

Angela Brintlinger

Biography as an Oratorical Genre

Biography, or Autobiography: A Scholar's Life

A few years ago I was invited to give an 'inaugural lecture' upon being promoted to full professor. There are a couple of ways to give these inaugural lectures. Some people choose to present their current scholarly project. Others do a kind of summary or 'greatest hits' of their careers, highlighting specific moments and presenting their own intellectual biography.

As I prepared my version of this lecture I assumed that I would discuss my continuing fascination with the topic of biography as a genre, and in particular Iurii Tynianov, whose writings have been so influential for me. But as I sketched out my talk, it moved in a slightly different direction. I began to think about my own professional autobiography and how I have constructed it over the years through a variety of genres. I dug up an old reader report which called one of my articles "an example of generically innovative scholarship that brings together biography, theory and literary analysis in mutually informative ways", and I began to think more and more about the centrality of genre

questions in the construction of biography and autobiography, especially of and by literary figures¹. It wasn't merely biography that interested me, I discovered as I wrote, but genres more fully and at two levels: first in terms of what I study and teach: prose and poetry, the novel and the short story, biography itself; second, in terms of the "generically innovative" work I have produced. But as I thought more about my teaching and my writing, I realized that what connects them is voice. Lecturing, scholarly writing, and now this intellectual autobiography – all, it seems and in the words of Tynianov, "oratorical genres".

My scholarly work began with a book that explored the genre of biography and its cultural contexts in the years after the 1917 Russian Revolution. And even though my most recent monograph was a departure from the study of biography, some of the texts I used to explore how war was depicted in twentieth century literature were actually biographical or autobiographical

¹ «Slavic Review» reader spring 2012.

novels. I love to study the historical backstory of fictional works, the relationship between ‘fact and fiction’, which was coincidentally the theme of one of our professional conferences recently². But as a scholar of literature, I find myself constantly wondering how the genre of biography fits into the larger literary landscape.

One way to approach that question is to consider the spectrum of genres in contemporary literature. In an interview in the «New York Times Book Review» American novelist Russell Banks was asked to name his favorite literary genre, and his answer supplies a nice catalogue:

It would have to be literary fiction, I suppose, both novels and short stories, the genres I’ve tried to master for most of my adult life. On the other hand, maybe it’s lyric poetry, which is what first made me want to try writing myself. Yes, that. Or maybe biography, because of the birth-to-death narrative completeness. Or autobiography, for voice. Right, voice. Memoir, maybe. I love a good

memoir. History. Would have been a historian if I hadn’t started writing fiction. Or personal essay. Right, why not personal essay? (Banks 2015: 7)

He went on to name his “guilty pleasure”: travel books, including old guidebooks (Banks 2015: 7). In fact, he named almost every genre there is, although he left out my own guilty pleasure, cookbooks.

But it is a pretty complete list. And Banks’s emphases for biography and autobiography—because of the birth-to-death narrative completeness” and “for voice – really speak to my own studies of these genres, as we will see below. Structure and tone or voice are the “dominants” of the genres of biography and autobiography. Leaving popular genre fiction out of the discussion, in the first two parts of the essay I want to look at the nexus between orality and literary genres. But in the last part I will very briefly explore genre as something we write.

I. The ‘Oratorical Genre’

One of the more influential articles I read in graduate school was Iurii Tynianov’s *The Ode as an Oratorical Genre* (Тынянов

² Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, Philadelphia, PA, November 2015.

1929: 48-86)³. A detailed analysis of eighteenth century poet Mikhailo Lomonosov's theory and practice of ode-making, the essay argues that at the time orality was the dominant feature of the odic genre. Central to the argument is Tynianov's idea that every aspect of the ode, including its oral aspect, has a relationship to every other aspect of the ode, which he defined as a system, as well as to other systems located adjacent to it – in this case speech genres as a class.

In other words, the sounds, syntax, meter, rhyme, and meaning of the ode were dependent upon and emerged from the oral quality of this poetry. The argument is dense and perhaps not essential for our purposes here, but its title, awkward as it is, frequently echoes in my head, a kind of 'fill-in-the-blank game':

The Quotation as an Oratorical Genre.

