

Aspects of Post-Utopian Imagination:

The Cases of Brodsky, P'etsukh, Petrushevskaya, and Makanin¹

Mitsuyoshi Numano (沼野充義)

The Demise of a Utopia in Reality

The 20th century Russian literature has given birth to a variety of anti-utopian novels, one example of which is *We* by Evgenii Zamiatin. As a backdrop to the rise of such anti-utopian literature, the Soviet Union, as “a utopia realized” naturally provided an ideal target for parody and criticism. It was because the Soviet system was still intact that opposition through anti-utopian imagination was possible. However, with the commencement of *Perestroika* in the mid-1980's, the supposedly solid system began to crumble. At the same time, in the field of literature, various restrictions were relaxed, and it gave way to an increasing use of non-realist techniques characteristic of modern literature, which had not been allowed in the previous period of socialist realism. This change led to the creation of qualitatively new utopian/ anti-utopian literature. This “newness” was not only an issue of technique. Faced with the decisive fall of the object of parody, namely, the utopia in reality, Russian society was left unable to dream about either a utopia or an anti-utopia and entered the “post-utopian era”. It is quite possible to think that this shift in *Weltanschauung* has contributed greatly to the rise of this new type of literature. The goal of this paper is to discuss this new trend in literature through an analysis of several specific examples.

¹ This is a slightly revised version of my paper originally given in the panel “Postmodern Perspectives on Russia's Other” (chaired by Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy) at *AASPCSA/ANZSA 1998 International Conference on Communist and Post-Communist Societies* held in Melbourne on 7-10 July 1998. Special thanks are due to Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover, and other discussants who shared with me interest in the topic and gave me insightful comments.

Brodsky: *Marbles* (Мрамор)

The original version of the play *Marbles* in the Russian language was completed in 1982, and was published by the American publisher *Ardis*. The English translation was published in 1989. However, the conception of the work can be traced back earlier, as a prototype of *Marbles* is already evident in the poem "Post aetatem nostram" written by Brodsky in the Soviet Union in 1970.

Marbles takes the form of a dialogue between two prisoners imprisoned in a "tower". Considering this work was begun in the Soviet Union, the reader can imagine, naturally, that implications aiming at totalitarianism are embedded in this work. In fact, in his autobiographical essay "Less than One," Brodsky reveals an excellent definition of prison based on his own experience: "The formula for prison is a lack of space counterbalanced by a surplus of time".² In *Marbles*, one of the characters, Publius, makes precisely the same statement: "Да, тюрьма есть недостаток пространства, возмещенный избытком времени".³ Taking such factors into consideration, we cannot deny that the personal experience of the poet's clash with the Soviet system underlies the situation in which the play is set. Drawing an analogy between the Roman Empire and "the Soviet Empire", the "tower" as a prison house can be seen as a metaphor for Soviet society and it is also possible to view the escape assisted by art as connected with the writer's personal experience. However, it should not be forgotten that this work is made unique by the power of poetic logic in a dimension that transcends personal experience or social reality.

The Roman Empire, surrounded by a classical ambiance, provides the backdrop for *Marbles*. However, the actual time is set as "the second century after our era." Brodsky himself has referred to this play as a "double anachronism". This label must come out of a consideration of the unique setting which moves in both directions, past and future (or "history" and "utopia"). Actually, it is not just time, but almost all aspects of this play that are presented as complementary and as possessing a dual nature. The educated Tullius and barbarian Publius, freedom and

² Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), p.23.

³ Иосиф Бродский, Мрамор (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), p.14.

constraint, the swan and its double, “up” and “down”, all of these elements face each other as though they were mirror reflections of each other; and the present time of the play functions as the mirror in this dichotomy.

