New Russians as a Cultural Myth

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ARE THOSE NEW RUSSIANS REAL?

In September 2002 the acclaimed film director Pavel Lungin, known for such movies as *Taxi-Blues*, *Luna-Park*, and *A Wedding*, released his new venture, *Oligarkh* ("An Oligarch"). Based on Yulii Dubov's novel *Bol'shaia paika* ("A Big Quota"), it features the infamous Russian tycoon and "king-maker" Boris Berezovsky, played by the popular "leading man" Vladimir Mashkov, as the central character and prototype. A year later *Iskusstvo kino* published a three-way conversation under the telling title "Konets dinozavrov" ("The End of the Dinosaurs") among Lungin, Aleksandr Timofeevskii (critic, political analyst, and speechwriter), and Lev Karakhan (deputy editor-in-chief of the journal) about this screen project. The point of consensus among the participants in this conversation was that the era of the New Russians is over—the attention-grabbing dinosaurs are extinct now, replaced by "middling beings" resembling field mice, who in the political sphere are represented by Putin's "chekists from Piter" (*piterskie chekisty*). The conclusion Lungin drew from this perceived fact is quite symptomatic: It is time to create a myth about New Russians:

> In my opinion, real mythology is not concerned with moral values, but, rather, with the question of vital activity and energy. Myths describe energy in its primordial and premoral state. ... Myths are constructed in such a way that the hero may murder, pillage, and rape, yet remain heroic. In contrast with myths about gods, there are myths about titans, who precede the gods, and drastically overshadow them with their independence from moral norms. The 90s are an age of titans rather than of gods. Titans of water, time, petroleum, and aluminum, all having grown from a coupling of heaven and earth, and in a barbaric, inhuman way having altered and shaped our lives. Ugly, brutish, misshapen, but powerful in their imagination and fervor, they've transmuted the world and given chaos a semblance of form through sheer will: to me, these are the oligarchs.[1]

Lungin and his interlocutors emphasize that the mythologization of the New Russian should play a constructive role in the popular mentality, as opposed to the destructive mythology of the social avenger featured in the blockbuster films of the late 1990s, such as *Brat* ("Brother") and *Brat-2* ("Brother-2," director Aleksei Balabanov) and *Sestry* ("Sisters," director Sergei Bodrov, Jr., the actor who plays the "brother" in Balabanov's films).

[1] *Iskusstvo kino*, 2002, no. 4:7.

The Russian Review 62 (January 2003): 54–71

Making no attempt to idealize the New Russians, Lungin models his *Oligarch* on Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, and the mythology of the New Russians he explores, in fact, includes the symbolic death and transformation of his hero into a monster. However, Lungin believes that "only a complex myth has a chance after a time, perhaps even ten to fifteen years, of becoming a piece of history."[2]

Lungin merely articulates what already is perceptible in contemporary culture: From their very first appearances, the New Russians were seen as *mythological* figures closely associated with the vital, constructive, and destructive energies hidden within the social chaos of the post-Soviet era. This mythological perception was motivated by the inapplicability to the New Russians' behavioral patterns (or to what was known about their behavior from the press) of social or moral norms. They were viewed as standing financially above—yet in other aspects dramatically below—the norms of mundane reality, as beings possessing a *sui generis* code of behavior incompatible with that of mortals. Naturally, such a perception required mythological, rather than rational, models.

Whether New Russians are real is an open question. For a literary critic, they are real insofar as they are reflected in literary and cultural texts. While eager to believe in the emergence of a new class that is affecting the Russian economy and political life, I consider sociologists, experts in political science, or economists better equipped to determine whether the New Russians' presence in post-Communist Russia is as powerful as it seems. What I find fascinating is this phenomenon: how not only the cultural models intended to illuminate the New Russians, but also exchanges with actual representatives of this category are fuzzy, contingent, and based on mutually exclusive concepts. They are titans and monsters, greedy gangsters and selfless knights of the market economy, tasteless thieves and visionaries, and so forth. My own conviction is that New Russians rapidly became ideal material for intensive cultural mythologization. In fact, the mythology of the New Russians is one of the most quickly evolving elements of post-Communist culture and incorporates several different cultural perspectives.

Different archetypes were applied to the modeling of New Russians as cultural personages, many of them borrowed from the Soviet mythological arsenal, but recycled. However, the presentation of the New Russians usually relied on more ancient archetypes as well. Lungin's reference to the Greek titans is very telling, since the most famous of the titans—Prometheus—was simultaneously a *cultural hero* and a *trickster*. These two mythological models proved extremely fertile in the cultural production of the New Russians' image.

My article analyzes the archetypes involved in the process of modeling New Russians' presence in contemporary culture, focusing on three discourses that navigate the cultural mythologization of New Russians in three different directions. The first is the traditional discourse of the Russian (formerly Soviet) intelligentsia, as manifested in texts by Andrei Dmitriev, Aleksandr Kushner, Anatolii Kurchatkin, Anton Utkin, and Ergali Ger. The second is the discourse of postmodernist culture rooted in the underground subculture of the Stagnation period, exemplified in the works of Vladimir Tuchkov and Viktor Pelevin. And the third is the discourse of the New Russians' *self*-representation,

[2]Ibid., 12.

the newness of which necessarily limits my analysis to one work—the memoiristic novel *Bol'shaia paika* by Yulii Dubov, Boris Berezovsky's former deputy and currently chairman of the board of LogoVAZ.

"THE OTHER," ANTI-INTELLIGENTSIA, "NAROD"

The series of *anekdoty* (jokes) that appeared in the early and middle 1990s first signaled the appearance of the New Russians as cultural figures. Seth Graham argues that "the *anekdot*-al New Russian is profoundly amoral, uncultured, and intellectually bankrupt. ... He is 'new' in that he is intellectually and physically isolated from the past. The type, however, is firmly ensconced in a tradition" (see Graham's article in this issue). The omnipotent fool or idiosyncratic wizard—two major profoundly traditional masks for New Russians at the heart of these anecdotes—as Graham correctly remarks, are reminiscent of "Russian folk *anekdoty* and *skazki* about simpletons. Some, and even old chestnuts, form that tradition, with the detail of the New Russian protagonist superimposed." In these masks, the newly rich Russians do not look menacing, and the narrator or audience of such jokes enjoys the momentary sensation of superiority over the new "masters of life." This is a typical first reaction: to shield oneself from a potentially threatening phenomenon by laughter, to neutralize it and to deprive it of its power, if only for a second. These jokes emphasize the irreconcilable contrast between two opposing features of the central character: his (always his!) incredible financial power and his intellectual impotence. Obviously, this dualism registers the reflex reaction of an intelligentsia trying to secure its own power, traditionally located in the spheres of intellect and culture. Early Soviet jokes about Bolsheviks, their ignorance, rudeness, and cruelty, and so forth, fulfilled a similar cultural function.