The Conference Paper as an Oratorical Genre.

Teaching as an Oratorical Genre.

The Inaugural Lecture as an Oratorical Genre.

And the title of the current essay: *Biography as an Oratorical Genre.*

In Tynianov's day the word *performativity* had not yet been invented in any language, let alone scholarly Russian, but essentially that is what he was writing about. The performance of poetry (as with any oral act) changes the very essence of that poetry; it sounds different in its oral context than it does on paper, or in a later context. Intonation, inflection, emphasis. When we perform a genre – whether an ode or an inaugural lecture – the speech aspects are the ones that persuade.

Lomonosov, in addition to being a poet, scientist, and all-purpose Renaissance man, was also one of the first Russian literary theorists. Tynianov described how Lomonosov changed his ideas about what the ode was from the 1744 edition of his *Rhetoric* to the next, in 1748. Persuasion, not merely logical argument, became dominant – and persuasion needs orality. In an effort to categorize genres vis à vis speech acts, Lomonosov wrote:

Rhetoric is the art of speaking beautifully about any subject and thereby winning over others to one's point of view. . . . Discourse can be expressed in two ways: in

³ Translations in the text are mine.

prose or in poetry. . . . Sermons, histories, books of instruction are composed in prose, and hymns, odes, comedies, satires and other kinds of verse in poetry.

Of course lectures, and essays such as this one, are composed in prose. In his discussion of the ode per se, Tynianov interpreted Lomonosov to mean that the oral qualities of the work – trumped the meaning, or to some extent *constituted* the meaning – without the oral aspect, the ode ‘read’ differently.

It was because of Tynianov and his biographical novels of Russian romantic poets that I became a scholar of biography and biographical fiction. But much of the appeal of Tynianov for me was his own ‘speech orientation’ (in Russian *rechevaia ustanovka*), even in his highly theoretical work. As he wrote in his essay on the ode:

The literary system correlates with the closest non-literary series, that is, with speech, both with the material of the closest speech art-forms and with everyday speech. How does it correlate? In other words, where is the social function closest to the literary

series? This is the point where the term *orientation* gets its meaning. Orientation is not only the *dominant* of the work (or genre) which functionally colors the subordinate factors, it is also the *function* of the work (or the genre) in relation to the extraliterary speech series which is closest to it. Hence the enormous significance of speech orientation in literature.

Tynianov here was in teaching mode: the question and answer format, the careful definitions of each term. In writing about speech orientation, he used the tools and techniques of orality. About Tynianov himself, one might say more simply that it was the sound of his voice in essays and articles and even prose fiction that was dominant, whether he knew it or not.

This struggle, between the ostensible meaning of words and their speech orientation, became particularly real for me in some of Tynianov’s autobiographical writings. The oral aspect of Tynianov’s quips and phrasings kept his words in my head, and I felt compelled to wrestle with the complexities and contradictions of some of his other statements in part because of the

very way in which he expressed them. But it is not only Tynianov's writings that are intriguing. He is also fascinating as a historical figure. This was a man who incarnated at least two personas: on the one hand, literary theorist and literary historian, and on the other writer of historical fiction. While each of these kinds of work called to me as genres I wanted to explore, or indeed practice, it is also the case that between his personas there did not always exist a harmony, and that discrepancy drew my attention as well.

In 1930, Tynianov contributed a wonderful essay to a little collection called *How We Write*, a collection designed to explore writers' methods and to offer an ABC or a formula for aspiring Soviet writers based on a questionnaire: where and how do successful writers do their work, what materials do they choose, how many hours a day do they spend working, do they compose at their desks or elsewhere, how many drafts do they write, etc. etc. In his contribution, which addressed more his historical fiction than anything else, Tynianov explained: "Where the document ends, that's where I begin". He continued: "There are official documents that lie like people. I have no love for 'documents as such' . . . I feel pangs

of conscience when I discover that because I did not have a document, I did not go far enough beyond it or even reach it" (Тынянов 1930: 163). For a researcher, who sifts through letters, lists, files in archives, this distinction is essential – sometimes we read (or even generate) a document that we know is just for show, or to create a certain impression; and sometimes we sense that something should exist even if it doesn't.