The 20th century has seen the birth of several classic anti-utopian novels such as Zamiatin’s *We* and Orwell’s *1984*. If, within this line of anti-utopian novels, *Marbles* can be seen as claiming a unique position, it may be due to the quality of duality inherent in the structure of this work, especially the dual nature of the time setting, the nature of anachronism as understood in its original meaning. In Brodsky’s work, the complementary elements “past” and “present” form a complete circle, and the “present” stands at a dead-end, trapped within this circle. It is this “dead-end” that the peculiarity of Brodsky’s utopia consists in. This concept of utopia as a “dead-end” (тупик), where no further progress is possible, should already be familiar to Brodsky’s readers. In his poem “The Lullaby of Cape Cod” we read:

Местность, где я нахожусь, есть пик
как бы горы. Дальше – воздух, Хронос.
Сохрани эту речь; ибо рай – тупик.⁴

One contradictory situation brought about by this spatial dead-end is that the concept of utopia merges with anti-utopia and thus the two become inseparable. And the concept utopia /anti-utopia is realized in the concrete form of an “empire”. In *Marbles*, it is given concrete form through the Roman empire that has enlarged its territory to its limit. When the territory reaches its limit and can no longer be expanded, the only possibility left for the empire is to transcend space and “merge with time”. This is why the true Roman Tullius attempts to become one with time through sleep.

However, for Brodsky, the “empire” is not only the Roman Empire, which gave birth to the classical poets he admires. At the same time it is also his home country, the Soviet Union, and America that has “adopted” him as a son. And at the same time, it is none of these. In other words, the “Empire” is more than anything a conceptual device for Brodsky, and what he has demonstrated in *Marbles* is a frightening and humorous drama which develops around the vulnerable existence of man within such an abstract conceptual framework. *Marbles* was

⁴ Иосиф Бродский, Часть речи (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), p.108.

written before the fall of the Soviet Union, yet it can be said to be a work which anticipates the post-utopian situation left after the destruction of the classical utopian/anti-utopian framework.

P'etsukh: "The New Factory (НОВЫЙ ЗАВОД)"

Vyacheslav P'etsukh (born in 1946) is a writer known for his unique humor and irony. The distinction between "good" and "evil" in his works is not simple, and his droll style creates an ambiguous impression so that it is difficult for the reader to tell whether he is mocking, being serious, being ironic, or protesting.

This "ambiguity" can be sensed clearly in his mysterious short story "The New Factory" which appeared in the June of 1987 issue of *Novyi mir*. The main character of the work, Komnatov, flees from his home after a trivial dispute with his wife. Having no place in particular to go to, he buys a ticket and gets on a train. As he finds only unpleasant passengers in his compartment, he begins longing to return home. However, he somehow falls asleep and, in the morning, arrives at a station called "The New Factory". Outside of the station, Komnatov finds an abnormally orderly world and feels as if he has "passed through a magic door and somehow entered a wonderland".

As he is given a tour of the town by three boys he meets, he realizes that this town is a sort of utopia based on principles which are difficult to understand. He asks the boys walking with him "Why don't you go to school?", and they answer "We don't go to school because we don't want to. We are free to do this in our town." They say that adults also work only for their pleasure and that no one is forced to work. After hearing such an explanation, Komnatov feels uneasy and asks the boys some more questions.

"I don't understand. If no one works properly, how do you survive?"

"That is precisely why things are working out! In other words, what we have here is ordinary jolly life based on respect of individuality."⁵

Then another boy reveals the equation "the Soviet government plus respect

⁵ «Новый мир», 1987, №6, стр. 82.

of individuality” equals “an ordinary jolly life”. This expression is, of course, a parody of Lenin’s famous slogan “Communism is Soviet power plus electrification” (“Коммунизм есть Советская власть плюс электрификация”). After hearing such an explanation, Komnatov becomes confused. He begins to feel a sort of resentment toward the people of this town. This resentment was something like a feeling which ordinary people feel towards the elite, heroes, or wise men. Then Komnatov decides to leave the town quickly. In the train on his way home, he ponders: “How strange life is... If I hadn’t argued with my wife, I would never have known about these people only 150km away from my house, who have a completely different way of life.” However, he soon feels he does not want to return home and develops the desire to return to “The New Factory”. Eventually the train slows down to a stop, and when Komnatov looks out of the window, strangely enough, he sees the station name “The New Factory” ...

What is the basic idea underlying this strange utopian story? It does not appear to be a specific parody of Soviet society as a frightening “anti-utopia”. Rather, it seems to provide an ironic portrait of the indecisiveness of “the ordinary man” in his longing for a utopia and his hesitation when actually coming across one. However, it is unlikely that P’etsukh is attempting to criticize the ordinary man through his ironic tone. It can be said that his basic strategy is to emphasize the great distance between reality and the utopian ideal by focusing upon the vulgarity and carelessness of ordinary life.

