

**New Realism in Russian Literature of the 2000s  
and the Prose of Evgenii Grishkovets**

by

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## Abstract

The thesis focuses on the textual representations of everyday experiences in short stories by Evgenii Grishkovets in the collections *Planka* (Plank, 2006) and *Sledy na mne* (Traces on Me, 2007). It reviews the literary environment of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and new realism is defined as a new literary trend, incorporating the elements of previously prominent realist and postmodernist traditions, and determined as partially a reaction to these.

Grishkovets' short stories are analyzed through the prism of Henri Lefebvre's theory of "everydayness," including the latter's concepts of *alienations* (the feeling of being foreign or estranged to oneself and some or all elements of one's existence), *moments* (instances of true insight into a situation or experience) and *presence* (an individual's experience of the authentic in an everyday situation). Through the analysis of the texts, an effort is made to determine the instances when Grishkovets' characters reach the state of Lefebvre's *total man*, a person whose perception is not clouded by the alienations, and the concept of Russia's 'new hero' in literature is discussed in correlation with Lefebvre's *total man*.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my husband, Andrey Kolmakov who has always encouraged me to finish anything I start and never give up. Without his endless patience and support none of my projects would be completed, including this thesis.

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### Note on Transliteration

In the thesis the author uses the following simplified Library of Congress system of transliteration for Russian:

|      |        |    |      |    |          |
|------|--------|----|------|----|----------|
| А, а | A, a   | Кк | K, k | Хх | H, h     |
| Б, б | B, b   | Лл | L, l | Цц | Ts, ts   |
| В, в | V, v   | Мм | M, m | Чч | Ch, ch   |
| Г, г | G, g   | Нн | N, n | Шш | Sh, sh   |
| Д, д | D, d   | Оо | O, o | Щщ | Sch, sch |
| Е, е | E, e   | Пп | P, p | Ъъ | ‘        |
| Ё, ё | Io, io | Рр | R, r | Ыы | Y, y     |
| Ж, ж | Zh, zh | Сс | S, s | Ьь | ‘        |
| З, з | Z, z   | Тт | T, t | Ээ | Ie, ie   |
| И, и | I, i   | Уу | U, u | Юю | Iu, iu   |
| Й, й | I, i   | Фф | F, f | Яя | Ia, ia   |

## Introduction

This thesis is a study of Evgenii Grishkovets' short stories as viewed through the prism of Henri Lefebvre's theory of "everydayness." It focuses on the representations of everyday experiences as described in short stories by Grishkovets in the collections *Planka* (Plank, 2006) and *Sledy na mne* (Traces on Me, 2007).

Evgenii Grishkovets' prose writings were mostly produced after the fall of the Soviet Union, at the end of the 1990s and through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The two collections that are the focus of this thesis were written during the 2000s, the decade that "has prompted intense debate about the direction and achievements of contemporary Russian prose" (Givens 3). The end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century are characterized by the critic Skoropanova as exhibiting aesthetic pluralism with "multiple currents and creative individuals [...] offering the most varied artistic decisions" (Skoropanova 49). She continues: "If at the beginning of the 90s it [literature] was pushed into the background by the "returned" [previously banned] and low literature, then by the beginning of the new age it was as if it had come out of the underground, having declared itself as a realized, mature and very interesting phenomenon of culture" (Ibid. 56).

The participants of *Druzhba narodov* -- a long-distance round table of

distinguished contemporary Russian writers and critics<sup>1</sup> whose collaboration resulted in the publishing of a collective article called “The Literary Naughts, a Place of Residence and Employment” in the *Russian Studies in Literature* journal in 2012 -- described the first ten years of the twenty-first century as “the decade of the naughts” (nulevye gody) in contrast to the productive and creative first decade of artistic freedom in Russia -- the 1990s. The title “decade of the naughts” is a play on words, in which the authors referred to the decade after the year 2000 with three zero digits as a zero point in the history of Russian literature, suggesting both a low point and a new beginning (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary literature, the authors of the article have suggested, was “annulled” with the year 2000, and it is now “at its starting point, it needs to create and understand itself from the start, to assert itself, to win the reader and its place in the history of the Russian literature” (Ibid.).<sup>3</sup> The literary correspondent for *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Pavel Basinskii, gives the following description of the period in his article in 2012: “The 1990s held a lot of hopes and dreams, a lot of romance, a lot of friends and enemies. None of that remained in the 2000s, although books could

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<sup>1</sup> The participants of the round table included Nikolai Aleksandrov, a literary critic and a host of several programs on “Kultura” TV channel; Roman Arbitman, a literary critic; Olga Balla, the head of the Philosophy and Culture Studies Department of *Znanie-sila* journal and Internet project; Pavel Basinskii, a literary correspondent for *Rossiiskaia gazeta*; Vladimir Bondarenko, the managing editor of *Den literatury* newspaper; Dmitrii Bykov, a prose writer, critic and television host; Evgenii Vezhlian, a literary critic; Evgenii Ermolin, a literary critic and the deputy managing editor of magazine *Kontinent*; Pavel Kriuchkov, a literary critic; Olga Lebedushkina, a literary critic; Alla Marchenko, a literary critic; Liza Novikova, a literary critic; and Andrei Rudalev, a literary critic. All titles and positions of the participants are indicated as they were at the time of the article being published.

