

Train of Thought:  
Boundaries and Boundlessness in Venedikt Erofeev's *Moscow-Petushki*

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*Abstract*

*A cult classic of the late-Soviet era, Moscow-Petushki by Venedikt Erofeev remains a fixture in Russian literary criticism. Its sweeping encompassment of a variety of generic forms and literary allusions lends itself to an equally wide variety of oft-contradictory critical interpretations. In this essay, I propose using the text's impenetrability as a starting point for analysis, considering it in the context of two literary traditions notable for their subversive potential. The first of these is the picaresque, a medieval travel narrative which originated in Spain as a parodic version of the chivalric romance. Building upon the work of Ulrich Wicks and Mikhail Bakhtin, I situate Moscow-Petushki within the picaresque tradition, tracing both the ways in which the novella conforms to formal guidelines, and the ways in which it challenges them. The second literary tradition I examine is skaz, a form of oral narrative prominent in Russian literature, in which the author uses informal, idiosyncratic speech to linguistically recreate a specific persona. Using the writing of Boris Eikhenbaum and Viktor Vinogradov as my critical basis, I explore how channeling the story through the voice of the novella's hapless narrator Venechka influences both his relationship to his lived experiences and the reader's relationship to the narrative as a whole. The synthesis of these two disparate traditions elucidates many of the text's contradictions, but it also reveals yet another subversive element: Erofeev's explicit rejection of narrative distance. Consequently, I conclude my analysis by examining the implications of this rejection in shaping Venechka as the rare literary figure who refuses to be contained within the confines of the text. By virtue of its complexity, Moscow-Petushki evades easy categorization, but it is also this complexity that allows for its formal transcendence.*

*I. Introduction: Dynamic Contadiction*

Written over the course of a few alcohol-fueled months in 1969, Venedikt Erofeev's late-Soviet novella *Moscow-Petushki* quickly took its place among the underground network of *samizdat* literature, reproduced in secret and passed on from reader to reader for two decades until its first licensed publication in the Soviet Union. That this strange text—one of the only works Erofeev ever completed before his untimely death from throat cancer at the age of fifty one—retained an avid underground following, holding its own amid other works by more famous and prolific writers of the era, serves as a testament to its magnetic power. The events of the story, which unfold over a period of about twenty four hours, are narrated in truly madcap fashion by Venechka Erofeev,<sup>1</sup> a thirty-year-old homeless man with penchant for drinking, who boards a train travelling from Moscow to the village of Petushki, where he hopes to reunite with his lover and infant son. On the trip, he reminisces about his life and converses with the other passengers, all the while becoming increasingly inebriated as he empties the bottles of cheap liquor he brings with him on his journey. Finally, he falls into a hallucinatory drunken stupor, as a result of which he ends up missing his stop and travelling all the way to Moscow, where he disembarks only to be chased down and violently murdered by a mysterious cohort of four men.<sup>2</sup>

The defining feature of this novella, which simultaneously draws in the reader and holds them at arm's length, is its ungraspability. *Moscow-Petushki* continuously defies readers' expectations, as Erofeev borrows from recognizable structuring modes only to distort them to the

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, the novella's author and protagonist share a name. I will come back to the significance of this choice later in the essay, but for now, in order to avoid confusion, I will follow the example of other critics, who refer to the author as "Erofeev" and to the protagonist as "Venechka", the diminutive form of the name "Venedikt".

<sup>2</sup> The identities of the men have been debated in critical literature, with the most common interpretations naming them as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse or the four foundational figures of Russian Communism; Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. (see: Ann Komaromi, "Venedikt Erofeev's 'Moskva-Petushki': Performance and Performativity In The Late Soviet Text," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 3 (2011): 431.

point of absurdity. The novella's subtitle identifies the text as a *ноэма*, a "prose poem", yet by the final page, the narrative has at various points taken from holy texts, Soviet textbooks, political satires, social realist tales, chivalric romances, and picaresque novels, among others. These varying elements, which exist concurrently with one another, interact in ways that undermine any attempt at constructing a single unifying system of logic. Adding another layer of difficulty is the never-ending deluge of intertextual allusions, which span a wide array of literature, history, and politics.<sup>3</sup> In the hands of two equally convincing critics, the same passage can either be read as a citation of a biblical text or as a veiled reference to contemporary political events. It should therefore not come as a surprise that, though there is an ever-expanding body of critical literature focusing on Erofeev's novella, no two analyses come to the same conclusion as to its intentions. Consequently, recent articles have focused on the disorder of Erofeev's novella as its own organizing force. Ann Komaromi argues that the text's "mutually perverting" centripetal and centrifugal forces do not annihilate one another—the overall impact of the text depends on them sustaining one another".<sup>4</sup> In other words, disorder does not function merely as a deconstructing force; rather, the novella, in its formal boundlessness, relies on the dynamic tension of many simultaneous planes of reference to maintain its structural integrity.

This essay does not set out to propose a single, unifying formal structure to "explain" the novella, as such an approach runs counter to the spirit of the work. Instead, it will focus on how Erofeev constructs the boundlessness of the text, how a chronicle narrated by a figure as socially and psychologically crushed as Venechka nevertheless evades formal categorization so thoroughly that no single explanation of the text succeeds in encompassing all that it contains. To this end, I will first explore the influence of the picaresque form as a structuring tool in Erofeev's

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<sup>3</sup> Boris Gasparov and Irina Paperno, "Встань и иди." *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 5 (1981): 387.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Komaromi, "Performance and Performativity," 31.

novella. The freedom that the form offers, with its ties both to the chivalric romance and to social satire, allows Erofeev to tap into a tradition that itself arose as a primarily subversive tool. To the extent that the picaresque structure holds up in *Moscow-Petushki*, it does so only because it allows for flexibility and takes for granted the world's chaotic nature. Identifying Venechka among a long history of picaro figures contextualizes his irreverence and unfiltered honesty, but it only begins to explain the larger subversive endeavor undertaken in the novella. Further clarification comes from analyzing the narrative voice in *Moscow-Petushki* as an example of *skaz*, a narrative tool with a long history in Russian literature, the generative nature of which allows Venechka's narrative voice to transcend formal limitations. With Venechka at the helm, the text unfolds and then folds back in on itself in perpetuity—even as structuring modalities appear, Venechka's narration subsumes them like the gravitational force of a black hole.

This formal blurring operates on yet another level, one that encompasses the very delineation between individual and character. Mikhail Bakhtin, in “Проблема отношения автора к герою”, argues the fundamental thing that distinguishes a fictional character from a real person is “completeness”. Fictional characters are whole in the eyes of their author, meaning that their entire being is contained within the author's mind. The author-creator serves as the “единственно активная формирующая энергия” (“singular active energy force”) of the text, defining the characters' inner lives and situating them within their environment as needed.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, real-life individuals, by virtue of their self-awareness, never view themselves as complete beings. Their consciousness ensures that they remain open to themselves without ever casting a final judgment over the sum of their personhood. The life of the character, therefore, exists in an entirely different contextual sphere. In *Moscow-Petushki*, however, Erofeev rejects

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<sup>5</sup> Михаил Бахтин, "Автор и герой в эстетической деятельности. Проблема отношения автора к герою." *Искусство* (1979): 4.

this traditional delineation by subsuming the “I” of the author within the narrative “I”. He instead constructs a neoromantic hero whose individuality asserts itself so forcefully that it extends beyond the confines of the text. This is the text’s most notable reversal, one that both allows for and supersedes its other transgressions. *Moscow-Petushki* thus becomes an articulation of individuality within a society where such expression is met with hostility.