For example, as a foreigner who spent a considerable amount of time in the Soviet Union, I sometimes wonder where all my *spravki* have gone. A *spravka* is like a permission slip, a hall pass, a document, as Tynianov might say. When I lived in Moscow, I had to go from one official to another, collecting signatures in order to obtain permission to do one or another thing, and I wonder where those documents are now. Perhaps there's a big stack somewhere? A cache in an archive, or a drawer in an old file cabinet? How would a researcher 'read' such documents? Would a researcher assume that I took every trip for which I gained permission, and that I didn't take any *without* permission? The documents surely exist, but interpreting them is another matter altogether.

In *his* discussion of the document Tynianov, whom I have characterized elsewhere as a 'literary scientist', seems to violate the rules of scholarship. His biographical fiction was precisely *fiction*, yet at the same time it is located somewhere between 'invention' and 'research, documents, facts'. As one memoirist has it: "Tynianov united knowledge and intuition, the 'document' and invention, scrupulous analysis and bold hypothesis" (Антокольский 1983: 249). For Tynianov, and for other novelists of his era, research for literary purposes had to be creative in nature, and researchers needed to be willing to go beyond the extant historical record, to feel the truth rather than find it, to believe in the document even if it never emerged from the archive.

With his vast experience as a researcher and literary historian, Tynianov was able to write fiction that was particularly convincing. "Tynianov-the-scholar", that same memoirist recalled, "was always reaching out his hand to Tynianov-the-artist-and-novelist" (Антокольский 1983: 253). Indeed, they worked together.

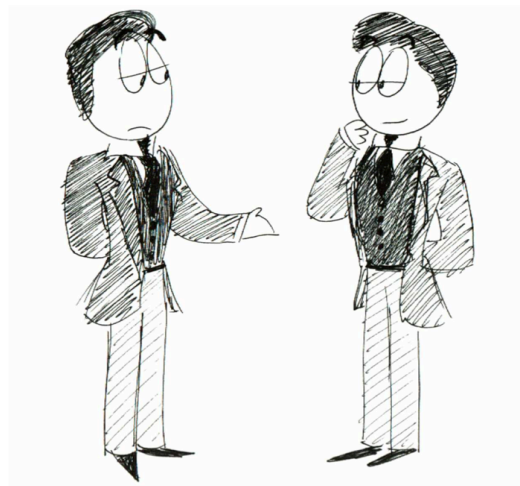


Figure 1: Tynianov-the-Scholar reaches out to Tynianov-the-Artist-and-Novelist. Credit: Amelia Smith.

For some years I have been considering writing a biography of Tynianov myself. One thing that stops me is that general readers have no idea who "this Tynianov fellow", as my student Amelia used to call him, was. Only a few would connect him with the most famous thing he wrote: the 1927 story *Lieutenant Kizhe* that was made into a film in 1934 with music by Sergei Prokofiev, music everyone in the Western world knows. The story of Kizhe – in the genre of 'historical anecdote' – is about documents and their power over human beings in a bureaucratic state, something that resonated for Tynianov in his day just as it did for many in the Soviet era, my-

self included. In fact, I began my research into Tynianov as a graduate student with a paper on *Kizhe*.

The questions of how fiction is related to fact, and how fiction might transform fact, occupied Tynianov for much of his career. In his theoretical work, for example, Tynianov contrasted the poetic schools of the 1820s that he called 'archaists' and 'innovators', exploring the tension between hewing to tradition and breaking new ground. It was in that work that Tynianov anticipated American historian Hayden White's assertion that imaginary discourse can often be more 'true' than historical presentation of the same material.

Tynianov showed those ideas in his fiction as well, for instance in his best work of fiction, the biographical novel addressing the tragic end of 19th century poet and diplomat Alexander Griboedov, who perished in a political struggle in Tehran in 1829. When Maxim Gor'kii read the stylized, montage- like *Death of the Vazir-Mukhtar*, he responded: "Griboedov is remarkable, although he is different than I expected. But you showed him so convincingly that he must have been like that. And if he wasn't, he will be now" (Костелянец 1985, 1: 25).