<sup>2</sup> Современную литературу “обнулили”, и она находится в точке отсчета, ей нужно создавать и осознавать себя заново, отстаивать себя, завоевывать читателя и свое место в истории русской литературы (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).

<sup>3</sup> In the following paper longer quotation from Russian critics and authors will be translated in the text, and the original will be provided in a corresponding footnote.



now be published and fees received, and no choice had to be made between hackwork and 'service.' Life became better but more boring. Writers cheered up but became appreciably colder and more cynical" (Basinskii 18).

The writers of the period have been accused of only producing the works that are guaranteed to be popular with the readership, with the sole goal of selling more copies. The prose written after the year 2000 has been criticized for turning reading into a leisure activity and book purchasing into an act of "cultural shopping" (Vezhlian 30). "A book, like any piece of merchandise, was required to be both high-quality and contemporary. The reader/consumer perceives his or her choice as a mode of self-expression, and the line of communication between reader and literature becomes utterly private and individual in nature" (Ibid.). Alla Marchenko, a literary critic, blames the new phenomenon of "office intellectuals" for creating a demand for what Georgii Tsiplakov in his "Battle for Middle Mountain" (*Bitva za goru Middl*) has called "Middle Literature," a time when "we will no longer be able to find works that are more complex than the average and authors who send in merchandise that will be difficult to move" (Tsiplakov *Bitva* as quoted in Marchenko 40).

In 2011, in her article reviewing the first decade of the new century, Mariia Cherniak quotes Boris Akunin, an author popular in the 2000s in Russia and around the world for his novels and literary essays, claiming that the reader in Russia "has either matured or even aged a little. He has lost interest in reading 'honest-to-goodness' tales about invented characters and invented situations. He

wants his genres pure. So, writers, you should either tell him what you want to say straightforwardly, or you should give him [...] an unvarnished game with special effects and all the frills" (Cherniak, *A New Playing Field* 70).

Grishkovets has indeed been criticised for writing "with the intent of being liked by the general public -- mostly people of the same circle" and thus writing for and about the same people (Rodnianskaia 148).<sup>4</sup> According to the literary critic Aleksandr Vislov, Grishkovets has lost the sincerity and authenticity of "indie literature and has transformed into another example of empty post-Soviet glamour" (as quoted in *Ibid.* 152).

We postulate that such radically different evaluations of the decade often originate from different points of view concerning the role of postmodernism in the literary process of the 2000s. As Leiderman and Lipovetskii state, alongside with what Rodnianskaia called "returned" literature (56), the development of the Russian literary scene by the 1990s was characterised by the "legalisation of the postmodernist literature previously considered underground" (90). The literary tradition -- that has started with the works of Andrei Bitov, Venedikt Erofeev, and Sasha Sokolov in 1960s-1970s -- in the 1990s became a "whole, monolithic trend" (*Ibid.*) In the 1990s, postmodernist works saw support both from the state -- they could be freely published and discussed in leading magazines, such as *Znamia*, and *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* -- as well as from the public. A number of distinguished literary awards were established at the time, such as The Russian Booker prize, The

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<sup>4</sup> [...] с явным расчетом понравиться публике - прежде всего людям "ближнего круга", почитателям фирменной гришковецкой искренности (Rodnianskaia 148).

Solzhenitsyn Prize, and The Anti-Booker, under the patronage of *Nezavisimaia gazeta* newspaper; many of these awards were given to works written in the postmodernist tradition (Ibid.). In Chapter 1 we will discuss the changes in the literary scene at the beginning of the twenty-first century that pertain to the postmodernist tradition and the seeming loss of interest in it from readership in Russia, which allowed the birth of the new trend of postrealism, which we feel includes Grishkovets' prose.

Givens points out emerging positive trends in Russian prose, such as "new realism," "gritty realism," and "new sincerity" (5). The critic does not elaborate on these terms but they can be related to the nature of Grishkovets' realism. This thesis attempts to show that though Grishkovets' prose aims at a "focus group of readers [...], the same readers, [who are] fans of his signature sincerity," it is also a testimony to contemporary Russian existence (Rodnianskaia 148). We tend to agree with several critics that Grishkovets' prose can be ascribed to the literary trend of new realism, also known as postrealism, and we discuss its nature and characteristics in Chapter 2.