## *II. Picaresque and the Freedom of “Otherness”*

Understanding *Moscow-Petushki* in the context of the picaresque tradition first requires establishing some definition of the form itself. This can be difficult, because the question of whether the picaresque should be consigned to a particular spatial-historical moment or whether it exists as an ongoing literary tradition remains contested among critics. To allow for its historical evolution and varied presentations while still establishing certain formal parameters, I will turn to Ulrich Wicks, who proposes examining the picaresque not as a genre, but as a fictional mode. He builds upon Robert Scholes’ work on the ideal types of narrative fiction, which places the picaresque on a spectrum of fictional modes organized according to their attitude towards the world: romance is thus placed on one end, as the mode which operates in the most idealized version of the world, and satire is placed at the other, as the mode which exists to mock and subvert a dark, disordered version of reality. Wicks locates the picaresque on the latter side of the spectrum, between satire and comedy, writing, “I would suggest...that the essential picaresque situation—the fictional world posited by the picaresque mode—is that of an unheroic protagonist, worse than we, caught up in a chaotic world, worse than ours, in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternately both victim of that world and its

exploiter”.<sup>6</sup> The limited success of the protagonist’s exploits mediate the inherent darkness of the picaresque situation, but these exploits still occur within the context of a world fundamentally lacking in moral order. Thus, if satire is typically underpinned by a feeling of hopelessness about the world it describes, then the picaresque form is underpinned by a feeling of instability.

It is easy to see how *Moscow-Petushki* fits into this description. The purported orderliness of the Soviet system provides a vivid contrast with the chaos of Venechka’s daily life, in which everyone acts perversely and nothing works the way it should—prostitutes become saviors, hiccups undermine ideology, trains run in the wrong direction. The very fact of Venechka’s existence flies in the face of Soviet ideology, which posits that everyone must do their part to contribute to the realization of the communist ideal. The Soviet worldview leaves no place for marginality; consequently, Venechka occupies the liminal spaces that exist at the outskirts of social consciousness, hiding on porches, drinking in gangways, and escaping up side staircases. Though Venechka lives in Moscow, the Kremlin—the nucleus of Soviet political control—has a kind of repelling power over him, so that even when he seeks it out, he always ends up back at the central train station instead.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the entirety of his journey from Moscow, the epicenter of the Soviet empire, to Petushki, located at the end of the line, underscores a desire to escape into the periphery.

In the moments when Venechka does interact with the rest of the world, his existence is not only actively rejected, but often simply ignored. Walking through the railroad car after having taken his first drink, he observes that the other passengers regard him “почти безучастно, круглыми и как будто ничем не занятыми глазами...” (“almost indifferently,

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<sup>6</sup> Ulrich Wicks. "The Nature of Picaresque Narrative: A Modal Approach." *PMLA* 89, no. 2 (1974): 242.

<sup>7</sup> Венедикт Ерофеев. *Москва-Петушки: поэма*. (Санкт-Петербург: Азбука-Аттикус, 2012), 12.

with round and seemingly idle eyes”).<sup>8</sup> Notably, he says this without jealousy or bile. On the contrary, he displays a kind of patriotic pride in his countrymen’s indifference: “Мне это нравится. Мне нравится, что у народа моей страны глаза пустые и выпуклые. Это вселяет в меня чувство законной гордости...” (“I like that. I like that the people of my country have empty, bulging eyes. It engenders a feeling of legitimate pride...”).<sup>9</sup> Venechka’s identification with the other people on the train, indicated by his use of the possessive “my”, renders his ostracism all the more poignant, yet his self-abnegating patriotism also has a critical subtext: It implies that what unites the Soviet people is not ideology, but dull indifference in the face of ideological collapse. Comments such as this, which demonstrate, rather than explicitly state, the deficiencies of the Soviet system, allow Erofeev to levy criticism without always having Venechka himself engage in overt sociopolitical discussion. The presence of social satire in the novella denotes the permeability of any formal delineation between fictional forms, even outside of the Erofeev’s deliberate subversion. As Wicks notes, many novels, such as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, incorporate picaresque elements without fully embodying the form.<sup>10</sup> Inversely, picaresque novels easily incorporate other types of narrative fiction, most commonly satire and comedy, forms which both feature prominently in *Moscow-Petushki*.

Unique to the picaresque is its inherent tension with its modal antithesis, the chivalric romance. This form, which originated in the twelfth century, describes the adventures of a knight who personifies the idealized medieval characteristics of valor, gallantry, and courtly love. Structurally, both the romance and the picaresque are panoramic, meaning that their plot is propelled not by the development of people or events, but by a single sequence—the quest—

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<sup>8</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 25. Unless otherwise noted, all translations were done by the author.

<sup>9</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Wicks, “The Nature of Picaresque Narrative,” 243.

around which the characters and plot developments of the novel converge. The people that the protagonist encounters on his journey tend to be “types” rather than fleshed-out characters, often serving as exaggerated versions of the ideology, social position, or career that they embody (e.g. the beleaguered damsel in chivalric romances, the corrupt priest in medieval picaresque, and the Decembrist in *Moscow-Petushki*). Another important parallel between the two forms is their episodic nature, which tends to follow a set pattern in which the protagonist lands in a precarious situation from which he must extricate himself, not without some unexpected difficulty, only to be thrust into yet another unexpected, similarly dangerous scenario. In the world of the romance, moral order inevitably gains the upper ground. As C.S. Lewis writes, at the conclusion of a chivalric novel, “All the apparent contradictions must be harmonised. A Model must be built which will get everything in without a clash; and it can do this only by becoming intricate, by mediating its unity through a great, and finely ordered, multiplicity”.<sup>11</sup> The picaresque, on the other hand, reflects and distorts this unity like a funhouse mirror. Whereas the romance moves in a relatively linear trajectory towards a satisfactory and all-encompassing conclusion, the picaresque relies upon what Wicks calls the “Sisyphus rhythm”, whereby the episodic nature of the text folds back in on itself, leaving the protagonist right back where they started.<sup>12</sup>

Venechka’s life is also governed by this agonizing cyclicity: He experiences it on a daily basis in his endless progression from sobriety to drunkenness to hangover, but the broader patterns of his life follow the same general scheme, as he undergoes a series of successes and failures in his professional and spiritual life. The fateful round trip between Moscow and Petushki also fits into this outline. In true picaresque fashion, his expedition comes to naught. He ends up back where

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<sup>11</sup> C.S. Lewis, “The Medieval Situation,” in *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Wicks, “The Nature of Picaresque Narrative,” 243.

he began, and his death provides finality, but not closure. Devoid of a grounding moral center, the picaresque transforms his attempt at forward progression into a painful exercise in futility.