In Gor'kii's reaction, we do not perceive biography as an oratorical genre. Instead *Death of the Vazir-Mukhtar* seems more like a potboiler, an international spy scandal – more like contemporary genre fiction. But in fact the novel was a different kind of biography, a biography that violated the primary rule of the genre. Tynianov lost the "birth-to-death narrative completeness", as Russell Banks put it, in favor of a condensed, compressed time line, portraying Griboedov in the last months of his life, careening toward what Tynianov insisted was an inevitable ending in the east.

I have always loved the title of the only English translation of this novel, the 1938 abridged *Death and Diplomacy in Persia*, by Alec Brown – a title that highlights the scandal and downplays the protagonist even more than Tynianov did. But in categorizing *Death* as an off-kilter biographical novel, we might apply the criteria of one of Tynianov's most prominent contemporaries to ask the question: what kind of writer was Tynianov's protagonist Griboedov? Did his life lend itself to biography? In his 1923 essay *Literature and Biography*, Boris Tomashevskii argued, in brief, that some writers have biog-

ographies and some do not. He continued:

For a writer with a biography, the facts of the author's life must be taken into consideration. Indeed, in the works themselves the juxtaposition of the texts and the author's biography plays a structural role. The literary work plays on the potential reality of the author's subjective outpourings and confessions. Thus the biography that is useful to the literary historian is not the author's curriculum vitae or the investigator's account of his life. What the literary historian really needs is the biographical legend created by the author himself. Only such a legend is a literary fact. (Tomashevskii 1978: 47)

Tynianov, I think, started from this point: his biographies are all focused on writers of the Romantic era (Wilhelm Kiu-khel'beker, Alexander Griboedov, Alexander Pushkin), and he was investigating this question: whether or not they were *writers with biographies* in Tomashevskii's sense of the phrase, to what extent they had dipped into their own lives to

enhance their literary creations. Himself a writer of creative fiction, Tynianov scrutinized their poetry, seeking in it encoded feelings and personal opinions. Did Griboedov have a biographical legend, one in addition to the life of his *Woe from Wit* character Chatskii? It's quite possible that Tynianov did not perceive one, which is why the novel he wrote was heavier on fate and intrigue than on birth-to-death biographical structure. At the same time, he did find the actual lives of his poet-subjects to be compelling, and as he delved into archives to find historical facts – letters, rough drafts, the bill from a dinner at an inn – Tynianov began to weave biographical legends of his own, drawing on intuition. He used those historical facts, “the document as such”, as he put it, but he also invented literary facts. And often readers believed those facts: as Gor'kii said: “you showed him so convincingly that he must have been like that. And if he wasn't, he will be now”. Persuasion, the oral quality of rhetoric, here depended not on orality at all but on the fabric Tynianov wove to connect the biographical data. At the same time, the dry tone of the novel, the sense that “everything was already decided” (a line on the opening page of the novel)

and Tynianov's emphasis on the inevitable forces of the inscrutable east, made this portrait of Griboedov convincing.

II. Genre Matters

The more I read, study, and teach, the more convinced I become that genre matters. When I read a novel and find out only later that it is based on the life of a historical person, I am frustrated, and when I read it a second time I find very different meanings in it⁴. When I read a journalistic account as if it were a novel, it lacks the plot and character development I expect, and when I go back to it with its true genre designation in mind, it 'reads' in a more satisfying way. Genre does matter.

In his 1927 essay *Literary Evolution*⁵ Tynianov identified the

question of 'literary genres' as the most difficult research question, and he expressed a certain disdain for 'naming' literary genres by only one factor: size. Yes, of course, he argued, a short story is shorter than a *povest'* (sometimes rendered as novella in English) which of course is shorter than a novel. In the essay Tynianov admitted that part of the definition of literary evolution is that ebb and flow across time: writers move from one genre to another, with poetry, short stories, novellas, novels, etc. being dominant in one or another era. And I have found that even though prose is the preferred choice of American students, if I want to give them the full flavor of Russian literature and how it emerged in different eras, I can't just teach novels. Genre matters in terms of the fullness of portraying a literary tradition⁶.