We will focus our analysis of Grishkovets' prose on two collections of his short stories, written in the second half of 2000s. Grishkovets came to prominence at the turn of the century. He started his artistic career as an author of theatrical solo performances, one of the first popular Russian bloggers, and later published several novels and novellas. His first distinguished theatrical performance, a monoplay titled *Kak ia s'el sobaku* (How I Ate a Dog), was first presented to the

Moscow public in 1998. His work at the time gained him recognition and the Zolotaia Maska (Golden Mask) National Theatre Award. His first published prose work was the novel *Rubashka* (Shirt, 2004), followed by the collections *Planka* (Plank, 2006) and *Sledy na mne* (Traces on Me, 2007).

The two collections of short stories are considered to be the author's most successful prose writings (Efrosinin 162). His background as a stage actor has influenced the nature of his prose: the inner monologue of the main characters serves as the narrative structure in the majority of texts; attention to external circumstances and small details of every event allow the reader to imagine the event being "staged" within the text; "stumbling" and repetition of the same word or expression are a reflection of Grishkovets' personal speech manner (Rodnianskaia 153; Efrosinin 162; Orlova 205). These characteristics of his style allow the reader to approach his texts with "the absolute and uncompromised trust," and produce a sense of openness that seems to "allow reality to penetrate the borders of his artistic work" (Efrosinin 162). They produce an illusion of authenticity and directness, of spontaneity and honesty. This was part of the revolt at the time against the "well-written" and deliberately composed prose, which was viewed as manipulative of the reader (Orlova 206). Several authors have emphasized the importance that Grishkovets attaches to seemingly banal details of life, objects that we encounter every day, and urban landscapes with which characters are surrounded (Rodnianskaia 150; Efrosinin 162; Borovikov 163). The same scholars emphasize that the form of inner monologue allows readers to understand a character's

self-consciousness and self-reflection, which is shown through moments of realization and the moments of illumination that characters experience (Ibid.). Efrosinin specifically underlines the importance of momentous experiences that Grishkovets' characters undergo when absorbed in their everyday lives (Efrosinin 164). These characteristics of Grishkovets' prose determined the methodology of the following thesis.

This study presents an analysis of the textual representations of everyday experiences of Grishkovets' characters through Henri Lefebvre's theory of everyday life. In his extensive studies on everyday life, the French philosopher proposes that scientists in a number of fields, including history, ethnography, philosophy, sociology, and literature, have to develop new ways of looking at human experiences, and how they are influenced by rapid changes in lifestyle and living conditions. In almost sixty years of his work -- in which he discussed virtually every topic popular at the time, from language, space, body, to imagination and creativity -- Lefebvre has continually returned to the question of the importance of studying the everyday, drawing where appropriate on works of art and literature (Shields 141; Gardiner 76).

Lefebvre's most articulated theories on human everyday experiences discuss the French society of 1950s and 1960s, when capitalism has been consolidated, and the bourgeois class is prevalent (Gardiner 76). We consider the similarities between the French society of that time and Russia of the 2000s sufficient to draw parallels between the experiences of particular individuals.

According to Lefebvre, in a society that has passed the transitional state into capitalism -- in the case of Russia of the 2000s, from the Soviet area into the period of free market economy -- human life is transformed into routinized and commodified forms, and the exchange-value of things holds sway over their utility, while one's life is encouraged to turn into a class-determined commodity consumption (Gardiner 77). Lefebvre, at the same time, states that the critique of the everyday life can play a positive role in overcoming what he calls the *alienations* -- the feeling, produced in an individual in the modern society, of being foreign or estranged to oneself and some or all elements of one's existence.

After giving an overview of the Russian literary scene of the 2000s in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 we will discuss Grishkovets' prose as an example of new realism, also known as postrealism, a trend we understand as a literary reaction to the writers and the public losing interest in the previously popular postmodernist art. We will look into the aesthetics and the spirituality of the new realism, which show how the focus of narratives shifts into the realm of the banal, the familiar, the everyday.

In Chapter 3 the descriptions of everyday experiences of Grishkovets' characters will be analyzed through Henri Lefebvre's theory of everyday life, including the latter's concepts of *alienations* and *moments* (instances of insight into a situation or experience, which one experiences as authentic, not dulled by the monotony of the everyday routine). Through what he calls *moments*, Lefebvre postulates that one can perceive the *presence*, the authentic behind one's existence

(Shields 41, 58, 60). In Chapter 3 we will discuss which textual representations of the character's experiences can be understood as *alienated*.

In Chapter 4 we will look at those descriptions, which show themselves as *moments* when characters' understanding transcends the "fractured, compartmentalized, inward-looking consciousness" of a person living in a capitalist society (Gardiner 83). Through the analyzed representations an effort will be made to understand how in Grishkovets' prose moments of *presence* punctuate everyday life according to Lefebvre's formula (Everyday Life = Banality / Moments of Presence) revealing the authentic experience of contemporary Russianness.