This *anekdot*-al reaction to New Russians could not last long, and it was replaced by a more psychological approach to the enigma of the new class. Not only sociological interest but also some repressed attraction, perhaps even of an erotic nature, served as an inspiration for these attempts. In fact, New Russians possessed everything that a Soviet *intelligent* was deprived of and dreamed about. New Russians had power, money, and freedom from moral norms and social limitations. Unlike the pauperized intelligentsia, New Russians represented that segment of society which enjoyed the fruits of perestroika and glasnost, economic reforms and the politics of openness—the ideals cherished and cultivated by the intelligentsia for decades. Therefore, it is no surprise when the sophisticated poet Aleksandr Kushner writes about the New Russians in his trademark elegiac tone:

Мне нравятся чужие мерседесы	I like other people's Mercedes,
Я, проходя, любуюсь их сверканьем.	As I walk by I admire their sparkle.
А то, что в них сидят головорезы,	The fact that they're full of cutthroats,
Так ведь всегда проблемы с мирозданьем,	Well... the world always has its problems,
Если не те, так эти неудобства.	If not these, then other, troubles.
Пожалуй, я предпочитаю эти.	I think I still prefer these.
А чувство неудачи и сиротства, –	As for feelings of abandonment and failure,
Пусть взрослые в него играют дети!	Let grown-up children play at them!

Разбогатеть – приятное мечтанье.	To become wildly rich—that's a pleasant dream.
Уж я бы знал, на что потратить деньги!	And I could think of ways to spend the money!
. . .	. . .
Но я могу представить это лучше,	But I can imagine wealth much better,
Чем въяве, и не страшно разориться.[3]	Than [have it] in reality, and I needn't worry about going bankrupt.

This reaction is also a form of self-defense, though less straightforward than the one epitomized by jokes. In his poem, Kushner draws a line between himself (a traditional *intelligent*) and New Russians: you and I, we have nothing to do with each other. In my dreams, I am richer than you, and my riches (unlike yours) are safe and cannot be destroyed by momentary changes of luck, because they belong to the sphere of the spirit. My realm is culture, memory, intellectual freedom; yours is this momentary and fragile reality. We are even; however, my capital is more sound and solid. What contradicts this proud credo is the poet's attraction to a shiny Mercedes—an attraction that cannot be disguised, especially in the punch-line: "I could think of ways to spend the money!"—if I had it, of course!

Another neotraditionalist writer, Andrei Dmitriev, in his novel *Zakrytaia kniga* ("A Closed Book") chooses a strategy similar to Kushner's.[4] He pretends that New Russians do not exist as a bona fide entity. In his novel, they turn out to be either traditional *intelligenty* who managed to implement their ideas and energy, or their traditional antagonists—party secretaries, KGB agents, and Soviet bosses of all ranks, who always impeded normal everyday Russian life. Dmitriev shows the latter preying on the fruits of the intelligentsia's efforts, and eventually destroying their achievements.

In both cases, the attempts to provide interpretations of New Russians by means of traditional cultural codes produce mirror images of the authors themselves. Both Kushner and Dmitriev present New Russians as ultimate *others*; they construe the images of New Russians as Jungian shadow projections of their own identities, shaped within the traditional intelligentsia paradigm. The *other* turns out to be a negative double of the authorial self and in fact remains impermeable to interpretation and representation.

Anatolii Kurchatkin's two stories from the cycle "Zlokliuchenie" ("Misadventure") demonstrate another phase in the development of traditionalist strategies for representing New Russians.[5] To depict his characters Kurchatkin employs distinctive cultural models from the past to slot the New Russian "other" into existing paradigms. Both "Kommersant" ("A Businessman") and "Killer" ("A Killer") mimic the genre of the "physiological sketch" central to the practices of Naturalism. "A Businessman" imitates journalistic style and, correspondingly, replaces characters with one-dimensional social masks. Its plot noticeably reproduces melodramatic models: a rich businessman, Slavik, buys the affection of a beauty named Marina, while her husband is away, serving in the army. Upon his return, the husband demands that the businessman give up his mistress for a single night. Slavic initially agrees to this offer, but later realizes that he cannot come to terms with his jealousy: returning to the apartment, he kills the couple and himself.

[3]Aleksandr Kushner, *Izbrannoe* (St. Petersburg, 1997), 466–67.
[4]Published in *Znamia*, 1999, no. 4:7–90.
[5]Published in *Znamia*, 1998, no. 10:21–37.

Written in a manner typical of psychological realism, "A Killer" focuses considerable attention on the psychological motivation of its characters, details of everyday life, and the repetition of significant motifs, phrases, images, and so forth. The plot of the story, however, is not at all fictional: Kurchatkin incorporates into this narrative the real names of several Ekaterinburg mafiosi, and meticulously describes the circumstances of their deaths. The generic rules adopted by the writer are based on the premises of the realist tradition, and therefore his literary products should be judged according to them.

The newspaper style of the first story and the "documentary" setting of the second serve as "proof of reality" applied to characters and situations. But these elements within the structure of Kurchatkin's texts achieve effects contrary to authorial intents: Kurchatkin's devices, despite the author's intentions, expose a gap between fictional models and New Russian reality. In the first story, the final, melodramatic triple murder/suicide totally contradicts Slavik's previous assumption that "he'll have loads of such Marinas" (*vagon i mal'enkaia telezhka*), that he will soon "dump" her: "He just needs to be sated by her. These Marinas are everywhere in Moscow. Point to any window, and there she is, sitting and waiting for you." Apparently, Kurchatkin wishes to convey that businessmen, like peasant women in Karamzin's "Poor Liza," can love too, and that under the impenetrable armor of a human computer beats a trembling heart. Even in the nineteenth century, however, this bathos was sooner the domain of parodied characters such as Lermontov's Grushnitsky in *A Hero of Our Time* than of the sober contributors to *The Physiology of St. Petersburg*, the first important collection of sketches emanating from the Natural School.