⁴ A great example of this is Susan Sontag's *In America*, which was loosely based on the life of Polish actress Helena Modjeska. Or not so loosely, as Beth Holmgren has convincingly argued—indeed, the novel may have veered into plagiarism (Holmgren 2011: 315-322). I had a similar experience reading A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book*, a book you can just tell even without knowing is heavily based on the lives of real historical figures (in this case the life of children's author E. Nesbit).

⁵ Tynianov's essay was reprinted in *Arkhaisty i novatory*: 30-47. For a discussion of John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, one book I

'misread' the first time around, see Whitt 2008: 51-53. Whitt comments: "Critics ... struggled to find a category into which [the text] would neatly fit. The book was called a travelogue, a travel book, a tale of real life murder, a diary, a character sketch, a cultural study and an allegory" (Whitt 2008: 51).

⁶ In teaching, size also matters. One of my students a few years ago particularly appreciated how Chekhov's stories, as he put it, "fit into an undergraduate's schedule", in contrast to Dostoevskii's novel *Crime and Punishment*, the length of which he found, frankly, punishing.

In the American classroom, another problem emerges with the famous Russian novel: they were written in Russian. So while I can explain the idea of the Soviet dissident underground of the 1970s and 80s and how those writers and artists reacted in the face of *perestroika* and the demise of the Soviet Union, and I can point students to my article exploring the topic, I can't share the actual text of one of the great examples of this concept: Vladimir Makanin's novel *Underground, or a Hero of our Time*⁷. Makanin felt a need to mark the passing of the Soviet era with a big work, to make philosophical pronouncements over an extended, lengthy novel, which among other things would compete with the novels of Dostoevskii, Goncharov, Tolstoi, and even Solzhenitsyn. The really significant statements in Russian literature are made in long novels with double titles,

Everyone wants to have read the great Russian novels, but sometimes they don't really have the time or fortitude to read them.

⁷ Vladimir Makanin's *Underground, or a Hero of our Time* (Андеграунд, или Герой нашего времени) was published in *Znaniia*, 1998, I-IV, and also by Vagrius (Moscow, 1999, see Makanin 1999). *Baize-Covered Table with Decanter* won the 1993 Russian Booker Prize and was translated and published in English in 1995 (Makanin 1993 and Makanin 1995).

like *War and Peace*, and Makanin was writing himself into that tradition. Perhaps my students are grateful, though, that I end up teaching his *Baize-Covered Table with Decanter* instead: it is considerably shorter⁸. Tynianov felt that genre was about more than size. In *On Literary Evolution* he defined the meaning of genre further by expanding upon his ideas about Lomonosov and the ode in a way that – among other things – justifies my own teaching philosophy, which has come to be about cultural context as much as about the literary works themselves. In his discussion of the 'speech orientation' of Lomonosov's ode, Tynianov reminded us that the 'oratorical' genre needed to be *pronounced*. But he continued: "*pronounced in a large hall in a palace*". Further, he explained the importance of this: the very meaning of the genre is defined both by its 'speech orientation' and by the cultural conditions surrounding it, what we call in Russian *byt*, or the trappings of everyday life. Suddenly the work is more than its content, its form, the words on the page, or even the words as pronounced: it includes within itself the context in which it is perceived.

⁸ See note 10.

So genre is also about context. We've all had these experiences: we present a conference paper in an enormous hotel ballroom; we teach a literature class in a cozy seminar room or in a windowless basement classroom; we give a talk in the lounge of the faculty club. To what extent is the context, the surroundings, appropriate to the speech act? To what extent, for example, could the audience at my inaugural lecture continue to pay attention to what I was saying, given that there was a young woman pouring wine just behind them? I had the opportunity to teach in a ballroom in a reconstructed 19th century palace at Warsaw University, but it was not an entirely successful experience. The ballroom had terrible acoustics for lecturing and the light coming through floor-to-ceiling windows made showing images particularly difficult. The microphone in the room made me feel like I was a talk show host rather than a Fulbright professor. In some cases, as in that one, the context trumps the oratorical effort.