## Chapter I

### Evgenii Grishkovets and the Literature in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century

Russian literature in the first decade of the twenty-first century has been wittily characterized by Lev Danilkin as “a kludge,” a term often used in computer science (as quoted in Cherniak, *A New Playing Field* 67). A kludge is a system constituted of poorly matched elements or of elements originally intended for different purposes, a clumsy or inelegant solution to a problem. A kludge in computer science slang is a program that theoretically should not work but for some reason does (Ibid. 67). In the same way, the literature of the 2000s is “not a mosaic of one kind or another but a list whose items have nothing in common, except they appeared during a defined span of time” (Danilkin).<sup>5</sup>

During the decade writers pursued their aesthetic quest, “employing a plurality of idioms, models, and methods, and all in one and the same work” (Ivanova 49). Elements taken from subcurrents in postmodernism which have variously been described as sots-art, conceptualism, metametaphorism, the new sentimentalism were reshuffled, new genres came to life, and their old accustomed hierarchy was destroyed (Ivanova 49; Berry and Miller-Pogacar 181). The literature was described as embracing “all trends, including the whole diversity of postmodernism” (Ivanova 49). The literary process was characterized by

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<sup>5</sup> не мозаика в одном-двух вариантах, а список, между пунктами которого может не быть ничего общего, кроме факта появления в определенный промежуток времени (Danilkin).



“interpenetration, the surmounting of insularity on the strength of what has already been ‘penetrated’ in culture by destroying the boundaries and ‘closing the gap’ between dissociated directions,” while the literary criticism was described as applying contrary assessments, and “contrary accounts of the state of its [literature’s] ‘health’” (Ivanova 49). While some critics express “a certain mood of disappointment and a sense of blasted hopes” when discussing the preliminary results of the literary 2000s (Cherniak, *A New Playing Field* 76), others understand that change is “a healthy, elemental process [...] of the somewhat belated birth, in blood, mud, and suffering, of a free culture” (Berry and Miller-Pogacar 187).

Such radically different evaluations of the decade often originate from different points of view concerning the literary process and postmodernist literature. Some researchers today (Mikhail Epstein, Natalia Ivanova, Mariia Cherniak, Pavel Basinskii, Vladimir Bondarenko, Evgenii Bezhlian) are bringing down the curtain on postmodernism, claiming that it “has played itself out” (Berry and Miller-Pogacar 68; Ivanova 38). Those who understood postmodernism as the literature of freedom in Russia of the 1990s see it drawing to an end and Russian literature falling into crisis in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Ivanova 39). They argue that literature reveals “the multiplicity of dead-end developments,” that it is fragmenting and becoming encapsulated; polemical debates have become all but pointless and are being minimized; and “literature is becoming reclusive, confining itself to hobby groups, elitist salons, or associations” (Ivanova 39). The writers of late Russian postmodernism are now compared to “the intellectually

facile, relentlessly ironic, and increasingly stale postmodern legerdemain” (Rampton and Maguire 92). The freedom of the 1990s was, they claim, being “forced on the society in place of the Soviet ideology, and was, firstly, a product thoroughly prepared for sale, and secondly, a product that was also ideological. Never before have we heard such frequent discussion that there is no freedom except the freedom of being bourgeois and praising bourgeois values, as in literature of the beginning of the twenty-first century”(Danilkin).<sup>6</sup> The ranks are thinning; “both friends and opponents” leaving the stage, in many cases departing from this world; “the greatness of village prose passed into the annals of literature” (Bondarenko 21); “there is no more confession prose” (Vezhlian 31). All that is left is “a crisis of novelty,” “a well-tuned presentation mechanism that makes a great show of how well it is doing and how useful it is” (Vezhlian 32). While “postmodernism has left center stage” (Bondarenko 20), “literature taught itself to manufacture a mainstream” (Vezhlian 31). Such comments seem to reflect the feeling of confusion and disorientation among readers and critics that was caused by the end of the censorship of the Soviet era, and the fact that literature was becoming solely concerned with producing books that could be profitable merchandise. There is almost a sense of nostalgia in such a view produced in the first decade of the post-Soviet literary environment, when critics and readers alike seem to yearn for the days when the state policies were dictating the “right” and “wrong” in literature,

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<sup>6</sup> та «свобода», которую навязали обществу вместо советской идеологии, была, во-первых, прошедшим хорошую предпродажную подготовку товаром, а во-вторых, — продуктом тоже идеологическим. Никогда еще так часто не воспроизводились в литературе разговоры о том, что нет никакой свободы, кроме свободы быть мещанином и воспевать мелкобуржуазные ценности, как в литературе начала XXI века (Danilkin).

when the critic was an authority figure protected by state-sponsored institutions with exclusive rights to judge the written word, while the state had the power to allow only certain books to be published. One critic wrote in 2011: “The role allocated to literature within the confines of the new social relations differed dramatically from the part that Russian literature had played in its previous three centuries” (Vezhlian 30). As we stated before, both reading and purchasing books became “cultural shopping” where the demand from readers became more important than the evaluation of the written by critics (Ibid.)