Yet it would be inaccurate to portray the picaresque as the complete inverse of the romance, as the disorder of picaresque reality exists *simultaneously* with a strong underlying desire for the order of the romance.<sup>13</sup> Picaresque episodes contain within themselves the potential to unfold according to romantic rules, but this potential remains unrealized as the chaos of the picaresque reality inevitably undermines any hope of a neat resolution. With every subversive twist, the picaresque eschews the structure imposed by the moral order of the romance, but the traces of romantic potential inevitably leave behind a sense of disappointment. This tension lies at the very heart of *Moscow-Petushki*. Its basic structure, in which a male figure embarks on a quest, overcoming obstacles in the hope of reuniting with his lover and living with her in peace, fits neatly into the romantic tradition, rendering his eventual failure all the more heartbreaking. Adding another layer of utopian potential is the novella's religious overtones. As Boris Gasparov and Irina Paperno point out, Venechka's character invites comparison to Jesus, a connection made evident through his strong identification with his son and through his eventual crucifixion, which is described in overtly biblical terms.<sup>14</sup> His single-minded desire to get to Petushki strengthens this comparison, as his description of the village, with its idyllic diction, reflects a profound longing for heavenly salvation: "Петушки—это место, где не умолкают птицы, ни днем, ни ночью, где ни зимой, ни летом не отцветает жасмин. Первородный грех—может, он и был—там никого не тяготит. Там даже у тех, кто не просыхает по неделям, взгляд бездонен и ясен..." ("Petushki is the place where birds sing without ceasing by day and by night, where in winter and in summer, jasmine never stops blooming. Original sin—

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<sup>13</sup> Wicks, "The Nature of Picaresque Narrative," 242.

<sup>14</sup> Boris Gasparov and Irina Paperno, "Встань и иди." *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 5 (1981): 387.

even if it did happen—doesn't burden anyone there. There, even those who haven't sobered up for weeks have a boundless, clear gaze...").<sup>15</sup> Viewing the text through this religious lens has the potential to give Venechka's itinerant existence cosmic significance, positioning him as the selfless sacrificial victim of a profoundly corrupt world, whose passionate, all-encompassing, overwhelming suffering has on a redemptive nature.

Such biblical parallels, however, collapse in on themselves as soon as they are constructed. Positioning Venechka as the moral arbiter of the world becomes difficult when his internal desire for purity inevitably clashes with his utter disinterest in living by Christian edicts. Furthermore, the text consciously inverts the traditional narrative of Christ's journey from suffering to crucifixion to resurrection.<sup>16</sup> Venechka's brief ascension up the ranks of the Soviet social order to the position of foreman of the cable-laying crew is followed in quick succession by his downfall, just as his sudden and painful death at the end of the novella, which the narration ensconces in overtly religious tones, offers little hope for resurrection. If Venechka is a Christ figure, he inhabits a world God has long abandoned; indeed, as he runs for his life at the novella's denouement, Venechka concludes, "если Он навсегда покинул мою землю, но видит каждого из нас, —Он в эту сторону ни разу и не взглянул" ("if He has left this earth forever, but sees each of us, he hasn't once looked in this direction").<sup>17</sup> The interplay of romantic and biblical undertones within the novella demonstrate the picaresque's capacity for both imitation and subversion, as it sets up expectations provided by other narrative forms, only to inevitably disappoint them.

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<sup>15</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Boris Gasparov and Irina Paperno, "Встань и иди." *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 5 (1981): 388.

<sup>17</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 175.

In addition to the stylistic permeability of the picaresque, its other defining feature is its unheroic protagonist, the picaro, who plays a central role in establishing the parameters of the form.<sup>18</sup> Situated in the middle of a chaotic world, he is a cunning, pragmatic figure, usually lower-class, who finds himself rejected by the social order and propelled through life by the harsh winds of fate. Defiant in the face of the endless challenges that stand in his way, he navigates the world alone, relying on nothing but his own dogged will for survival. While the picaro largely manages to evade disaster, often against all odds, his underlying feeling of helplessness in the face of an unpredictable world remains an important common thread. In this sense, Venechka Erofeev fits seamlessly within the picaresque tradition.<sup>19</sup> Venechka experiences total alienation on two fronts: first, as a result of constant social rejection, and second, as a result of his own internal rejection of social mores. Thus, Venechka's potential for human connection is severely limited. The only people who exhibit any sympathy towards him are just like him—lonely wanderers relying on alcohol for the warmth the world is unable to provide. His interactions with them offer little potential for social reintegration, as none of them wield any power within Soviet society. Even the quest itself, which usually allows the picaro some control over his own existence, instead further reinforces Venechka's lack of agency. The medieval picaro typically travelled by foot or on horseback, thus forging his own path toward his desired destination and deviating from it as he saw fit. Venechka does not have these options. Instead, he

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<sup>18</sup> Though the picaro is traditionally a male figure, thus justifying my use of the word “he”, I do want to acknowledge that there exists a smaller group of female picaros, perhaps the most recognizable of which is Daniel Defoe's conniving protagonist Moll Flanders. (see: Ian Watt, “The Recent Critical Fortunes of Moll Flanders.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 1, no. 1 (1967): 109.)

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that even Venechka's name is significant in the regard. Using the diminutive form to identify the protagonist has a long history in the picaresque tradition: *Lazarillo de Tormes*, usually considered the first European picaresque novel, derives the name of its eponymous protagonist from the formal “Lázaro”, a technique which reinforces the protagonist's lack of social standing and engenders the reader's sympathy by emphasizing his childlike naïveté and powerlessness. (see: Francisco de Quevedo, “Introduction,” in *Lazarillo de Tormes and The Grifter (El Buscon): Two Novels of the Low Life in Golden Age Spain*. (Hackett Publishing, 2015), xvii.)

must board a train which propels him forward (and then backward) along a predetermined route, stopping at intervals determined by factors entirely outside of his control. Even he senses his own impotence, complaining, “И вообще раньше поезда быстрее ходили... А теперь, черт знает, стоит—а зачем стоит?... И так у каждого столба.” (“And anyway, trains used to run much faster... But now, it’s just standing there... why the hell is it standing?... It stops at every post as it is”).<sup>20</sup> Unable to determine his own route, unable to control when to stop and when to start again, Venechka experiences his lack of agency as a frustrating inevitability. As the train speeds through the Soviet heartland, all he can do is name the stations as they pass by, locating himself in relation to his destination even as he admits his inability to control the manner in which he gets there.

From a formal standpoint, Venechka’s solitude and helplessness has an important purpose. In his analysis of the chronotope of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin—who refers to the picaro as the *нлым*, or the rogue<sup>21</sup>—argues that social isolation brings with it a unique privilege: “The right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available”.<sup>22</sup> “Otherness” gives the picaro the capability to see through the absurdity of established social structures and to point out those absurdities to the other characters, and, through them, to the reader. He does not suffer the backlash associated with this kind of criticism because he has no social standing left to lose. When others challenge his subversive behavior, the picaro can hide behind ignorance or incomprehension as an excuse (whether or not that excuse is genuine). In this way, he resembles the Russian figure of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 187.

<sup>21</sup> In this essay, I will use the terms “picaro” and “rogue” interchangeably, as they describe the same type of character, though from different critical lenses.

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. (Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: Univ. Texas Press, 1981), 159.

*юродивый*, or the holy fool, whose ascetic lifestyle serves as a reflection and a judgment of the world he inhabits.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the holy fool, however, the picaresque still has some ties to this world, and he fights to establish a place for himself in ways that can be decidedly unholy. Thus, he occupies a unique narrative position “in life, but not of it”.<sup>24</sup> This opens the door for the picaresque’s most versatile and powerful subversive tool: its irreverent narration.