Context is much of what I do in the classroom, trying to evoke the colors, smells, cultural artifacts and habits that facilitate perception and understanding. I use documents: letters and memoirs, yes, even biography;

visual artifacts, including manuscripts and sketches, maps, etchings, paintings, photographs, sets and costumes; music, including opera, folk songs, and the scratchy recordings of 'bard' poets and singer-songwriters, and so on, to try to convey *byt*, to immerse my students in the everyday context of the era I am teaching. Sometimes I even bake: no contemporary reader of *Crime and Punishment* knows what a 'rusk' is, and I have made them on occasion to let students experience first hand what Raskol'nikov was eating in the days before he committed his murder.

The relationship between literary texts and history can fuel student interest. When I teach, I offer a lot of historical material, including – especially when I get into my own era, the 1980s to the present – personal anecdote. For example, while I myself never met Sergei Dovlatov, I did meet a woman who as a child spent a number of weeks in the émigré housing complex in Vienna where Dovlatov and many other Russians were waiting to emigrate to the United States. She recalled her mother being disdainful of Dovlatov because of his drinking habits – and for her, that memory affected the way she read his prose.

How relevant was his alcoholism as a literary fact? I suppose it may depend on audience, but certainly for American college students it is interesting and quite relevant. One of Dovlatov's recent biographers omitted his drinking from her scholarly work, and explained her choice to me as necessary to 'respect the widow's wishes'. But in Tomashevskii's terms, Dovlatov was a "writer with a biography", and when statements by his (semi-autobiographical) characters have become aphorisms in everyday Russian life, it seems to me that we have to take alcohol into consideration as part of Dovlatov's cultural context.



Figure 2: "Once you've had a drink, the whole day opens out in front of you."

<http://demotivators.to/p/31020/s-utra-vyipil-ves-den-svoboden-.htm>

In his short stories and essays, Dovlatov practiced what another Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovskii, theorized about: *obnazhenie priema*, "the baring of technique". For example, in his work *The Compromise*, Dovlatov presented versions of Soviet newspaper stories, and then 'revealed' the background of how his journalist-protagonist got those stories. Frequently in the 'official' story he had to edit out most of what 'really' happened: most of the cultural apparatus of the hypocrisy-infused Soviet system he was exposing, and, of

course, the drinking. The irony of Dovlatov's work sometimes can be hard for American students to perceive, but his surging popularity in Russia in the years since his 1990 death and the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union identifies him, and his tone, as essential to understanding the Soviet experience. His career as a journalist and the ways he used his own life experiences in his writing—university drop-out, prison camp guard, guide at the Pushkin museum at Mikhailovskoe, émigré to the United States, denizen of Forest Hills, New York – mean that his work straddles the border of fact and fiction. He was a writer with a biography, and for him, genre took a back seat to voice and tone.

That émigré tone really helps us evoke the Soviet period, especially for contemporary students born in most cases after 1991. Another of my favorite émigré writers is Alexander Genis, who with his long-time writing partner Petr Vail' penned the fantastic little book *Russian Cuisine in Exile* (written 1985–86, see Генис, Вайль 1987)⁹. These short culinary essays – with titles like *The Clay Pot: A Recepta-*

cle of Tradition, or *The Scent of Cabbage Soup*, – have a very specific structure and a light, slightly satirical tone, with shades of something more philosophical lurking underneath. Each tackles a cultural commonplace, offers specific advice and even recipes, and comments on both Soviet experience and émigré life in the U.S. in the 1980s¹⁰. There is also an element of the personal – a grandmother's love of borscht, a memory of drinking tea in a friend's apartment. My students love the essays, and I realized that trivial though they might seem on the surface, they are doing important cultural work, work that might structurally be compared to the stanzas of Pushkin's famed novel-inverse *Eugene Onegin*. Like many of Pushkin's stanzas, each of Genis and Vail's essays end with what Russian poetic dictionaries call a *pointe*, defined as a "witty saying, aphorism, or unexpected conclusion to a stanza, story, or essay". Vail' and Genis's essays also bridge the autobiographical through the use of tone. Thus again the details of what is being

⁹ Full disclosure: I am currently translating *Russian Cuisine in Exile* into English with Thomas Feerick.