Indeed, "A Killer," with its attempts at providing psychological motivation and the vivid contradictions it reveals, offers more promising fare than the poorly designed melodrama of "A Businessman." However, neither the biographical details offered to illuminate the protagonist's psyche, nor the ethnograpy of his proletarian neighborhood, can convincingly explain how this ordinary teenager is transformed into a senseless murder-machine. This is so, I contend, because, first, the attributes of a realistic discourse only imitate a genuine exegesis, while in actuality reducing the "inner world" of the protagonist to such simple reflexes as irrational hatred for those weaker than he. Second—and more important—the plot line of this story reveals an amazing resemblance to numerous examples of Socialist Realism. "A Killer," in fact, may be read as a replica of the Socialist Realist narrative about the life of a true Soviet hero. It contains the early awakening of a class instinct in a proletarian youngster: the protagonist becomes famous for his invention of "carpet bombing"—a refined method of bullying "mamas' boys" in grade school. He subsequently becomes involved in a healthy (literally!) collective of bodybuilders and kick-boxers that serves as a recruitment center for the mafia.

One may argue that similar patterns are detectable in Western mafia literature and films, well known in the post-Soviet cultural milieu. However, the proletarian background of Kurchatkin's hero, his "class instincts" and class- (rather than family-) based feelings of belonging to a collective body, actualize associations with Socialist Realism much more than with any other discourse. Katerina Clark notes that in Socialist Realism integration into the collective body is marked by a scene when "the elder hands the initiate some objects or token that symbolizes belonging to the 'tribe'—e.g. a banner, badge, or Party

card."[6] In "A Killer" this sacred object is replaced by a thick wad of dollars handed to the protagonist by a leader, a gesture that signifies the incorporation of the protagonist into the collective that in this case is the mafia. According to the Socialist Realist proto-plot, a series of "tests" and "ordeals" follow that temper the protagonist's character, verifying his resolve and devotion to the "common goal." Tests lead to the historic deed—the protagonist participates in the assassination of a leader of a rival mafia group. True to Socialist Realist conventions, the protagonist participates in this action anonymously, remaining "a soldier of the invisible front," as the saying went, who has dissolved his/her personality in the common cause. Finally, the protagonist's death is also depicted in accordance with the semiotics of Socialist Realism, which usually casts the hero as a social machine and therefore frequently identifies him/her with his/her working tool. (A metaphor from the famous song *Ever Higher* (1920) by Pavel German and Iulii Khait, "Our minds made steel wings for our hands/ And throbbing engines take the place of our hearts" [*Nam razum dal stal'nye ruki-kryl'ia,/ A vmesto serdtsa plamennyi motor*] is emblematic for this concept.[7]) In Kurchatkin's story, the killer's death immediately follows an episode where an evildoer from the enemy gang uses the protagonist's "lack of vigilance" to break his "favorite rifle," an accident that inevitably leads to the killer's first and last mistake.

Both characters presented by Kurchatkin are clearly marked as *others*, whose values differ from the author's and, in general, the intelligentsia's. That difference explains Kurchatkin's attitude toward them, which seeps through the text's quasi-neutral journalistic intonation and frequently borders on disgust. The paradox of Kurchatkin's "duo" of stories lies in the fact that he simultaneously models New Russians on two *opposite* cultural paradigms. In the first story, one easily recognizes the archetype of the *ukhar'-kupets*, epitomized by Nikolai Nekrasov's and Nikolai Leskov's characters, Aleksandr Ostrovskii's *samodury* (self-willed petty tyrants), Dmitrii Mamin-Sibiriak's merchant dynasties, Maksim Gor'kii's Foma Gordeev in the eponymous novel, and popularized in mass culture ranging from vaudeville to melodrama (as mentioned, Kurchatkin relies most heavily on melodramic plot models). This type manifests a wild freedom unrestrained by culture or civilization, hence often culminating in its practitioner's destruction. The archetype invoked in "A Killer" offers a polar opposite to the classic merchant-*samodur* type. Here Kurchatkin revitalizes the Socialist Realist model of an exemplary representative of the people (*narod*)—a Soviet worker/soldier/party member who embodies ultimate *submission*, which the protagonist perceives as the highest privilege, though it leads to his self-destruction. Self-destruction, however, is common to both types.

It is difficult to say whether Kurchatkin uses these models intentionally or subconsciously. What is more important, though, is that he depicts New Russians as the mirror opposites of the Soviet intelligentsia—as its *shadow figures*, as noted above. Certainly these two stories reveal an odd paradox: According to Kurchatkin, New Russians, as those who possess more freedom than an ordinary *intelligent*, are opposed to the intelligentsia; yet they need much less freedom and are more prone to submission than the latter. The

[6]Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, 1981), 172–73.

[7]James von Geldern and Richard Stites, eds., *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays and Folklore, 1917–1953* (Bloomington, 1995), 257.

Russian/Soviet intelligentsia traditionally criticized, openly or covertly, both irresponsible limitless freedom and the blind dissolution of the personality in a collective body that deprives him/her of all sense of freedom. It is these negative characteristics (on the intelligentsia's scale of values) that are combined in Kurchatkin's concept of the New Russians. The writer divides these two traits—irresponsible freedom and lack of individuality—between his two characters; however, both protagonists are so faceless and similar that they appear interchangeable. Their facelessness is a clue to the New Russians' ability (as depicted by Kurchatkin) to combine wild freedom and self-will with "party discipline." Whereas such a paradoxical dilemma would remain insoluble for the complex personality of an *intelligent*, a nonperson, presumably, can fluctuate between these two poles without difficulty.