Beyond any explicit criticism that the picaresque levels against the social order, it is the narrative act which serves as his ultimate act of rebellion. As Wicks points out, there exists an inherent irony in the discrepancy between picaresque’s lowly status and his gall in telling his own story. The narrative role allows the picaresque a level of credence that society has never granted him; thus, narration becomes a gesture of self-assertion. Fully aware of this power, the picaresque also understands that reclaiming agency over his story depends on the reader’s acceptance of his version of events. Consequently, he frames his narrative as a confession, “luring [the reader] into his world through ostensibly moral designs”.<sup>25</sup> This strategy is but an extension of his broader survival approach. Aware that danger awaits him around every corner, the picaresque has trained himself to be outer-focused. By virtue of a chameleon-like ability to blend in to any situation, he gladly sacrifices personal identity for the sake of self-preservation. As Laura Behara puts it, “the picaresque is the rogue-hero of a thousand—not faces, but masks; this external excess disguises, betrays and perpetuates an internal lack”.<sup>26</sup> He can be whatever he thinks his interlocutors want him to be, and in this case, the reader becomes another unseen interlocutor who the picaresque seeks to win over. Wicks goes on to explain, “First-person picaresque can thus be seen as a narrative

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<sup>23</sup> Mikhail Epshtein, “После карнавала, или вечный Веничка,” in *Вера и образ: религиозное бессознательное в русской культуре 20-го века*. (Tenaflly, N.J.: Hermitage, 1994), 174.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, “Chronotope of the Novel,” 161.

<sup>25</sup> Wicks, “The Nature of Picaresque Narrative,” 244.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Behara, “Out of and Into the Void: Picaresque Absence and Annihilation,” in *Venedikt Erofeev's Moscow-Petushki: Critical Perspectives*. Vol. 14. Ed. Karen L. Ryan, (Peter Lang Pub Incorporated, 1997), 21.

version (between the picaresque and the willing reader ‘victim’) of the tricks in the picaresque’s remembered life experiences (between the picaresque and his landscape).<sup>27</sup> Thus, the narrative itself becomes the locus of a power transfer, as readers can only access the picaresque’s story if they agree to view the world through his eyes. The picaresque’s “otherness” grants him a unique perspective, and his narration brings that perspective to the foreground.

### *III: The Generative Power of Skaz Narration*

It is here that *Moscow-Petushki*’s ties to the picaresque form begin to unravel. Though Venechka’s “otherness” locates him within the picaresque tradition, his narration is not an outer-focused projection, but an inner-focused attempt at piecing together a reality that incorporates all the disparate and contradictory facets of his lived experience. That is not to say that he does not have the power to influence others through his words. On the contrary, his linguistic prowess serves as his primary tool for survival, taking the place of the picaresque’s characteristic guile as the vehicle which allows him to navigate his precarious existence. Aboard the train, his knack for storytelling proves essential in ensuring a safe passage, even serving as an alternate form of currency. Instead of bribing the train inspector Semyonich with alcohol in lieu of purchasing a ticket, like the other passengers, Venechka bribes him with an ongoing recitation of world history, drawing a comparison to Scheherazade from *A Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>28</sup> His stories intrigue Semyonich so much that for three years, Venechka avoids incurring his wrath, leaving him the only person who remains “в живых и непобитых” (“living and unharmed”) despite never having given the inspector any alcohol.<sup>29</sup> The trip recounted in the novella marks a change

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<sup>27</sup> Wicks, “The Nature of Picaresque Narrative,” 244.

<sup>28</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 120

<sup>29</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 122

in this well-established arrangement, as, having finally run out of world history to recount, Venechka turns towards the future instead. He asks Semyonich to imagine Judgment Day, describing it in deeply utopian terms as the herald of a brighter, better future. Semyonich finds himself so intoxicated by what he hears (as well as by the alcohol he has consumed) that in a fit of passion, he disrobes completely, crying out for the advent of this promised world.<sup>30</sup> His visceral reaction, which shocks even Venechka, speaks to the power of his storytelling abilities to move, and even manipulate, his audience.

As well as ensuring his safe passage across the country, Venechka's narration also serves as a unifying force, helping establish a feeling of camaraderie among the members of his drinking party aboard the train. When others within the group argue among themselves, Venechka's ability to put their disagreements to rest through clever argumentation puts him in a position of respect among his interlocutors, allowing him to direct the flow of the conversation and resolve conflicts with an easy-going authority. Almost every group member has the opportunity to share an anecdote, but it is Venechka who has the final word, determining the merit of their contribution. When the others ridicule old Mitrich for his crude, unliterary addition to the conversation, Venechka encourages him, rewarding his efforts by pouring him a drink, which ends the influx of criticism. Alcohol serves as the reward system by which the group determines their appreciation of the storyteller's abilities—and when the drinks are poured, Venechka gets the largest portion.<sup>31</sup>

His own recitation of his extensive excursion across Europe, itself a bizarre parody of travel narrative, has a strange hypnotizing effect upon his audience. When the story is cut off by the arrival of the ticket inspector, it is as if a spell has been broken: “Но не только рассказ

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<sup>30</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 125

<sup>31</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 92

оборвался: и пьяная полудремота черноусого, и сон декабриста,—все было прервано *в полноте*” (“It was not just the story that was cut off: so was the drunken half-slumber of the man with the black moustache, and the nap of the Decembrist—everything was interrupted *midway*”).<sup>32</sup> The significance of phrasing is two-fold: First, by linking the progression of his narrative with the drowsiness of his listeners, Venechka implies that the very existence of the other characters is contingent upon his attention—as Venechka speaks, they fade into unconsciousness, to be revived only when he goes silent. Second, the word “midway” connotes spatial progression, which implies that the end of his narrative also marks the end of the journey itself, meaning that his transcontinental journey is a purely linguistic invention, not a description of events that occurred previously in time. This is a profound departure from the picaresque, where the events of the narrator’s life shape the way he tells his story. In *Moscow-Petushki*, on the other hand, utterance supersedes plot.

The effect of Venechka’s storytelling on other characters within the text mirrors the effect of his narration on the reader: though often confusing, it is also undeniably spellbinding. Unlike the traditional picaro, Venechka does not act the part of a trickster. Instead, his narration constructs a reality that is uniquely his own, where the boundaries between immediate external stimuli, world events, Russian poetry, classical music, Soviet sloganeering, and drunken hallucination continuously fuse and morph. Reading Erofeev’s text means not just succumbing to narrative trickery, but actively trying to piece together a version of reality that consistently contradicts itself. Venechka does not just describe the world through his eyes; he recreates the world entirely. The generative nature of Venechka’s narration allows him to transcend the boundaries of the picaresque form.

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<sup>32</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 118, emphasis added.