¹⁰ Sergei Davydov recently showed me his copy of the first edition of *Russian Cuisine in Exile*: marked up in the margins with comments and appreciative "Ha!"s, the book also shows signs that he has used some of the recipes frequently over the years.

conveyed are enhanced by how it is being conveyed: the oratorical aspect, which we can perceive even on the page.

One good example might be the essay *Sharlotka: A Russian Name*, in which the authors have a number of coals. First, they give a recipe for a Jewish version of the ubiquitous Central and East European apple cake; second, they confront the problem of the American obsession with fat and calories that they were trying to understand as new Americans, and finally, they comment on 'censorship', comparing the habits of American bakers, who make beautiful cakes that no one would want to eat, with Soviet literary censorship – which they describe as a less harmful phenomenon, in that it forced Russian writers to create more interesting works than they might have otherwise. In America, we bake beautiful, formally perfect bakery cakes which taste like sawdust, while in Soviet Russia restrictions forced creativity (although perhaps not at the *konditerskaia*). The essay ends thus:

Конечно, от шарлотки не худеют. К тому же говорят, что есть много хлеба вредно. Но жизнь вообще вредная вещь – ведь она всегда ведет к смер-

ти. А после шарлотки эта неизбежная перспектива уже не кажется такой пугающей.

Of course, no one loses weight from eating apple cake. And they say that it's harmful to eat a lot of bread. But then, life is generally fairly harmful – after all, it always leads to death. After eating apple cake, this inevitable conclusion no longer seems quite so scary.

III. Writing genre

I have been alerted to the very many genres in which I myself write, and perform, in part because of my experience in and with Russia. From my very first year as a faculty member I have had the opportunity to travel to conferences, especially in Russia, and have had fantastic interactions with Russian, German, British, even Chinese scholars in wonderful venues. I gave my first such paper, in Russian, at a conference at Khmelita, the former estate of Griboedov's uncle, located in the countryside a couple of hours from Smolensk. That summer some of us from Ohio State drove out to a different Russian environment, to the

Russian School at Norwich University in Vermont for another Griboedov conference, where the lights of the émigré world gathered: Efim Etkind, Viacheslav Ivanov, Naum Korzhavin. Since then I have spoken at conferences in Staraia Russa, Novgorod and Nizhnyi Novgorod, in Alushta, in Yalta, and on Lake Baikal, just to name a few.



Figure 3: Khmelita in Winter
<http://www.russianmuseums.info/M682>

In my interactions with Russian scholars, and in my attempts to ‘perform’ American academia at conferences, I have become even more aware of the numerous personae inherent in my profession. Researcher and scholar, teacher and advisor, mentor and peer-reviewer. The power of words – whether spoken from a podium or uttered at a banquet, whether written in the margins of a student paper or in a recommendation letter – and their permanence, even in today’s

world, or maybe even more so in today’s world, continues to inspire awe in me. In Russia my spoken word, and how I perform it, garners more notice than it might otherwise: I’ve given radio and newspaper interviews merely on the strength of being a visiting American, and I’m always called upon to give an appropriate toast at conference banquets and in gatherings with colleagues. Those who have been in Russia know that the toast is its own oratorical genre.

Having now written (and performed) the equivalent of literally reams and reams of words, I find myself thinking very carefully about questions of genre and tone. How many times have we gotten it wrong, or witnessed how others get it wrong – pompous pronouncements at a conference panel, summary dismissal in a tenure review letter, botched introductions at a college gathering, the mere recitation of a table of contents in a book review. But as both student and practitioner of the literary arts, I feel more and more that I want to take care with my words, to make sure that I express just enough praise, just the right kind of critique, and most importantly, just the right amount of enthusiasm in sharing my knowledge and the culture and literary works that I

love. An idiosyncratic scholar and, I dare say, an idiosyncratic teacher, I have finally begun to think of myself not just as an academic, but as a writer, and I am striving to make the words I commit to the page or the computer screen really count.