More or less tradition-oriented writers' subsequent explorations of New Russian types favor one or the other of the representational models employed by Kurchatkin. The New Russian as a throwback to the Socialist Realist canon may bifurcate into two more forms. One group of texts depicts him as a hero from the lower depths of society who ousts representatives of formerly privileged classes (the party *nomenklatura* and the intelligentsia), as in Vladimir Arro's play *Smotrite, kto prishel* ("Look Who's Come"), written in 1980, long before the post-Communist reforms (which suggests that New Russians existed within late Soviet culture, as well—as the representatives of the *defitsit*-associated professions, *blatnye*, *tsekhoviki*, and so forth). Indebted to Sociaist Realism, the opposite approach to New Russians as invariably "bad guys" presents them as *burzhui* abusing "simple people"; this type regularly appears in Aleksandra Marinina's crime novels, especially *Stilist* ("The Stylist"), in Aleksei Balabanov's blockbuster films *Brother* (1998) and *Brother-2* (2000), and in Sergei Balmut's best-selling novel, *Sami po sebe* ("All By Themselves").[8]

The melodramatic models are easily detected in Anton Utkin's *Samouchki* ("The Self-Taught") and Ergali Ger's *Skazki po telefonu* ("Fairy Tales Over the Phone").[9] In both novels the fatal intervention of literature (the gift of the word, literary-theatrical situations) in the cruel reality of the New Russians' world explains the catastrophic finales. Here we meet a spoiled New Russian princess, sole heiress of her mother's dishonestly acquired wealth and mistress of the mother's lover; a Romantic hero who deploys his poetic imagination in stirring monologues addressed to phone-sex girls; a simpleton *nouveau riche* who, after mastering the alphabet, late in life apparently never reads anything apart from the criminal code; and an eccentric actress indistinguishable from the melodramatic roles she plays. Although both Utkin and Ger are aware of the incompatibility of their melodramatic models with their "realistic" characters, neither can move beyond the overwrought clichés of outmoded genres. In fact, the melodramatic code provides a convenient method of gliding on the surface of the thematics linked to the phenomenon of the New Russians; it masks the authors' inability to transcend stereotypes while protecting their narratives with a shield of irony. In spite of their ironic strategies, however, these novels merely peddle stereotypes and fantastic images. The New Russians' Mercedes

[8]Evgeny Ermolin analyzes the antibourgeois tendency in the depiction of New Russians in "Mezhdu vorchaniem i buntom," *Voprosy literatury*, 2001, no. 4:70–95.

[9]Published in *Novyi mir*, 1998, no. 12:4–109; and *Znamia*, 1999, no. 1:8–94, respectively.

appears here surrounded by an aura of Romantic love and suffering, and the New Russian Byronic hero presumably is intended to make readers' hearts flutter. Whatever the target of their irony, the authors of these novels cater to the new moneyed masters.

This juxtaposition of mutually exclusive features and intentions in the presentation of New Russians is analogous to the mythological function of a mediator. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, mythological thinking derives its structure from irreconcilable oppositions, fundamental logical contradictions, and the figure of a mediator is the only way to resolve the contradictions basic to myth.

> If we keep in mind that mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution, the reason for these choices [of a raven and a coyote as mediators] becomes clearer. We need only assume that two opposite terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third one as a mediator, then one of the polar terms and the mediator become replaced by a new triad, and so on. ... Thus, like Ash-Boy and Cinderella, the trickster is a mediator. Since his mediating function occupies a position halfway between the two polar terms, he must retain something of that duality—namely an ambiguous and equivocal character.[10]

It is possible to perceive New Russians as a kind of a mediator in the post-Communist cultural mythology. However, while exploring this hypothesis, one should not forget Lévi-Strauss's caution that "there is no single 'true' version [of a myth] of which all the others are but copies and distortions. Every version belongs to the myth."[11] In the present context this means that no existent discourse "truly" presents New Russians, in contrast to others that distort the dominant mythology. All discursive models taken together, along with their interactions, shape the "mytheme" of New Russians and one can only speculate about the end result of this complex process.

TRICKSTER/CULTURAL HERO

The authors who tend toward postmodernism also have contributed to the cultural mythology of New Russians. In fact, the brightest cultural phenomenon associated with New Russians—the projects of "The World of the New Russians"—is marked by distinctive postmodernist features (see Helena Goscilo's introduction and Harley Balzer's article in this issue). Not unlike "The World of the New Russians," such writers as Vladimir Tuchkov and Viktor Pelevin overtly question the applicability of *any* cultural models to the depiction of New Russians. In a mode compatible with the mediator model, New Russians, as depicted by these authors, constantly fluctuate between the poles of culture and noncultural, archaic, primitive (or even bestial) forms of behavior that confound the very idea of cultural norms. This discourse has created a specific means of *negative representation* of New Russians, whereby the inadequacy of the invoked cultural codes serves as a

[10]Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York, 1963), 224, 226.

[11]Ibid., 218.

paradoxical form for characterizing the subject. Any cultural code, it seems, may be used for negative representation. For example, Viktor Pelevin in a passage from his latest novel undermines the perception of the New Russians as capitalists or proactive businessmen:

> "Most of the time," said Morkovin, "it goes like this: a guy borrows money on credit. He uses the credit to rent an office and buy a Jeep Cherokee and eight crates of Smirnoff. When the Smirnoff runs out, it turns out the jeep's wrecked, the office is awash with puke and the loan is due for repayment. So he borrows the money again—three time more than before. He uses it to pay back the first loan, buys a Jeep Grand Cherokee and sixteen creates of Absolut vodka. When the Absolut..."
>
> "OK, I get the picture," Tatarsky interrupted. "So what's the ending?"
>
> "There's two endings. If the bank the guy owes to is one of the mafia banks, then some time or other he gets killed; and since there aren't any other, that's what usually happens. On the other hand, if the guy's in mafia himself, then the last loan gets shifted on the State Bank, and the guy declares himself bankrupt. The bailiffs come round to his office, inventorise the empty bottles and the puke-covered fax, and in a little while he starts up all over again. Nowadays, of course, the State Bank's got its own mafia, so the situation's a bit more complicated, but the basic picture's still the same."[12]

One could argue that the model of Russian capitalism described by Pelevin has intrinsic rules according to which, under certain circumstances, whoever violates them gets killed. Such may indeed be the case, but the rules of Russian capitalism—at least, in Pelevin's vivid presentation—have nothing to do with the norms of a capitalist economy. According to Pelevin, they are based not on the notions of profit, investment, or any other rational categories, but, rather, on the rituals of *potlach, excess, and expenditure* similar to those described by Georges Bataille as "nonsumptuary production and consumption upon which wealth depends and thus appears as a relative value."[13]

Vladimir Tuchkov in his cycle of thematically interconnected stories, *Smert' prikhodit po internetu* ("Death Comes via the Internet"), offers an analysis of the inner mechanisms of this paradoxical cultural realm, which, apparently, is located *between* contemporary civilization and archaic ritualism. A revealing subtitle accompanied the first publication of this text: "A Description of Nine Unpunished Crimes that Were Secretly Performed in New Russian Bankers' Households."[14] Surprisingly, this work not only received praise from critics of the most diverse aesthetic and ideological orientations but also was named the best publication of the year by *Novyi mir*.

