody of erudition, and satire on a particular ideology. It is in the dialogue that we find the struggle of ideas now resolved, or deepened by a paradox. In this dialectic the paradox by its contradictory nature suggests further complications, further struggle. In pointing out the limits of erudition Zinov'ev is not unique. Other anatomies attempt the same. But he is certainly original in the quality of his unrelenting attack on leftist thought, even though this attack is marked by a deep sense of pessimism. And he leaves us a possibility that even his pessimism is only a mask, that reason could, after all, triumph:

> Mankind is facing a choice—for the first time in history, bear in mind. People have got to reflect on our experiment. They have got to think about it in all sincerity and without pity. And that is why they must talk. At this moment conversations like this are mankind's main duty (p.319).

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23. Peter Chaadaev, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, transl. Raymond T. McNally (Notre Dame, 1969), pp. 37-38.

What if this note of high seriousness is submerged in the sea of paradoxes? Somehow or other, we know that we are dealing with a "direct word," with "the expression of the speaker's ultimate semantic authority."[24]

24. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 165.