IV. *Finale*

In Russian, people frequently say ‘finale’ when they mean ‘conclusion’, and this essay has finally reached that moment. As a kind of epigraph to my last part, I take a quote from one of Griboedov’s letters, a statement that evinces more bravado than anything else. “Я как живу, так и пишу свободно и свободно”. “*I live the way I write... freely, freely*”. In my inaugural lecture a few years ago, I felt like I needed a little of that bravado to execute this finale.

At my lecture, I spoke about work I have been doing that is not strictly academic: writing in a genre new for me, one that I find quite rewarding. I have any number of projects cooking, all related in some way to that major one on the back burner—the biography project about Tynianov. But as I began to reveal to students and colleagues a couple of years ago, I have also begun to use another ‘b’ word – I’ve been blogging. For an aca-

demic who is used to careful argument and conscientious citation, blogging feels free and easy, unstructured and comfortable, like an opportunity to speak up to an audience who rarely questions the choice of topic or tone. Its history is personal. When my daughter was little, we used to imagine starting a used bookstore with a café—scones, muffins, pie, cake, cookies, tea and coffee. I always figured that with the way I bake, sometimes there would be an abundance of treats at our bookstore cafe, and sometimes there would be *nothing*! Thus was born *The Manic Bookstore Café* – first just a joke, and now a blog I have been writing for almost five years¹¹.

While I can’t be certain, it may very well be that I get more readers for my blog posts than I ever have for my articles and books. Certainly the lay reader finds them more compelling. No one in my family, for example, ever reads those books they display on their shelves and coffee tables, but they do read my blog posts. And writing a blog post is pure pleasure. The length and

¹¹ My blog can be found at <http://manicbookstorecafe.blogspot.com/>. I also wrote a more autobiographical blog during what I called the 2014 Recipe Project. See <http://2014recipeproject.blogspot.com/>.

tone are just right, and the more I think about it, the more I find that my blog posts mirror Vail' and Genis's essays from their *Russian Cuisine in Exile*: a little bit of personal history, a lot of cultural commentary, sometimes a little politics, and whenever I can manage it, a *pointe*, an ending line or two that offer not quite an aphorism, but at least some food for thought.

The blog is a kind of workshop, a place where I try things out, whether commenting on texts that haven't been translated into English yet (like Vail' and Genis's *Russian Cuisine in Exile*), or reacting to plays, art exhibits and films, or beginning to curate those characters – Tynianov, Tomashevskii, Eikhensbaum, Dovlatov, Ulitskaia – about whom I'm thinking of writing something more extensive and more serious. I've even used it with students, as last year when I had students in my graduate seminar on biography create their own blogs and I also wrote entries about biography in mine every week.

Not just a workshop, though, the blog is becoming fodder for a larger book project – one I'm tentatively calling *The Manic Bookstore Café Guide to Life and Russian Literature*. It has enabled me to play with genre and with voice, both of which are es-

sential components of anything I will write in future. And it has a real oratorical aspect to it. Blogging, like speaking to an audience of students, friends, and peers, gives instant gratification, unlike scholarly writing that often takes a long time to find an anonymous and silent audience.

On the one hand writing a blog post is nothing like biography – with all its careful research and structure – or like writing scholarship. After all, a blog post is written on the computer, just the author and her laptop, and 'feedback' comes from the statistics generated to show how many 'hits' the post has received, and the occasional comment or email response. On the other hand, blog posts are also stories, bits and pieces of life, and with their orality in place—a more informal vocabulary, bolding and italics to render emphasis, the rhythm of the sentences as important almost as their content, the implied reader sometimes referred to directly. Writing a blog post can resemble the process of declamation.

"I live the way I write ... freely, freely". That makes a great slogan for a writer, especially one who aims to mimic in the printed word (or word on the screen) the oral functions of literary

speech. For Griboedov – at least the Griboedov Tynianov portrayed, one doomed to die in a violent encounter in Iran – the slogan did not function as pro-

tection. But it does encapsulate a spirit, one in which orality may very well trump genre entirely.

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