Tuchkov does not pretend that the stories he tells "really happened," but, rather, tries to reveal the behavioral codes that would enable these and even wilder incidents to occur. His method favors intellectual modeling rather than photographic precision. However, as the foreword to the cycle acknowledges, Tuchkov strives to make appear natural the

[12]Viktor Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York, 2002), 9.

[13]Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," trans. Allan Stoekl, in *Postmodernism: Critical Concepts*, ed. Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist (London, 1998), 1:7.

[14]First publication in *Novyi mir*, 1998, no. 5:67–104. Later the cycle was republished (with two additional stories) in Tuchkov, *Novaia russkaia kniga liudei* (Moscow, 1999), 6–68; and idem, *Smert' prikhodit po internetu* (Moscow, 2001).

motivation for even the most horrible deeds (*vpolne estestvennymi vygliadeli i motivirovki vsekh chudovishchnykh postupkov*); not only the characters but also the readers are supposed to find the recorded atrocities natural and reasonable.[15] Intent on exposing the mechanism of mythologizing New Russians in contemporary Russian culture, Tuchkov suggests that the logic behind the horrible acts he portrays may be understood and shared by a "normal" reader, and therefore reflects certain cultural norms. In the sphere of "real" life, these norms and rituals may be described by means of the Foucauldian "*disciplinary* effects of the new 'regime of truth and power' that constitutes the Russian business worlds," as Alexei Yurchak does in his article in this issue. However, in the literary text a neutral depiction of these norms necessarily entails *provocation*, the purpose of which is to shake perceptions of the New Russians as anticultural monsters. It is quite telling that Tuchkov's macabre stories simultaneously draw on the mythological presentation of a mediator as trickster *and* cultural hero.

Tuchkov presents the system of the New Russians' moral norms despite the fact that the plots of his stories reject the very idea of such norms. In his stories, a brother kills a brother, and their father not only approves, but in fact provokes, this murder; a husband kills his wife, or else orders her to be a prostitute; a teen-age daughter blackmails her mom, who, in response, plots to murder the former; a wannabe wife of a banker has to eliminate all her rivals and then to serve as live bait during her newlywed husband's safari; another wife seduces her father-in-law and kills him by means of excessive sex in order to place her spineless husband in the director's chair, and so on. What kind of moral norms could accommodate such outrages?

The first principle unifying these "norms" is that any person is replaceable. Two stories of the nine constituting the cycle are based on this motif. In "Strashnaia mest'" ("A Terrible Vengeance") a banker deprives his wife's lover, a famous showman, of his identity and replaces him with a double. In "Mogila neizvestnoi materi" ("Grave of an Unknown Mother") another banker kills his wife in a rage, then replaces her with a look-alike prostitute, who later is also killed. On first glance, such interchangeability seems a direct result of depersonalization, of the crisis of individual values in the world of the New Russians. However, these categories prove inapplicable to this realm, where individual personality is absent. Tuchkov's method has nothing in common with psychological realism. Instead of exploring the evolution of a character he unfolds a spectrum of social roles—animated programs frequently marked by peculiarities.

Not personality, but power, is what matters. The erasure of individual features and the replacement of one human doll with another is the ultimate expression of power in the world of Tuchkov's bankers. Power is the sole value, the purpose of this world. It is totally self-sufficient, fully justifies itself, and for Tuchkov's New Russians serves as a religious absolute. His bankers do not care about power over somebody or something; they desire power as such, as a fetish, and they realize that this kind of power tolerates no compromise. Only when free from compromises of any kind does power acquire religious status. The point is illustrated in a passage inscribing the reaction by one of Tuchkov's characters to the discovery of his wife's infidelity: "A principle of his, to which in life he stuck most

[15]Tuchkov, *Novaia russkaia kniga liudei*, 8.

adamantly, was: "Ignore pleas for forgiveness and atonement, for having stumbled and fallen just this once; they'll lose no time in doing so again."[16] The formal, Biblical style here reflects not the sentiments of a deceived husband, but a patriarch's and mythological lawmaker's perception of a routine situation from the perspective of eternity. Indeed, some of the stories in the cycle may be read as pure rituals of power. For example, in "Zhizn' zakanchivaetsia s poslednim udarom serdtsa" ("Life Ends with the Last Heartbeat") a creditor presses a bankrupt banker to kill his wife and little son in order to obtain their life insurance payments so that he can repay a debt. Yet even when the banker does so, he himself is killed for the sake of the "moral principle."

Symptomatically, a few of Tuchkov's stories are explicitly modeled on famous mythological plots. For instance, "Dva brata" ("Two Brothers") depicts a "natural selection" between the brothers, during which the younger—a teenager—kills his older, innocent sibling. "Steve wisely thought that every man who strives to occupy a worthy place in life has to do this. It's not possible otherwise. Otherwise they'll trample you. Otherwise you'll never be like the father."[17] To "do this" means to become Cain, to kill your own brother. But above Cain and Abel rises the figure of the godlike father who intentionally provoked the competition between his sons in order to choose the stronger: "His Empire was designed and built for a long time in the future."[18] A Father-Banker appears here as a "demiurgic pre-ancestor or a cultural hero ... [who], in fact, models the entity of a primitive community that is equated with 'real people.'"[19]

The critic Mikhail Zolotonosov writes about Tuchkov's stories: "In the context of Russian culture, perceived as a whole, these supposedly short-lived, anecdote-like games display sudden and (for representatives of traditional culture) frightening significance and vital stability. All these characters have fallen so low, to the level of pure instinct, that nothing can defeat them anymore."[20] To this diagnosis one might add that the instinct of Tuchkov's bankers is that of power. These characters establish a new system of rituals to confirm the absoluteness of power—once and forever—and in this respect they closely resemble mythological titans and cultural heroes.

The main paradox of Tuchkov's cycle, however, consists of the fact that there is only one way for his "cultural heroes" to establish the religious norm of absolute power—through destruction. And this is where the trickster archetype becomes central, representing as he does a "negative variant of a cultural hero."[21] Tuchkov takes into consideration previous writers' failure to represent New Russians by means of traditional discourses. As his stories vividly attest, the New Russians' discourse of power realizes itself through devastation, castration, and erasure of everything with which it comes into contact—from people to cultural traditions. Followers of Derrida would say that the major trace of the New Russians' discourse is total destruction of any individual face and meaning, and that

[16]Ibid., 13.
[17]Ibid., 33.
[18]Ibid., 33–34.
[19]Eleazar Meletinskii, *Poetika mifa* (Moscow, 1976), 178.
[20]Mikhail Zolotonosov, "Smertel'noe manit," *Moskovskie novosti* 21 (1998): 15.
[21]Meletinskii, *Poetika mifa*, 253.

this destruction is the ultimate proof and embodiment of limitless power as the essence of their discursive representation.