Alla Marchenko explains that the middle class, tired of “a cruel literature, merrily cynical, with no humanitarian subtleties or psychological nuances, produced in spades and ready for prime time” (Marchenko 40), perceived his or her choice in books “as a mode of self-expression, and the line of communication between reader and literature becomes utterly private and individual in nature” (Givens 4). The literature of the 2000s was forced to seek out a “language” to support its rudimentary contact with the social organism, one that permitted it to manifest itself from within while surviving (Vezhlian 30; Ivanova 39). Memoirs, biographies, mystery novels, and new realism were the genres sought out by the contemporary readers (Givens 4; Balla 16; Marchenko 40). After all, it was said, books in the 2000s were read by young adults, more often female, with a higher education, residents of larger cities (19 percent of whom are Muscovites), with high consumer status (Dubin and Zorkaia 25). Writers increasingly followed the demands of the reader. As one critic stated: “the twenty-first-century reader demands a remedy to alleviate

excessive psychological stress and offer an opportunity to relax, away from the hard challenges posed by the environment” (Cherniak, *A New Playing Field* 68). Some researchers went as far as to say:

The Moscow and St. Petersburg middle-class elite and bureaucrats of all stripes have turned up their noses at the terrible truth of how profoundly pernicious Russian life is. Oil is sold, gas is sold, money is flooding into Moscow banks, and the entire elite does not give two hoots about the black hole of blighted hopes and extinction. Let them go extinct as fast as they like; there’s no downside to that. No one needs the truth about Russia itself. (Bondarenko 24)

Seen from this perspective, the new realistic prose appeared to be most logically destined for popularity among the mainstream readers of the twenty-first century. Jean-François Lyotard explains that twentieth-century realism became the most popular form of writing as it was easiest to understand its “communication code,” one which the mass public could digest most easily as a therapy for the horrors of reality and depression (Taylor and Winquist 753-754). Lyotard attributes this to the fact that the realist tradition of the twentieth century was a part of the totalitarian culture in such countries as Germany and Russia. The images and the narratives of the tradition were, according to Lyotard, made available to the public only if they were “correct” from the regime’s point of view, containing an easily comprehensible message that the state and governing establishment agreed with (Ibid.).

Meanwhile, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the power appears to have shifted toward the reader. When talking about the literature of the 2000s, Cherniak says: “Because it is focused on demand, literature acts as a precise indicator of the values in contemporary mass culture and as one of the powerful factors that serve to propagate it” (Cherniak, *A New Playing Field* 74). She quotes the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić who says that “the writer who does not accept the rules of the market will simply perish” (quoted in *Ibid.*). Success is said to go to “those who do not care to take any risks, who select sure-fire and secure variants -- tattered, threadbare, and shabbily “realistic” writing and popular biography of popular people” (Lebedushkina 37).

Following this line of thought, many accuse Grishkovets of blindly following the tastes of the masses. He is put in the same category as other writers of the period who are said to perceive the reader as a consumer, while their writing is said to solely pursue a desire to please a reader as opposed to “evoking emotion by transforming reality or having something to teach” (Vezhlian 30). Describing Grishkovets’ transformation from his early works written in 1990s to his prose of the 2000s, Ian Shenkman says: “In *Kak ia s’el sobaku* (How I Ate a Dog, 1998) and his preceding works he is new, naive and sincere. In *Rubashka* (Shirt, 2008), in my personal opinion, [he is] calculating to the point of hypocrisy. Also, with a distinct tang of being iconic and fashionable. For the Moscow middle class, the quasi-elite, consisting of managers and PR people, not reading *Rubashka* today is like not

watching Solov'ev's *Assa* in 1987" (Shenkman 17).<sup>7</sup> Grishkovets has been accused of "selling out," giving up his sincerity and the openness of an independent writer for commercial success and "his place in the gaping emptiness of post-Soviet glamour" (Aleksander Vislov as quoted in Rodnianskaia 148). Grishkovets, it is said, has been instructed to create characters and plots that are doomed to be popular with his mass readers as they are "philistines, bourgeois, [...] a hundred per cent average" (Shenkman 17).

We tend to agree with a quite different, much more positive interpretation of the decline of postmodernism and the literary situation in the 2000s. It is given by a number of critics and scholars, such as Naum Leiderman and Mark Lipovetskii, Evgenii Ermolin, Aleksander Ageev, and Dmitrii Bykov.