In Russian literary tradition, the style of narration employed by Venechka is called *skaz*. In the broadest sense, *skaz* is a narrative device in which the author channels the story's plot through the voice of a particular narrator (usually the protagonist) in such a way as to invoke spoken, rather than written, speech. As Viktor Vinogradov puts it:

Когда в стилистике всплывает проблема о роли рассказчика,—ясно. Тогда, когда заходит речь о введении словесного потока в русло одного языкового сознания, когда возникает потребность прикрепления семантической вязи рассказа к индивидуальному образу с известной психологической и общественно-бытовой окраской. Для стилистики вопрос о функции рассказчика—проблема семантики.<sup>33</sup>

While orality plays a central role in identifying this type of narration, Vinogradov points out that simply imitating spoken language does not by itself constitute *skaz*. Instead, *skaz* must embody a singular narrative voice, complete with all its inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies. As Boris Eikhenbaum explains, this process of stylization brings to the forefront not the events described in the narrative, but the narrator's subjective experience of those events.<sup>34</sup> Stories built on *skaz* tend not to emphasize plot at all. Rather, to once again use Eikhenbaum's term, they rely on *мелочи*, or trifles, which serve as a catalyst for the wordplay and morphological manipulation which lies at the heart of the piece.<sup>35</sup>

In light of Eikhenbaum's assertion that triviality serves as the narrative center of *skaz*, identifying *skaz* narration within a picaresque may initially seem counterintuitive, as triviality seems to be in direct opposition with the grand panoramic structure of the picaresque form. Yet

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<sup>33</sup> "It is clear when the problem of the narrator's role becomes important in stylistics. It is when the conversation turns to channeling the flow of language into a single linguistic being, when the need arises to attach the semantic ligature of a story to an individual entity with known psychological and sociological colorations. For stylistics, the question of the function of the narrator is a semantic problem". (see: Viktor Vinogradov, "Проблема сказа в стилистике," in *О языке художественной прозы: Избранные труды*. (Moscow: Наука, 1980), 44).

<sup>34</sup> Eikhenbaum, "Как сделана «Шинель» Гоголя."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Erofeev's novella differs from traditional picaresque in one specific way that gives credence to such an analysis: Venechka's adventures happen not *at* the stations (as they would in a picaresque) but *between* them.<sup>36</sup> The structure of *Moscow-Petushki* underscores this distinction: Erofeev subdivides the novella into chapters, the titles of which mark Venechka's location during the particular portion of his story that he happens to be telling in that spatiotemporal moment (e.g. "Москва. К поезду через магазин." and "Электроугли—43-й километр").<sup>37</sup> This indicates that the focus of Venechka's *skaz* lies not on his journey, but on the act of narration itself. It is also important to note that the function of these chapter divisions changes as the narrative progresses. Near the start of the novella, the titles often appear largely arbitrary: While the beginning of a new chapter does occasionally signal a change of topic or allow for the introduction of a new character, more often than not, Venechka pays no heed to their imposition, simply continuing his sentence wherever he had left off, as if the chapter titles are announcements made over the railway station loudspeakers—something to be noted, but largely ignored. As the novella progresses, however, the changing of the chapter titles becomes an element of Venechka's narration rather than an infraction upon it. Venechka's alarm and confusion as he wakes up from his hallucinatory slumber, only to discover that the train appears to be moving in the wrong direction, coincides with his passage through "Омутище" ("Omutishe"), the root of which, *омут* (omut), means "whirlpool".<sup>38</sup> When he disembarks from the train, still confused as to his location, the chapter title reads "Petushki", though he is really in Moscow. Only when he himself fully grasps his location do the chapter titles change to reflect his newfound realization. These moments demonstrate the preeminence of Venechka's *skaz* as

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<sup>36</sup> Gasparov and Paperno, "Встань и иди," 388.

<sup>37</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 18, 69. " 'Moscow. To the train through the store.' and 'Elektrougli-43rd Kilometer'."

<sup>38</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 159

the novella's primary structuring tool. It is his narration, and not the progression of the train, that advances the plot. Eikhenbaum calls this kind of *skaz* narration *воспроизводительный*, or “reproductive”, meaning that it recreates the world rather than describing it.<sup>39</sup> The train ride thus becomes a synecdoche for the structure of the novella as a whole: Even as the train hurtles forward, seemingly depriving Venechka of all control, Venechka retains the ability to narrate his experience aboard it, which ultimately puts him in the position of real power.

By empowering Venechka's narrative voice in relation to his lived experience, *skaz* allows him to reclaim his agency within a larger system over which he has no control. At the same time, *skaz* also allows for an internal restructuring. Eikhenbaum writes that *skaz* narration requires a certain amount of seclusion from the normal network of values and relationships that shape society at large, as this opens the door to a game with reality in which the momentous can become trivial, while the trivial can gain colossal significance.<sup>40</sup> In other words, *skaz* has the potential to overturn accepted hierarchies of value to reflect the priorities of the specific narrator. *Moscow-Petushki* makes heavy use of this restructuring potential, as evidenced in part by Venechka's internal resistance to Soviet ideology. Rather than explicitly expressing opposition, Venechka distances himself from the issue. Epshtein describes his attitude thus: “Согласно одному шаблону, при слове ‘родина’ или ‘советская власть’ надо было встать навытяжку, согласно другому—прыгнуть в кулак. А вот Веня придает этим словам какую-то иную интонацию, не серьезную и не ироническую, а хочется сказать, загробную”. (“Following one template, upon hearing the word ‘homeland’ or ‘Soviet authority’, you had to stand at attention—following another, you had to raise a fist. But Venya gives these words a different kind of intonation, neither serious nor ironic, but, I'm tempted to say, as if from beyond the

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<sup>39</sup> Eikhenbaum, “Как сделана «Шинель» Гоголя.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

grave”).<sup>41</sup> By approaching Soviet ideology with a degree of detachment, Venechka takes it entirely out of the sphere of the dialectical. Instead, his subversive power comes from refuting the very idea of political ideology as central to his self-identity. The instances in which politics do figure into his narration, they do so primarily through the lens of his personal experience. Thus, when his inebriated imagination concocts a dream in which he leads a drunkards’ rebellion in Petushki, his first decree addresses the issue which he considers essential to improving quality of life for his people: he proclaims that the village’s two liquor stores have to open earlier in the morning.

Gasparov and Paperno refer to this formal restructuring as *сниженная трактовка*, or “downgraded interpretation”, a technique by which Venechka repurposes high-brow cultural references within the context of his own life.<sup>42</sup> Filled to bursting with incongruent, disconnected snippets taken from the literary and cultural landscape, Venechka recontextualizes them within a new discursive system, one in which nothing is held sacred. Thus, history becomes fodder for sexual innuendo, god’s angels become flighty conversation partners, and salvation becomes synonymous with alcohol consumption. Perhaps the most ubiquitous example of this technique is the repetition of the ancient Aramaic phrase *талифа куми* (“talitha cumi”), originally uttered by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew during his miraculous resurrection of a child.<sup>43</sup> When it first appears in Erofeev’s novella, it comes out of the mouth of Venechka’s enigmatic lover, a prostitute who inveigles him to get up off the floor after a night of heavy drinking. Venechka describes this moment as the turning point of his life, imbuing him with newfound spirit after

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<sup>41</sup> Epshtein, “После карнавала,” 182.

<sup>42</sup> Gasparov and Paperno, “Встань и иди,” 389.

<sup>43</sup> Taking her by the hand he said to her, “Talitha cumi,” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” Mark 5:41. English Standard Edition.

three years of utter hopelessness.<sup>44</sup> Henceforth, “arise and go” becomes Venechka’s mantra in the face of ever-mounting setbacks. This transfer of the power of resurrection from the son of God to a “fallen woman” indicates a leveling of the ultimate hierarchy—the one between the divine and the mortal. The person who pronounces the sacred words does not matter for Venechka: In *Moscow-Petushki*, it is the utterance that contains within itself the power to resurrect.