The ambivalence of New Russians as tricksters who establish their "new world order" by means of destruction is emphasized in Tuchkov's cycle by extensive references to nineteenth-century literary classics. The titles of at least three of the nine novellas directly iterate the titles of famous works by nineteenth-century classics: "Strashnaia mest'" by Gogol, "Stepnoi barin" by Turgenev, and "Sluchai na okhote" by Chekhov. The allusions to nineteenth-century literature are a hallmark of Tuchkov's style.

The choice of the nineteenth-century literary tradition as a major intertext for horror stories about the misdeeds of New Russians may be explained by the sacred position of this discourse in Russian culture. Nothing defines a trickster as clearly as his desire to confuse the distinction between sacred and profane. "The trickster is a boundary-crosser," argues Lewis Hyde. "Where someone's sense of honorable behavior has left him unable to act, the trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again. The trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox."[22] A transparent illustration of this thesis appears in Tuchkov's story with the Turgenev-indebted title "Stepnoi barin." The author introduces the protagonist as the "negative product of great Russian literature": "Dmitrii, who relished reading Fedor Dostoevsky and Lev Tolstoy, whom he had practically memorized, laughed mockingly when he read scenes treating honor and humility, and savored the wretched parts where evil triumphed over good."[23]

Following his favorite literary models, Dmitrii builds a village (*dereven'ka*) and hires serfs for $2,000 a year. Their job is to be the victims of outrageous humiliations of the type described with compassionate indignation by the Russian classics. He sadistically whips and tortures his "peasants" for any minor fault, rapes women, destroys peasants' crops while hunting, sets his dogs on children, spits into the serfs' faces and laughs when they cry. Yet this monstrous, regressive display of power has no negative effect on Dmitrii's business activity. "In spite of the ongoing disintegration of his personality, in his business Dmitrii preserved his status."[24] There is nothing strange about this state of affairs: the rage of destruction displayed by Dmitrii in his *dereven'ka* cannot jeopardize his power, for his performance as a sadistic landlord emerges as an excess of his power, and therefore, according to the logic of the *potlach* ritual, can only serve its further growth. As is well known, the Russian literary tradition rejects a harmony built on human suffering, a harmony that allows (and requires) hunting children and whipping peasants to death. By enacting situations excoriated in the Russian classics, Dmitrii juxtaposes his morality, based on limitless power, with the humanism inscribed in the "sacred texts" of classical authors. Moreover, Dmitrii triumphs: All his "serfs," after surviving the year-long tortures and humiliations, decide to extend their contracts for another year. Furthermore, his "village" transforms into a self-sufficient system, and the story of its development begins to suspiciously resemble Russian history in general. Without exerting any pressure, Dmitrii

[22]Lewis Hyde, *The Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York, 1998), 7.
[23]Tuchkov, *Novaia russkaia kniga liudei*, 16.
[24]Ibid., 18.

as landlord brings out those features of the Russian national character that have been glorified by the classics as its main virtues:

> Excruciating hardships train the Russian man to a point where he can endure any misfortune, no matter how inhuman. It was always this way; under the Mongols, under Ivan the Terrible, under Peter the Great, under Stalin. Dmitrii effectively reinforced this rule. The people began to see the lord of the manor not as an eccentric millionaire, but as a master and father, strict but fair, and always working for their benefit. Each and every one of them knew, deep in his soul, that without the lord, none of them would till, sow, or go to church, and would turn on one another with murder and violence.[25]

In the story's finale, Dmitrii mellows and "even starts to think about some reforms." The established order of things, however, now too organic to be controlled by his will, has led the village to become a Great Family—an ancient Russian myth extending from early *obshchina* and *sobornost'* to communism. His son and heir Grigorii has joined his father's game: "Life in the village became so deeply ingrained that the serfs' women started to deliver babies the spitting image of Grigorii."[26] What is this phenomenon if not a harmony corresponding to the ideals of the Russian classics? Paradoxically, the destructive activity of a New Russian trickster not only has transformed reality into a ritualistic game aimed at the constant display of his absolute power but also has restored and revitalized the ancient Russian mythology of a Great Family. Tuchkov's narrative implicitly confirms that the perception of a trickster as a Patriarch and cultural hero is intrinsic to Russian cultural history in general. Examples proliferate from ancient times (Ivan the Terrible's and Peter the Great's morbid tricks) well into the twentieth century (Rasputin, Stalin, and Khrushchev, to name but a few).

Viktor Pelevin's best-selling novel *Generation "P"* (1999; *Homo Zapiens* in the 2002 American edition) spotlights a similar combination of trickster and cultural-hero features while depicting the most successful New Russians as members of some mystical Chaldean Order that inherited its power from ancient Babylonian priests, and at same time as professional crooks supplying Russia with illusory (virtual) reality in the form of commercial and political advertisements. Pelevin's New Russians sell simulacra of the world order, clearly realizing that their products are merely sophisticated tricks:

> "There, you see," said Khanin. "What's the most important feature of the Russian economic miracle? Its most important feature is that the economy just keeps on sinking deeper and deeper into the shit, while business keeps on growing stronger and expanding into the international arena. Now try this: what do the people you see all around you trade in?"
>
> "What?"
>
> "Things that are absolutely non-material. Air time and advertising space—in the newspapers or out on the street."[27]

[25]Ibid., 18, 19.
[26]Ibid., 20.
[27]Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 99.

Tellingly, the Supreme Priest of the Chaldean secret order who rules Russia is deprived of his face and is literally transformed into a virtual copy of himself. This 3-D model of him later becomes pasted into every possible TV commercial. Thus, the main function of this personification of absolute power is to entertain the public while selling its simulacra of success and happiness. A deity that dances, sings stupid slogans, and makes silly faces is the epitome of any trickster. "They are all the same, these tricksters," observes Lewis Hyde. "They have no shame and they have no silence. Hermes should bite his tongue when he's hauled before the assembly of the gods, but instead he wiggles his ears and tells a boldface lie, wearing—his mother says—"the cloak of shamelessness." Loki once had his lips sewn shut by an irritated dwarf, but Loki ripped the thongs out and went right on talking."[28] These characteristics may be directly applied to Pelevin's New Russians.