Naum Leiderman and Mark Lipovetskii in their *Sovremennaia russkaia literatura* (Contemporary Russian Literature, 2001) discuss the beginning of the twenty-first century as the completion of a certain post-Soviet transitional period and the creation of what they call "postrealism" (for the purposes of this work we will equate "new realism" and "postrealism") (Leiderman and Lipovetskii 142). This represents a period when the creative trends of the past have not ceased to be an influence but have turned into new, strong literary trends, based on the preceding ones (Ibid 143).<sup>8</sup> As Vladimir Bondarenko says, "Russia has welcomed back, after a

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<sup>7</sup> В "Как я съел собаку" и предыдущих вещах он нов, наивен и откровенен. В "Рубашке" - это мое личное впечатление - расчетлив на грани фальши. Зато покрыт толстым налетом культовости и моды. У московского среднего класса, у квазиэлиты, состоящей из менеджеров и пиарщиков, не читать "Рубашку" сегодня - все равно что в восемьдесят седьмом не смотреть соловьевскую "Ассу" (Shenkman 17).

<sup>8</sup> Завершение отмеченных творческих линий не стало обрывом нитей, а, наоборот, обернулось утверждением на их основе новых, сильных художественных тенденций. В

hundred-year hiatus, a brilliant realism enriched by all the cutting-edge techniques” (Bondarenko 23). The described merging of the realistic tradition with the latest “technologies” (in the case of the 2000s, the merging with postmodernist elements, such as understanding the world as chaos, disappointment in authorities and elitist values, acceptance of a multiplicity of established truths) results in the most varied combinations and the generating of new literary phenomena and border zones (Skoropanova 51). We will discuss postrealism in more detail in the next chapter, analyzing its various elements including those inherited from the postmodernist tradition as well as other literary trends.

Within this more positive outlook, some scholars and authors prefer to accept the new relationships that is forming between the writer and the reader, rather than accusing the contemporary writers of “selling out” some authors and scholars. Bondarenko summarises the new paradigm of reader/writer relationships of the decade in this way:

The naughts [2000s] were given to this country so that it would learn to live, rather than die, for freedom. They were given to writers so that they could write and publish books that would interest readers. To readers who had gotten over the social and economic shock and gone off to visit the book stores, who stopped in at Ozone and Labyrinth<sup>9</sup> as if they were IKEA and Metro<sup>10</sup> [...] Writing “just texts,” however

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данном случае речь идет о явлениях, получивших наименование “постреализма” и “нового сентиментализма” (Leiderman and Lipovetskii 143).

<sup>9</sup> Names of large bookstore chains in Russia

<sup>10</sup> Grocery stores chain in Russia

inspired they may be, is as senseless at this point as trying to become another Platonov, another Nabokov, another Brodsky. Before writing an article, you have to think about where you are going to publish it, before writing a novel, you have to imagine its prospective reader (Bondarenko 19).

Alexander Ageev in his “Conspectus on the Crisis” agrees with many claiming that indeed the contemporary Russian literature is in a crisis, but that he “welcomes it heartily” (Berry and Miller-Pogacar 184). He describes the current literary process as “the gradual secularization and democratization of literature”; the formation of new genres and the new relationships between the reader and the writer are seen as “a completely objective process that is normally in force everywhere” (Ibid). As for the spread of mass culture and its demands regarding what is written, Ageev expresses a perspective we will discuss in further detail in the following chapters: “As long as mass culture remains culture (that is, it does not transgress precepts of humanism), it has every right to occupy the lower tier. And high culture, so as not to scornfully slight its poor relative, could learn something from it” (Ibid).

To summarise, Grishkovets’ prose could be seen in a much more positive light. It could be taken as representing an optimistic and relaxed attitude towards mass culture, as embracing the opportunities that mass culture offers for exploring the everyday, even the banal.



## Chapter 2

### Postrealism of the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

Maria Cherniak when discussing the literature of the first decade of the twenty-first century quotes Sergei Shargunov, a young writer from the generation in question, who said at the beginning of the 2000s: “The new laughter is coming! The new realism is coming! [...] I repeat the incantation: new realism! Rhythm, clarity, conciseness are returning to the prose. The reality will not be clouded, the locusts will be gone, the spirit of the old traditional literature will take a new breath” (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).<sup>11</sup> Many writers and critics, among them Irina Skoropanova, Mikhail Zolotonosov, Vladimir Bondarenko, Alexandr Ageev, Tatiana Ternova and many others, characterize the new prosaic tradition born in the 2000s as “an attempt to break out of the ambit of commercial literature while escaping the muddy encirclement of the postmodernists” (Bondarenko 22).