Petrushevskaya: “The New Robinsons (НОВЫЕ РОБИНЗОНЫ)”

The short story “The New Robinsons --- A Journal of the end of the 20th century” by Liudmila Petrushevskaya (born in 1938), which appeared in the August of 1989 issue of *Novyi mir*, can be seen as a science fiction short story which, using the framework of the Robinson Crusoe story, portrays the destruction of the world. The time is not specified, but it is probably set in the near future. A family of three, consisting of a couple and their daughter, escapes from the city and moves to a remote country village, where they live in isolated from civilization. The parents are 42 years old and their daughter -- 18 years old. The entire story is told from the

perspective of the daughter in the first person. However, it is not at all made clear why this family has run away from the city to the countryside. What the reader can see clearly is that the father seems to be possessed by a mania of escaping. The family simply follows the father and begins a modern Robinson Crusoe type life. "Father was satisfied with his new fate and didn't think about the city. He left many enemies in the city, however, including his parents... My father, who was a geologist and athlete who enjoyed mountain climbing but injured his leg, lived intent on escaping. And this growing mania for escape matched perfectly with the surrounding circumstances and we escaped at a time when our life was still unclouded."⁶

Only three other old women live in the village to which the family moved. Money is of no use here, and bartering is the only way to acquire necessary food supplies. And, the narration by the 18 year-old daughter completely rejects ideological generalizations or abstractions, paying attention only to specific items and incidents. Is it possible for this to be a pastoral utopia discovered by people who have run away from the "anti-utopia" in the city? The answer is no, the issue cannot be stated so simply. The old women live face to face with death, everyday life is hard, their life is modest to the extreme and they lack even basic food supplies. And, the story-teller also longs for her friends in the city.

Whatever it may be that the father is running away from, he is unsatisfied with the abode in the countryside and works hard to make a secret cabin in the forest. When they see that danger is approaching their country home, they quickly move to the forest. In the forest, they can not hear anything on the radio. Perhaps mankind has been extinct and they are only ones left. By this time, they have become a family of five by taking in the young daughter of a woman who committed suicide and an abandoned baby boy. It is still possible for mankind to continue to survive ...

As can be seen from this description of the story line, "The New Robinsons" is consistently ambiguous. There prevails a sense of crisis – maybe, the final hour is approaching. But it is not clear specifically what kind of anti-

⁶ Людмила Петрушевская, "Новые Робинзоны". В кн.: *Людмила Петрушевская, Собрание сочинений в пяти томах, том 2* (Харьков и Москва, 1995), стр.80.

utopian end will be met. All of this might even be an illusion on the part of the father and daughter. It is difficult to say that the Robinson-like life in the countryside has enough potential as a utopia to stand up against such an end. What the author attempts through this work is not likely to offer a critique of the Soviet type of totalitarian system (there is no concrete image of an anti-utopia here). It rather seems to highlight the situation left after the destruction of such a system against a background penetrated by the apocalyptic atmosphere.

Makanin: *The Manhole* (Лаз)

One of the recent works by Vladimir Makanin (born in 1937), *The Manhole* (*Novyi mir*, May 1991), can also be read as a unique anti-utopian novel. From some allusions, it is clear that the novel is set in Moscow. However, the time is not specified. Most likely it is conceived as taking place in the near future. There is no explanation of what sort of catastrophe has taken place. Anyway, the city has gone completely wild, there is almost no merchandise in the stores, and the situation, overrun with theft and violence, resembles a civilization in its final hour. Even more frightening are the "mobs". It is not uncommon for someone to be caught up in a mob, and, unable to move away, to be trampled to death. As the city is in such a state, almost none of the public facilities are functioning. However, the main character Kliucharev knows of a "manhole" (or rather a trap door) in the ground of a nearby overgrown lot. Going underground through this manhole, he can reach a separate world, bright and content, and completely different from the "dark" city up above.