INTELLECTUALS/ ENTREPRENEURS/ DICTATORS

Yulii Dubov's novel *Bol'shaia paika* is a unique attempt at self-analysis by a new Russian entrepreneur in the form of a semifictional narrative. Dubov's novel may be read as a *roman à clef*, many of whose characters have obvious real-life prototypes. It also may be read as a memoir of a New Russian businessman with first-hand knowledge of the secret mechanisms of success and power. Neither of these definitions, however, adequately captures the work, for Dubov adds novelistic (even melodramatic) elements to what might seem a documentary narrative, and refers to real events and figures within clearly fictional collisions.

The novel consists of five large chapters, each of which presents the rise of the multifunctional enterprise "Infocar" (an obvious pseudonym for LogoVAZ) and its intellectual leader, Platon (a transparent portrait of the infamous Boris Berezovsky). Each chapter proceeds from the perspective of one of Platon's close friends and colleagues—intellectuals and academicians—with whom he worked at the research institute during the Stagnation, and with whom he subsequently built his post-Communist empire. The novel, in fact, holds the reader's interest as a concise history of a post-Communist business that started by selling women's panties and ended with ambitious financial operations involving millions of dollars. Business for Platon and his followers becomes something more significant than just money-making. It entails building a new, free, and successful Plato(nic) Republic in the midst of post-Communist chaos. Yet every chapter shows how Platon—unconsciously and involuntarily rather than through evil intentions—deceives or loses his former close friends. He constantly faces the necessity of sacrificing his buddies, directly or indirectly, to the god of business success, Russian style.

The narrative movement gradually reveals the role played by Platon's shadow, his executive director, Larry—the only one outside the intelligentsia circle, who cleverly consolidates Platon's empire by eliminating all those "academicians and intellectuals." Larry prefers a swindler to an independent thinker, because with a swindler one can establish

[28]Hyde, *The Trickster Makes This World*, 56.

rules that even a dishonest partner would obey, whereas the unpredictability of an intellectual is not good for business. Though invariably approved by Platon, Larry's shadow activities inevitably lead to his isolation, for he either alienates friends or passively colludes in their elimination by murder or suicide. Platon experiences an analogous loneliness: in the novel's finale his only "true retainer" is Larry, who never disdains doing a dirty job for him and whose devotion to him and his goals has created the paradoxical situation of increasingly imprisoning his beloved friend and boss in an impenetrable aura of inner and outer alienation.

Dubov's interpretation of the process leading to this alienation is quite clear. Within a team of free-spirited brilliant intellectuals, scholars, and thinkers, Platon was the brightest. When this team started to build a business empire, it was forced to play according to the rules of criminals and swindlers, most of whom had traded their positions as Soviet-era authorities for executive chairs in post-Communist Russian firms and banks. In this tough game, the more idealistic and humane of Platon's friends failed and became the first sacrificial victims, to be followed by the independent-minded, and, subsequently, by those inadequate to the demands of business through excess of ambition, arrogance, or self-centeredness. As a result, the initial "Republic" of equal partners and friends who love and respect one another's individuality metamorphoses into Infocar's totalitarian regime in miniature.

Similarities between Larry and Stalin, such as Larry's thick moustache, Caucasian origins, and (when he wishes to intimidate) assumed accent are emphasized strongly enough to make the parallel unmistakable. But especially telling is his shadow-like relationship with the leader, Platon, whom circumstances force to leave Russia, so that immediate command of the firm transfers to Larry, whose power is immense and whose methods are nontransparent (even to the author). Furthermore, it becomes clear that Larry stands behind the physical elimination of almost all of the central characters. Without directly killing them, he orchestrates situations that inexorably lead to their deaths. At the end of the novel Fedor Fedorovich, a former KGB officer and devoted security chief of Infocar, straightforwardly explains to Platon and to the reader that a business system is similar to a political system, and in order to function perfectly it needs to become a dictatorship:

> With a flourish Fedor Fedorovich drank the shot, then, leaning over, whispered into Platon's ear.
>
> "Dictatorship! An iron-clad, merciless dictatorship. Nothing else. If you're building a major business, nothing but one individual can serve as the base."
>
> "Why did you...?" Platon asked hoarsely, and Fedor Fedorovich understood.
>
> "Because. Those who came into the business with you either don't understand this simple truth, which is doubtful, or, more likely, for one reason or another they believe that this law doesn't apply to them. ... You, Platon Mikhailovich, are going to be the boss as long as you have people who do exactly what you imagine they should do. When you need other people to imagine for you what they should be doing, you'll have to retire. Or your whole organization ends.[29]

[29]Iulii Dubov, *Bol'shaia paika* (Moscow, 1999), 692–93.

Fedor Fedorovich illustrates his point with a quote from Eduard Bagritskii's notorious poem *TVS* (1929), which also serves as an epigraph to the entire novel:

А век поджидает на мостовой,	The age is waiting on the sidewalk,
Сосредоточен, как часовой.	Focused like a guard.
Иди – и не бойся с ним рядом встать.	Go up to him, don't be afraid to stand by his side.
Твое одиночеству веку под стать.	Your loneliness is just like his.
Оглянешься – а вокруг враги;	Look around—enemies surround you;
Руку протянешь – и нет друзей;	Stretch out your hand—there are no friends.
Но если он скажет: «Солги», – солги.	But if he orders "Lie," then lie,
Но если он скажет: «Убей», – убей.	And if he orders "Kill," then kill.

This neo-Romantic manifesto of dehumanization and immorality for the sake of revolution was widely quoted during perestroika as a verdict on the Soviet regime. Dubov turns the tables: according to his logic, the post-Communist revolution that enabled Platon to realize his ambitions in business paradoxically reproduced the logic of the communist revolution, and similarly demanded that its true believers cast off all such "prejudices" as morality, friendship, trust, or personal freedom. This logic also implies that the "perfect business system" created by Platon will inevitably destroy him too, since his individuality is too exceptional and his intellect too unpredictable. Characteristically, the real-life ousting of Platon's prototype, Berezovsky, by Putin's administration in 2000 (at least a year after the publication of Dubov's novel) realized this grim prediction.