This technique also operates in the reverse, whereupon Venechka raises the banal to the level of the sacred, in a technique that can be called “upgraded interpretation”. Into this category falls the “allegory of the hiccups”: For Venechka, hiccups represent the utter powerlessness of man living in an unpredictable world. He invites the reader to pay close attention to their hiccups and count the intervals between each one, challenging us to derive a meaningful pattern out of their sporadic recurrence. The impossibility of this task, he argues, should remind us of the futility of our feeble attempts at organizing reality according to predetermined logical systems, which can be torn to shreds by the fickle winds of fate. “Не так ли в смене подъёмов и падений, восторгов и бед каждого отдельного человека—нет ни малейшего намека на регулярность? Не так ли беспорядочно чередуется в жизни человечества его катастрофы? Закон—он выше всех нас. Икота—выше всякого закона”. (“Is this not the same way in which the ups and the downs, the delights and the afflictions of every individual person oscillate, without even a hint of regularity? Is this not the same way in which the catastrophes of humankind alternate in utter disorder? Law is above us all. Hiccups are above any law”.)<sup>45</sup> The implications of his argument stretch into the domain of both the political and the divine. If something as quotidian as a hiccup does not lend itself to easy categorization, then the idea that

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<sup>44</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 167.

<sup>45</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 68-69.

large-scale social trends can be effectively observed and predicted seems laughably vain, drawing into question the very essence of communist ideology, which relies on large-scale social observation as its theoretical basis. From a religious standpoint, Venechka argues that the incomprehensibility of hiccups serves as a reminder of our profound ignorance in the face of an incomprehensible God. In extrapolating meaning from the most quotidian of events, Venechka razes the hierarchy of intellectual culture in which high-brow scholarship is the domain of profound contemplation, whereas bodily functions remain the domain of foulness and impropriety. For Venechka, such distinctions are meaningless. Let others concern themselves with the great problems of science and architecture, he proclaims. We will stick to hiccups—and through them, discover all we need to know.<sup>46</sup>

As well as obviating traditional value systems by channeling the narrative through a single linguistic being, Venechka's *skaz* also fundamentally shapes the aesthetic sphere of the novella, creating an atmosphere riddled with uncertainty. The primary device that makes this possible is alcohol. Drunkenness features in *Moscow-Petushki* as both a mechanism for survival in the face of a distressing reality and as another way to reshape that reality from within. For Venechka, drinking is not merely a means to an end. Rather, alcohol plays a role in every aspect of his life, from his social interactions to his philosophical musings. It saves him from the suffering of the hangover, manipulates his emotional patterns, and impinges upon his sense of reality, ultimately shaping every moment of his existence. Such is the nature of Venechka's character, however, that he does not simply allow its effects to act upon him unobserved. Alcohol instead becomes one of the foremost subjects of his attention. He devotes serious study to his own drinking patterns, recounting extensive experiments he conducts in order to determine

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<sup>46</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 67.

the effects of various alcohol combinations on his psyche. The drinking patterns of others interest him as well: during his brief managerial stint, he decides that the key to understanding the spiritual state of his subordinates lies in keeping track of their drinking patterns.

Consequently, Venechka knows exactly what to drink, and when, to elicit the desired emotional effect. His cocktail recipes, containing ghastly combinations of cheap liquor and products such as perfume, nail polish, and brake fluid, have the power to alter consciousness in predetermined ways: One formula awakens the conscience and disquiets the mind; another does the opposite, quieting the soul and reconciling the drinker to life's inevitable difficulties.<sup>47</sup> Given this wealth of self-knowledge, it would not do Venechka justice to say that alcohol consumption controls the flow of the narrative, at least not initially. Instead, it serves as a stylistic device, one that allows for greater formal malleability.

Over the course of the novella, Venechka's increased alcohol consumption corresponds with a breakdown of the distinction between exteriority and interiority. As my aforementioned analysis of *Moscow-Petushki*'s chapter titles illustrates, the beginning of the novella—though replete with digressions and non sequiturs—nevertheless maintains the standard cause-and-effect relationship between action and reaction (i.e. something occurs in Venechka's life, and he responds to it.) His progression into drunkenness, however, gradually degenerates this relationship, sowing doubt upon the reality of anything occurring outside the confines of his own mind. Venechka's bizarre travelling companions begin to use speech patterns similar to ones used by Venechka earlier on in the novella, thus calling into question whether they exist as anything more than externalizations of the narrator himself. Later still, though the progression of the train continues to interrupt Venechka's alcohol-induced slumber, it becomes increasingly

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<sup>47</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 73

unclear at what point his hallucinatory dreams end and the events on the train begin. *Moscow-Petushki* leaves the reader to determine how and where to differentiate between Venechka's direct experiences, his thoughts, and his visions. Formally, this allows for ever-expanding permeability: The existence of travelling companions allows for the possibility of dialectical discourse that would not be possible had Venechka remained alone, while the dream sequence interspersed throughout the final section of the novella allows for the introduction of political parody into an already-crowded field of genres encompassed in the novella's structure.

Examining the world through an alcoholic haze allows Venechka's *skaz* to gradually encompass every aspect of the novel, destabilizing any notions of a stable reality and eschewing all formal boundaries.

There comes a point, however, when his *skaz* begins to overwhelm Venechka himself. Whereas Venechka spends the first half of the novella projecting his vision of reality upon the world, in the latter half, the projection turns back upon its creator. The pivotal moment comes when Venechka realizes that he has lost control of his alcohol consumption, that he has become drunk beyond all limit.<sup>48</sup> This marks the beginning of a descent into alcohol-induced delusions over which he has no control. As the structure of the novella becomes ever more permeable, the literary and historical figures he invokes earlier in the novella begin to interact with him aboard the train as freely as the Decembrist and old Mitrich had earlier on. He meets Satan face-to-face; a Sphinx poses a series of nonsensical riddles phrased like word problems from a math textbook. His increasing agitation indicates that this permeability is no longer a source of narrative freedom, but a living nightmare. Without the mediating power of alcohol to bolster his spirits and inflame his imagination, he himself loses the ability to differentiate reality from delusion,

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<sup>48</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 92.

and it is this that permits his nightmares to catch up to him. Cornered on a stranger's porch, Venechka meets his doom, a fatal stab wound through the throat severing the very means by which his *skaz* narration was ever possible.

#### *IV. Unmasking the Author*

As I have demonstrated, *skaz* narration and elements of the picaresque form figure within *Moscow-Petushki* in order to free Venechka from constraint, rather than to impose it. Venechka's status as the irreconcilable "other" grants him the leeway to lay bare his worldview unhindered by social mores, while the orality of his narration frees him from any remaining formal binds. Socially and narratively, therefore, Venechka's freedom is secured. The ultimate limit on the freedom of the fictional narrator, however, comes not from social constrictions or formal limitations; rather, it comes from the omnipotent presence of the author-creator. As noted earlier, Bakhtin defines the literary protagonist as a passive figure in a larger unified textual whole of which the author is the sole arbiter. He refers to the relationship between author and narrator as one based on "внеаходимость" ("outsidedness"), which he defines as "любовное устранение себя из поля жизни героя" ("the loving removal of the self from the field of the hero's life").<sup>49</sup> This separation allows for the narrative distance necessary for the author to remain in the aesthetic sphere rather than adhering to socially-accepted ethical mores; the author becomes an "этически безучастным зритель" ("ethically indifferent onlooker").<sup>50</sup> While the protagonist's consciousness is encompassed within the omniscient consciousness of the author, the two remain distinctly separate. The significance of this is two-fold: The author-creator renounces moral responsibility for the characters in the text, which in turn means that the characters can express

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<sup>49</sup> Bakhtin, "Автор и герой," 5.