The contrast between the two worlds, the dark and wasted world "up above" and the bright and content world "underground" reminds one, for example, of *Time Machine* by H.G. Wells. However, in the case of Makanin, there is almost no science fiction type explanation for this mysterious anti-utopian world. One can only imagine that this is some sort of man-made shelter established by the elite who have escaped from the wasteland up above. Although the main character Kliucharev is an inhabitant of the world up above, occasionally he passes through the manhole to the world underground and procures tools which can not be obtained up above. He needs a shovel and other tools because he is trying to dig a "cave" in

order to survive in the world “up above” together with his wife and mentally retarded son. Naturally, Kliucharev is not the only one making such efforts. The other people left up above are each in their own way, working hard to survive.

Despite the fact that the world up above is in such a state as if it were approaching its final hour, the inhabitants of the world underground only dine decadently at luxurious restaurants and leisurely indulge in discussions of abstract issues at the café. And in the back room of the café, they are conducting a poll: “Do you believe in the future?” The directions for the poll read as follows: “The survey is very simple. If you believe in the future of your dim city, receive a ticket at the registration window and take it home with you. If you do not believe in the future, return the ticket.” And the returned tickets are thrown away on the floor. Because everyone throws their tickets away, in the end the discarded tickets form an enormous heap. There are election officers at the voting area, who call upon people to take their tickets home with them, in other words “to believe in the future”. But almost no one listens to their propaganda. The people that discard their tickets feel that “Too much blood and too many tears have been shed. This is why we cannot believe in and do not want a future built on such blood and tears.”⁷

Viewed in this way, Makanin’s *The Manhole* is also extremely ambiguous --- that is to say that it is an anti-utopian novel which shows no clear salvation or decisive catastrophe. Perhaps this novel is an extremely deformed portrayal of the reality of a wasted Moscow after the fall of the Soviet system. At least for inhabitants of the present Moscow, the world in *The Manhole* will not be simply an imaginary illustration but must seem to be a reflection of their severe reality.

Makanin has originally been involved in the task of creating a new reality where previously people have only found “ambiguity” or “void”. The literary critique Irina Rodnyanskaya has focused upon this unique world of Makanin’s and calls it “anti-utopian”. Here, “utopian” refers to the idea which has been deeply-rooted in the Soviet Union for a long time that literature should depict good and evil clearly, and can succeed in leading society. Certainly it can be said that in contrast to such “utopian Soviet thought”, Makanin presents a sharp “anti”.

⁷ Владимир Маканин, Лаз. В кн.: Владимир Маканин, Лаз. Повести и рассказы (Москва: Вагриус, 1998), стр.353-354.

However, Makanin does not himself present an ideal in place of "utopia" nor does he categorize people and thought simply into good and evil. What Makanin attempts in the novel *The Manhole* is to purposely take a stand in the ambiguous border between utopia and anti-utopia without regressing to monolithic "utopian thought". At this point it is difficult to call such a mysterious world "anti-utopian". And the same thing can be said of Petrushevskaya's "The New Robinsons" and P'etsukh's "The New Factory". Being neither utopian, nor anti-utopian, they are something qualitatively new.

From Utopia to Post-Utopia

Then, what exactly are these works? I would like to label them "post-utopian fiction". In considering the new quality of this "post-utopian" prose, it may be of use to refer to the concept "meta-utopia" suggested by the American scholar Edith Clowes in her book *Russian Experimental Fiction*. According to Clowes, "meta-utopia" is fundamentally different from "anti-utopia" which demands a selection of "one or the other". Because meta-utopia is "positioned on the borders of the utopian tradition and yet mediates between a variety of utopian modes,"⁸ it is able to compare the possibilities of a number of utopias while challenging each one. This is much more ambiguous and complex than the traditional anti-utopia. In other words, utopian/anti-utopian visions in meta-utopian fiction are never contracted into one single vision. Rather, this type of fiction constantly considers the possibilities of more than one utopia/anti-utopia. Being conscious of the line which divides them, it continues to float on the borderline. P'etsukh, Petrushevskaya, and Makanin's works examined here can in this sense all be called "meta-utopian".⁹

⁸ Edith Clowes, *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology After Utopia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.4.

⁹ As far as I know, the term "meta-utopia" was first given extensive usage by Gary Saul Morson in his book *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1981).