Dubov tends to present Platon as the one who unwittingly traded his friends, his own and their intellectual independence and ideals, for business success. However, since Dubov belongs to the social group he ostensibly tries to depict "objectively," his interpretation of the events cannot help but elicit skepticism. Especially noticeable is the double standard applied to the protagonists and their foes. For example, according to the novel's plot, major evildoers attempting to destroy Platon and his business, thereby involving him in their dirty games, are former KGB and party officials. Yet Fedor Fedorovich, a senior KGB officer who uses old connections for the sake of Infocar, is depicted with utmost respect (the novel's final words of wisdom are pronounced by him in the role of moral judge!). Platon's opponents frequently recruit mobsters for kidnapping innocent women, murdering Platon's friends, racketeering, and blowing up Infocar's offices. Their actions are appalling, and the author cannot hide his satisfaction at their eventual punishment. By contrast, his tone remains neutral when he describes the retaliatory (always and only retaliatory!) actions of the mob headed by Platon's old and devoted friend Larry with the Stalinist moustache. This double standard reveals the fuzziness of the author's diagnosis about the reasons for the corruption and degradation of Platon's Republic of friends.

Especially telling is Dubov's description of "the good old times" when Platon was just a laboratory head and a brilliant organizer of such professional events as seminars and conferences. The novel's opening scene depicts one of these seminars; surprisingly though, this seminar is not devoted to intellectual debates but turns out to be a never-ending celebration aimed at charming foreign colleagues where the "halls of science" function as brothels supervised by KGB officers and everything is orchestrated by direct and indirect bribery (offers of "deficit" books, female bodies, luxury suites, and so forth). There is no

place for intellectual self-expression here, only for intrigues and the clandestine struggle for limited privileges at which Platon is shown to be already quite successful. Despite the author's apparent intentions to evoke a nobler past, this picture hardly contrasts with the low morals of New Russians' business-style orgies, customary bribes, and blackmail. Soviet intellectuals desperately fighting with each other over sex with an attractive secretary, or a rewarding research topic, or a trip abroad, in fact, formed the perfect material to be molded into New Russians. As a matter of fact, Dubov demonstrates that the transformation of Soviet scientists into post-Soviet New Russians entailed no betrayal of the former's moral principles; rather, it realized the potential hidden in late Soviet culture. A new level of possibilities accompanying the post-Communist game without rules merely added scale and visibility to the immorality endemic to the isolated world of the Soviet scientific intelligentsia, a world heavily romanticized by such popular Soviet writers as Daniil Granin and I. Grekova. Intellectual conformists who successfully traded their understanding of the real mechanisms of the Soviet economy and the Soviet system in general for some privileges and limited freedom from ideological restraints—these are Dubov's "idealists." Though smart enough to outclass their primitive opponents with criminal or party backgrounds, and to grab "a big quota" in the new economic conditions, they nonetheless created the new order that eventually destroyed them. In fact, they are the victims of their full-fledged self-realization.

This paradox explains why people like Platon (or Berezovsky) could serve as the most effective mediator between two historical eras: late Soviet Stagnation, with its amoral energies hidden under the cover of cynicism, and post-Communist "wild capitalism." Platon and his buddies are no revolutionaries, but accomplished conformists; this is why their efforts at reform did not produce a radically new model, but created a blend of capitalist economy and totalitarian politics in their megabusiness empire. Dubov's New Russians perfectly fit into Bakhtin's description of a novelistic character:

> One of the basic internal themes of the novel is the hero's inadequacy to his fate or his situation. The individual is either greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man (*libo bol'she svoei sud'by, libo men'she svoei chelovechnosti*). He cannot become once and for all a clerk, a landowner, a merchant, a fiancée, a jealous lover, a father, and so forth. If the novel's hero actually becomes something of the sort—that is, if he completely coincides with his situation and his fate—then the surplus inherited in the human condition is realized in the main protagonist.[30]

The fate of Dubov's heroes is to shift from one modification of totalitarian order (based on the privileges granted by the totalitarian state) to another (based on the profits of wild capitalism), and doing so requires the ability to function as levers in the impersonal machine of capitalism *à la russe*. However, they are too ambitious, too inventive, and too individualistic to fit into this scheme easily and without losses. Therefore those who achieve success and fulfill their destiny—Platon and Larry first and foremost—gradually

[30]Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), 37.

lose their humanity, eventually becoming transformed into monsters. Those who manage to preserve their surplus of humanity are inevitably eliminated.

The characters of Dubov's novel taken as a group represent the tragedy of the doom of New Russians in the role of cultural and historical mediators. In this respect, the novel echoes a theme typical for various works written in the 1920s by writers such as Boris Pil'niak (*Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*), Valentin Zazubrin (*A Sliver*), Aleksandr Tarasov-Rodionov (*Chocolate*), Aleksei Tolstoi (*The Viper*), and later epitomized in the character of Strel'nikov in Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*: the tragedy of the commissars, the devoted servants of revolution, who are eliminated as a result of their own enthusiastic demolition of the "old world" that laid the foundation for a totalitarian order rather than the happy Utopia they had envisioned. Paradoxically, New Russian capitalists are trapped by the same cyclical models of self-destruction, a fact that indirectly confirms the unity of Russian cultural dynamics despite all historical ruptures between the prerevolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods.

If, as I contend, contemporary Russian culture has not elaborated a clear discourse for representing New Russians not only as a social group but also as a cultural myth, my analysis shows the extent to which the very subject of mythologization in this case is elusive. Existent representations of the New Russian blur the opposition between the polarities it establishes and create an amalgam of incommensurable features. New Russians appear simultaneously as folklore wizards and fools, as ultimate *others* and as mirror reflections of the intelligentsia; their literary representations combine models of wild freedom rooted in the prerevolutionary culture with the Socialist Realist concept of single-minded devotion to the "right cause." New Russians fuse the destructive functions of a devilish antihero with the creative energy of a cultural hero, and blend features of capitalists and commissars, a utopia of freedom and the practice of dictatorship. In addition, the cultural mythology of the New Russians as presented in contemporary Russian literature also serves as the crossroads of different historical discourses: Socialist Realism intersects with nineteenth-century Russian classics, and postmodernism converges with archaic mythological models and motifs. While the phenomenon of New Russians constitutes a focal point of contemporary Russian writings, New Russians as a cultural mythology form the *empty center* of contemporary Russian mentality, since the mechanism of their representation necessarily includes the collisions of components that ultimately erase one another. However, this uneasy combination of centrality and emptiness creates a unique strategic vantage point from which to question the most authoritative discourses and to reevaluate the long-standing values of Russian culture as a whole.