The new realism, also known as postrealism, is often seen as precisely such a reaction to the postmodernism of the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and understood at the same time as built upon previous realist traditions of Russian literature. In this chapter we will look at the relationships between the postrealist and postmodernist trends in the literary 2000s and at the aesthetics of the former movement. We will also discuss the status of the prosaic literature

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<sup>11</sup> Несколько лет назад С. Шаргунов заявил от имени поколения: «Грядет смена смеха. Грядет новый реализм. <..> Я повторяю заклинание: новый реализм! В прозу возвращаются ритмичность, ясность, лаконичность. Явь не будет замутнена, сгинет саранча, по-новому задышит дух прежней традиционной литературы (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).

among the contemporary Russian readers to further understand the audience whom Grishkovets' short stories are written for.

One critic has noted that "a superabundance of constant quotations and an 'un-Russian' game of recognizing them" characteristic of postmodernism is said to "irritate the reader and ends by exhausting the writer" (Ljunggren 462). Tired of the "heightened signness" and lack of "Tolstoyan pure content," the new century in literature began its development under the banner of a return to realism, as that term is traditionally understood in Russian culture (Ljunggren 460; Rudalev 44). Vladimir Bondarenko comments on the seeming departure of the postmodern and the upsurge of new realist prose:

Hermeticism in literature is good when literature is highly meaningful. The convoluted woodland paths of postmodernism are good when they do not replace the high road. It is no coincidence that the most gifted writers [...] have abandoned the postmodernist space they were finding so tedious and have gone off into social satire or historicism, into new forms of neoclassicism (20).

Irina Skoropanova in her article "The conceptual model of Russian literature" wrote: "One can observe an active interaction of different aesthetic systems emerging in most varied combinations and generating new literary phenomena and border zones," and observed that "a rather typical feature of the modern Russian literature is the postrealism appearing as a result of borrowing by the realism the elements of modernist poetics [...] or of postmodernism" (51).

Postrealism, since it is often understood as a literary recoil from postmodernism, is repeatedly determined through the terms of the latter. It is recognized as “a literary trend demonstrating the crisis of a parodical approach to reality and combining the markings of postmodernism (‘the world as chaos,’ ‘authority crisis,’ emphasis on the corporeal), realism (a typical character, typical circumstances), romanticism (the discord between the ideal and the reality, the antagonism of ‘I’ and reality) with an orientation to the existential dead end, alienation, questing, dissatisfaction and tragic gesture. It is not so much a trend as a unity of the writer’s individualities, an overall world outlook, reflected in works, so different in their artistic and stylistic solutions” (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).<sup>12</sup>

The appropriation of the elements of postmodernism in postrealist poetics is a part of the overall process of the system of genres being actively reconstructed in Russian literature, at a time when “its accustomed hierarchy is being destroyed, and new genres are coming to the fore” (Berry and Miller-Pogacar 181). The critics continue, “These genres have declared themselves to be hybrid forms. State, nationalized, socialized literature is gradually yielding its place to a literature that is closer to the individual person, to personality” (Ibid).

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<sup>12</sup> Новый реализм — это литературное направление, отмечающее кризис пародийного отношения к действительности и сочетающее маркировки постмодернизма (“мир как хаос”, “кризис авторитетов”, акцент на телесность), реализма (типичный герой, типичные обстоятельства), романтизма (разлад идеала и действительности, противопоставление “я” и общества) с установкой на экзистенциальный тупик, отчужденность, искания, неудовлетворенность и трагический жест. Это не столько даже направление как единство писательских индивидуальностей, а всеобщее мироощущение, которое отражается в произведениях, самых неодинаковых по своим художественным и стилевым решениям. (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).

Postrealists also combine in their prose the realist traditions with those of modernist literature: the simple, “street” language is merged in them with references to myths. Bondarenko confirms this idea, saying that “here an utterly hard and fast reality combines with the mysticism and mythology of history” (Bondarenko 24). The writers of this new generation, according to Ternova, build their aesthetics upon the difference between existence (the world of the material) and reality (the combination of the existing and the spiritual component of human life). They claim that the spiritual has been lacking in literature and life, and set themselves the goal of reclaiming it (Ternova 7).<sup>13</sup> Skoropanova supports this idea of the hybrid nature of a postrealism, one that “on a subjective base reconstructs the reality of the conscious and the unconscious, reflects the search of the sense of existence (personal and all-human) in appealing to the philosophical systems which are concentrated on the sphere of spirit, on building the new conceptual models of spiritual existence” (Skoropanova 48).