Then, why were such qualitatively different meta-utopian works written one after another from the late 1980's? The time after the late 1980's was the period when the deceptive nature of the Soviet system became evident to everyone and when *Perestroika* tumbled into the collapse of the Soviet system. What occurred simultaneously was the conclusive destruction of a monolithic worldview. That is, the "*grand récit*" (in Lyotardian sense) of utopia/anti-utopia was finally destroyed. All that were left were various "small stories". And it is the Russian post-modern fiction of "meta-utopia" that floats uncomfortably on the borderline presented by these "small stories".

Finally, here is one more example of typical Russian post-utopian fiction. It is Viktor Pelevin's short story "The Ninth Dream of Vera Pavlovna".¹⁰ This is a grotesque fantasy story where present-day Moscow is sucked up by a tidal wave of sewage. It is an intense reflection of the final hour atmosphere in post-Perestroika Russia. Particular notice should be taken of the title. Needless to say, Vera Pavlovna is the name of the heroine in Chernyshevsky's famous novel *What is to be done?* Her third dream is well known as a beautiful utopian one. On the other hand, the epithet "ninth" in Russian implies "dangerous" and "catastrophic" as can be seen from use in Aivazovsky's famous painting *The Ninth Wave* (*Девятый вал*). Here, it is clearly associated with Moscow's final collapse. Thus, in Pelevin's work, "utopian" and "anti-utopian" are already tied together in the very title and it demonstrates succinctly the ambiguity and duality of post-utopian fiction.

¹⁰ Виктор Пелевин, "Девятый сон Веры Павловны". В кн.: Виктор Пелевин, Синий фонарь (Москва: «Текст», 1991), стр.140-156.

論文要旨

ポスト・ユートピア的想像力の諸相

——プロツキー、ピエツフ、ペトルシェフスカヤ、マカーニンの場合

沼野充義

1980年代半ばにペレストロイカが始まると、風刺の対象としての「実現したユートピア」の決定的な崩壊という現実を背景にして、ロシア社会はいかなるユートピアもアンチ・ユートピアも夢見ることのできない、「ポスト・ユートピアの時代」に入ってしまった。この世界観の変化が、「ポスト・ユートピア的」と呼ぶべき新しいタイプの文学の隆盛に大きく貢献することになった。

本論文では、4つの作品を具体的に取り上げ、この「ポスト・ユートピア的フィクション」の特徴、その質的な新しさを検討する。4つの作品とは、プロツキーの戯曲『大理石』(1984)、ピエツフの短篇「新しい工場」(1987)、ペトルシェフスカヤの短篇「新ロビンソン」(1989)、マカーニンの長編『抜け穴』(1991)である。

これらの作品は、物事の善悪を「黒か白か」に決めるユートピア的思考にも、それを裏返しただけの反ユートピア的思考にも回帰せず、ユートピア／反ユートピアの間の曖昧な境界に敢えて踏みとどまりながら、質的に新しいジャンルを形成している。筆者はそれを、アメリカの研究者モーションやクルーズの用語を借りて、メタ・ユートピア的なポスト・ユートピア文学と呼ぶことにしたい。このような新しいタイプの文学作品が目立つようになってきた背景には、ユートピア的思考が前提としていた一枚岩の世界観の決定的な崩壊がある。リオタール流に言えば、ユートピア／反ユートピアという「大きな物語」が崩れ去った結果、様々な「小さな物語」が派生し、それらの「小さな物語」の境界線上に漂うように生起しているのが、「メタ・ユートピア」といういかにもロシア的なポストモダンの物語なのである。

最後にもう一つ好例として付け加えておきたいのが、ヴィクトル・ペレーヴィンの短編「ヴェーラ・パーヴロヴナの9番目の夢」である。これは世紀末の雰囲気濃厚に漂わせたグロテスクな幻想小説だが、そのタイトルそのものの中にユートピアと反ユートピアの二つが封印されていて、典型的なメタ・ユートピア小説になっていると考えられる。

(追記 この論文は、1998年7月にメルボルンで行なわれた「共産主義・ポスト共産主義社会についての国際学会」において、「ロシアの<他者>へのポストモダンのパースペクティブ」というパネルで発表した報告を若干改訂したものである。)