<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin, "Автор и герой," 6.

opinions that the author otherwise might not. The incarnating power of fictionalization thus provides a level of protection that opens up a channel for personal expression.

In “Chronotope of the Novel”, Bakhtin argues that the figure of the rogue is particularly fit for serving as a conduit for this kind of “pure natural subjectivity”.<sup>51</sup> The rogue’s very purpose, he argues, lies in providing a “formal and generic mask” from behind which the author can taunt—and mirror—their experienced world. The rogue’s social role becomes a formal tool in the author’s literary arsenal: Venechka does not lose social status because he unfavorably compares communism to hiccups, on the contrary, he makes such comparisons *because* he has no social status left to lose. The freedom of *skaz*, too, has traditionally been conditional upon similar terms. Vinogradov writes, “сказ, идущий от авторского я, свободен. Писательское я—не имя, а местоимение. Следовательно, под ним можно скрыть что угодно”. (“*Skaz* which derives from the ‘I’ of the author is free. The ‘I’ of the writer is not a name, it is a pronoun. Consequently, anything can be hidden beneath it”).<sup>52</sup> Once again, Vinogradov notes the strict formal division between the narrator of the text, who is the “author” only in the proverbial sense—the author who exists “only as a pronoun”—and the author-creator, the real artistic force behind the work. A striking parallel between Eikhenbaum’s analysis of the role of the rogue and Vinogradov’s observation about the nature of *skaz* is that both are ensconced in the language of “masking” and “hiding”. Both posit that the author-creator uses the language of the text as a protective barrier, allowing authors to externalize their worldview, transform it through the process of fictionalization, and endow it upon their characters—or create characters who skew or deny it—as a way to sublimate their own opinions and desires. The freedom of fiction, according to both critics, comes precisely as a result of its sublimating potential.

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<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, “Chronotope of the Novel,” 164.

<sup>52</sup> Vinogradov, “Проблема сказа в стилистике” 53.

If *Moscow-Petushki* was adhering to the traditional relationship between author and protagonist, Venechka's profound isolation and narrative mastery would provide Erofeev a way to express his unfiltered view of the world, without concerning himself with how his character's worldview would reflect back on him. Instead, Venedikt Erofeev rejects this notion of formal distancing, variously "unmasking" himself in the eyes of the reader. Within the text itself, Venechka explicitly derides artists who hide behind their characters as a means of protection. During an intense discussion about the role of alcoholism in Russian culture, the Man with the Black Moustache argues that all the great intellectuals in history drank. The Decembrist is loath to accept this idea, proposing Goethe as a counter-example of a significant figure who abstained from alcohol. His interlocutor finds himself stumped and discouraged, and, though Venechka does not agree with the premise, he pities the disheartened man and steps in to restore the system:

Думайте, ему не хотелось выпить? Конечно, хотелось. Так он, чтобы самому не скопытиться, вместо себя заставлял пить всех своих персонажей.

Возьмите хоть "Фауста": кто там не пьет? все пьют. Фауст пьет и молодеет, Зибель пьет и лезет на Фауста, Мефистофель только и делает, что пьет и угощает буршей и поет им "Блоху"...Алкоголик он был, *алкаш* он был, ваш тайный советник Иоганн фон Гёте. И руки у него *как бы* тряслись!..<sup>53</sup>

That Goethe did not drink himself, Venechka argues, does not make him any less of an alcoholic; the only difference is instead of acting on those impulses, Goethe sublimates them through his

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<sup>53</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 91-92. "You think he didn't want to drink? Of course he did. And so to keep himself from croaking, he made his characters drink instead of him. Take Faust, for example: who doesn't drink there? Everyone drinks. Faust drinks and becomes younger, Siebel drinks and starts getting on Faust's case, all Mephistopheles does is drink and treat everyone to bourbon and sing the "Song of the Flea" to them...He was an alcoholic, a real *alkie*, your secret counselor Johann von Goethe. And it was *as if* his hands shook!.." Original emphasis.

characters. To put his argument in Bakhtinian terms, Faust and the other characters become masks behind which Goethe can hide his own proclivities. Venechka proceeds to describe such maneuvering as more cowardly and egotistical than alcoholism itself, accusing Goethe of artistic lowliness.<sup>54</sup> Ann Komorami points out there “there is a serious metanarrative point here about authorial investment and risk taking”<sup>55</sup> as Erofeev’s investment in his protagonist runs directly counter to Goethe’s strategic displacement. Whereas Goethe unloads his sins upon his characters, Erofeev shares in them, blurring the line between author and protagonist.

He accomplishes this partially through the lack of temporal logic in the text, which destabilizes any firm understanding of Venechka’s position as narrator in relation to the events of the journey. Venechka’s use of the past tense, which would imply a degree of temporal distance from the unfolding events, is undercut by the continued infringement of the chapter titles which—seemingly—indicate his spatial location *at the time of* the narration. His long conversations with himself, which occur with increasing frequency near the end of the novella, add to the confusion, as their extensive use of the imperative case implies that Venechka must convince himself to perform the actions described in the novella even as he narrates them. The ambiguity culminates at the final sentence of the novel: “И с тех пор я не приходил в сознание, и никогда не приду”. (“And since then, I haven’t regained conscious, and will never regain it again”).<sup>56</sup> At this point, Venechka seemingly speaks from two simultaneous narrative planes; the word “never” acknowledges his death as irreversible and irrevocable, while the use of the present tense in the same clause implies that some version of himself continues to exist in

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<sup>54</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 91.

<sup>55</sup> Ann Komorami, “Performance and Performativity,” 421.

<sup>56</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 179.

order to tell the tale. Thus, at every turn, Venechka reveals himself as more-that-character, more-than-narrator.

This cultivated porousness between author and protagonist is reinforced in the autobiographical details which Erofeev inserts strategically into the novella. Venechka's alcoholism certainly takes from Erofeev's own life, as tales of his spirits-infused exploits have become legendary in Russian cultural lore: the poet Olga Sedakova, who was a close friend of the author, wrote that alcohol was his "возвышающей страстью" ("exalting passion").<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the dateline at the end of the novella informs the reader that "the author" wrote this novella while working on a cable-laying crew—the same job which Venechka-the-character held until a week before the narrative opens. These inclusions serve to displace the novella from the realm of the purely fictional into the quasi-autobiographical, confusing Bakhtinian conceptions of boundary and rejecting "outsidedness" as a creative tool.

By giving the protagonist his own name, Erofeev only furthers the novella's opacity. Venechka's first conversation with his lover is precipitated by the fact that she recognizes him as Erofeev, the author: "Я одну вещицу вашу читала. И знаете: я бы никогда не подумала, что на полсотне страниц можно столько нанести околесицы. Это выше человеческих сил!" ("I read one of your pieces. And you know what: I would never have thought that you could fit so much nonsense into just fifty pages. It's superhuman!").<sup>58</sup> This quote, incidentally, appears close to the fifty-page mark of the novella itself. In typical contrarian fashion, Venechka is flattered by her insult and promises her that he can rise to even greater nonsensical heights, raising the possibility that the rest of the novella exists to live up to Venechka's besotted promise

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<sup>57</sup> Olga Sedakova, "Несказанная речь на вечере Венедикта Ерофеева," in *Дружба народов* (1991), 264.

<sup>58</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 54.

to his beloved—an interpretation that makes it difficult to determine where the authorship of the text begins and ends.

The effect of this blurring even bleeds into critical literature, in which critics often refer to Erofeev-the-author as “Venechka”.<sup>59</sup> This rarely happens the other way around, however: the novel’s protagonist uses his own full name only once, close to the end of the novel, when the lines between hallucination and reality within the text have become wholly blurred. The “Venechka” of the novella does not aspire to fully encompass the figure of the author, but he is undeniably a part of him—an intimate part, based on the use of the affectionate diminutive form of the name. Mikhail Epshtein considers this part of the greater mythologization of Erofeev: “*Москва-Петушки* не просто по названию поэма, но и вполне лирическое произведение, поскольку автор воссоздает в нем самого себя, Веничку, так что Веничка жизни и Веничка поэмы становятся одним лицом, а это уже начало мифа”. (“*Moscow-Petushki* is not a prose poem in name only; it is quite a lyrical work, in so far as the author recreates himself, Venechka, within it, so that the Venechka of the world and the Venechka of the poem become one entity, and that is already the beginning of a myth”).<sup>60</sup> Epshtein’s hypothesis that it is possible to fully unify author and character into a single entity merits debate, especially seeing as *Moscow-Petushki* has moments in which the narrator’s intention differs from that of the author, indicating a degree of doubled consciousness that draws into question Epshtein’s totalizing analysis.<sup>61</sup> It is clear, however, that Erofeev intentionally makes it difficult to talk about the character without implicating himself. Erofeev does not create Venechka as a means to exteriorize his worldview;

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<sup>59</sup> See Epshtein, 173 and Genis, 183.

<sup>60</sup> Epshtein, “После карнавала,” 171.

<sup>61</sup> See pages 7-8 of this essay and the “eyes of his countrymen” excerpt.

instead, Venechka embodies an interiority that blurs the boundaries between character and author. It is by virtue of this confusion that Venechka achieves an extra-textual boundlessness.

In highlighting the novella's ties to the lyrical tradition, Epshtein hits upon a template that better explains the author-protagonist relationship in this novella, one that proposes Venechka as a sort of neoromantic hero in the traditions of poets like Byron. Of this kind of figure, Bakhtin writes, "Такой герой бесконечен для автора, то есть все снова и снова возрождается, требуя все новых и новых завершающих форм, которые он сам же и разрушает, своим самознанием". ("This kind of hero is endless in the eyes of the author, meaning he is reborn over and over again, necessitating newer and newer totalizing forms which he himself then breaks by virtue of his self-consciousness".)<sup>62</sup> For the Romantic hero, wholeness is a limitation; he pushes back consistently against the notion that the entirety of his being can be knowable to the reader. Thus, the empty spaces within the novella, the "excess of denial"<sup>63</sup> in which it indulges, contribute to its neoromantic quality. Venechka's reticence regarding his first sexual encounter of his beloved, self-censored through a long series of ellipses; the unnamed word once scrawled on the window of the railway cabin, the outline of which provides Venechka a peak into the world outside the train; the indescribable horror of the early morning hours spent foraging for drinks, commemorated only by a moment of silence; even the mysterious identity of his executioners—all these narrative voids permit Venechka a degree of interiority that shrouds him in a veil of unknowability. Indeed, Venechka finds himself plagued throughout the novella by a profound desire for *целомудрие*, or "chastity", which exists in conflict with the openness expected of him. One particularly striking example of this tension occurs when, in a fit of self-righteous indignation, his four roommates confront him over his refusal to announce his intention

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<sup>62</sup> Bakhtin, "Автор и герой."

<sup>63</sup> Beraha, "Out of and Into the Void," 23.

to relieve himself before heading to the bathroom. They see his desire for privacy as a personal affront, accusing him of believing that his modesty makes him superior to them. Though Venechka adamantly denies this, he ultimately complies with their demands: “Ну что ж, я встал и пошел. Не для того, чтобы облегчить себя. Для того, чтобы их облегчить”. (“So I arose and went. Not to relieve myself. To relieve them”.)<sup>64</sup> Venechka’s yearning for modesty is thus rendered futile and ridiculous, as the incongruence of his behavior with their expectations does nothing but create distance and distrust between them. Beyond the ridiculousness of his neighbors’ complain, however, lies a broader point: His roommates act as stand-ins for the reading audience, which feels entitled to the totality of the narrator’s experience. By resisting that expectation, Venechka challenges the readers’ understanding of the function of the narrative role itself.

Venechka’s identity exists precisely in this point of tension between extroversion and introversion. While the novella’s formal structure dictates that his literary role is that of the symbolic other, Venechka refuses to be pinned down as a disempowered symbol, a mere conduit for socially subversive commentary. Instead, he recreates the world in his own image, as a confusing and often terrifying kaleidoscopic collection of experiences and hallucinations. This exercise in externalization leaves him profoundly vulnerable, a feeling which is only intensified by Erofeev’s insistence upon casting off the mask of the author and laying bare the ties between himself and his protagonist. Venechka’s vulnerability, for all its complexities and limitations, becomes a form of rebellion—one that is not political, but deeply personal. He rebels against a social structure which deprives him of agency, against the formal limitations that limit his narrative potential, against the very audience with whom he shares his story. From the beginning,

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<sup>64</sup> Ерофеев, *Москва-Петушки*, 31.

Venechka understands that vulnerability has a profound self-destructive potential: “Я безгранично расширил сферу интимного—и сколько раз это губило меня” (“I have infinitely expanded the sphere of the intimate—and how many times has that proven to be the death of me”).<sup>65</sup> The denouement of the novella proves him right once more: the narrative gets away from him, turning in on itself and devouring Venechka within it. At the same time, however, it is the same act that allows him to exist, to his last, outside of the scope of any totalizing boundaries.

#### *V. Conclusion: The End of the Line*

Identifying formal elements in *Moscow-Petushki* must be predicated upon an assumption of their collapse. This collapse, however, is not an end in itself. Rather, it opens the door for the appearance of the unlikeliest of revolutionary figures. Venechka Erofeev—a homeless man, an alcoholic, a solitary lost soul in a sea of other lost souls—asserts his individuality unimposingly, quietly, “медленно и неправильно, чтобы не сумел загородиться человек, чтобы человек был грустен и растерян”. (“slowly and incorrectly, so that a person can’t close himself off, so that a person remains melancholy and bewildered”).<sup>66</sup> Yet assert himself he does, for as long as he possibly can. The power behind his narrative voice, which supersedes any other organizing structures comes not from its rhetorical capacity, but from its reflective, vulnerable tone. This voice, the singular unifying force in a text riddled with contradiction, pierces through the novella, leaving in its path the destruction of both formal and social barriers.

It is difficult to say whether that destruction is rooted primarily in a rejection of social mores, which then extend into a rejection of linguistic forms, or whether it works the other way

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<sup>65</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 27

<sup>66</sup> Erofeev, *Москва-Петушки*, 10-11

around, meaning the rejection of form encompasses within it an implicit denunciation of the social. The two seem inextricably intertwined, rooted as they are in a stifling social order the existence of which arose out of the failed promise of a linear trajectory toward a bright future. Living in the ashes of that failure, Venechka's desire for interiority is a form of rebellion—not a communal rebellion, but an individualistic, private, personal one—which, in *Moscow-Petushki*, is the only kind worth having.

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