The spirituality of postrealism reflects in itself the process of the “reorientation and changing of the episteme,” of the evolving crisis facing society in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Skoropanova 52). Postmodernist writers are said to be concerned with the issues that lie beyond the interest and

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<sup>13</sup> Неореалисты принципиально различают реальность (вещный мир) и действительность (реальность + духовность). Они считают, что духовное измерение все больше уходит из литературы и жизни вообще, и стремятся его вернуть. Стиль неореалистических текстов совмещает позиции реализма и модернизма: здесь, с одной стороны, нарочито простой язык улицы, а с другой стороны, используются отсылки к мифам (Ternova 7).

sometimes even understanding of their audience. They are said to busy themselves with “overcoming the world-wide civilizational crisis which is threatened with a thermonuclear war and an ecological catastrophe [...] through pluralism, polycentrism, religious ecumenism, ethnic and cultural diversity, panecologism, purposeful evolution, which considers life on earth to be the basic value” (Skoropanova 56). Meanwhile, their texts seem to be “causing a weak resonance in the society burdened by the mass of undecided current problems” (Ibid.). In contrast to postmodernism, postrealism seems to choose an alternative set of values for itself, with “the opposite tendency taking place in the realist literature now: an apotheosis of the earthy joy of life, which develops and upholds a philosophy of hedonism,” with a celebration of “the humanistic values common to all mankind, such as the right to life and full-fledged development of the individual, humanity, friendship, and love” in a large number of works of contemporary Russian literature”(Ibid. 53).

As we have noted earlier, postmodernism lost a lot of its popularity when in the early years of the century readers seemed to turn their attention towards the everyday, the banal, the familiar. According to some critics, postrealism was able to give these to its audience. Moreover, the spiritual dimension of postrealism is sometimes understood as representing a breaking through to the deeper layers of the human psyche. Dmitrii Bykov, a popular contemporary poet and journalist, describes the new realist prose of the twenty-first century as follows: “The dark depths of the human and the national are today more interesting than the entirely

predictable labyrinths of the social. We must seek the thing that Bitov called ‘new data on man,’ breaking with threadbare concepts such as ‘intellectual guilt,’ the ‘downtrodden backwoods,’ or a ‘deficiency of democracy’” (Bykov 29). According to Evgenii Ermolin, a prominent literary critic and culture historian, the contemporary prose is said to be “strongly marked by the will to make a breakthrough [to the heart of things], by the yearning for the real, for the genuine” (33).

The way to this goal seems to many critics to lie through “the erosion of boundaries drawn between the “invented” and the “uninvented,” their interpenetration, and their appreciation of their kinship” (Balla 16). The interest in the “uninvented,” as sometimes manifested in the increasing popularity of memoir prose and “human documents,” attests to an interest in what people are made of, “what a man is in and of himself, outside all ideological and even narrative structures” (Ibid.). One of the elements of such a trend is the growing interest of the public in the possibilities that the Internet provides for such, more “personalised” relationships between a reader and a writer, allowing feedback and communication between the two sides. “The technical potential of the Internet has become not only a topic in contemporary literature but also a part of its poetics” (Lebedushkina 39).

One proof of that is the immense popularity of published blogs in hard copy. Grishkovets’ five books published between 2008 and 2013 based on his posts on LiveJournal only support this idea. For many readers he is a blogger firstly, and a writer and a playwright only secondarily. His blog on LiveJournal was what had initially brought him recognition and popularity around the country, long before he

began to tour with his plays. Later, already as an established writer and a theater actor, he published *God zhzhizni* (Year of LiveLife, 2008), *Prodolzhenie zhzhizni* (Continuation of LiveLife, 2009), *151 epizod zhzhizni* (151 episodes of LiveLife, 2011), *Ot zhzhizni k zhizni* (From LiveLife to life, 2012) and *Pochti rukopisnaya zhizn* (Almost handwritten life, 2013), all comprised of his blog entries. LiveJournal is a blog of public diary entries, and the popularity of Grishkovets' publications shows the interest in the inner life of an individual who is a characteristic figure for the readership of that time, as well as illustrates certain expectation that Grishkovets' readers place on his prose.

Ermolin has coined the term "new journalism" to describe

the recording of the simple social truth as sketches, as social analysis/investigation (including historical), as cultural-historical essay, as commentary/reporting (which, given the specifics of the social organism, usually appears as a column or a small standalone publication and is often couched in a tone of sentimentalist edification or ironic banter), as social prognosis, and so on. It is what people often have in mind when they speak of the heyday of the new realism. (34)

Ermolin places Grishkovets' prose in the same literary paradigm, one concerned with "a journey behind the real on the map, [...] beyond the confines of factual truth," while sometimes comprised of "the simple confession of an ailing and aching soul" (34-35). The idea of contemporary realist prose having a confessional nature is supported by Aleksandr Ageev who claims that "the new literature did not

appear just today or yesterday”, and in his opinion the postrealism of the 2000s traces its beginning to the 1950s and 1960s with “confession prose,” “the first gulp of freedom for people who had gained the right to be private individuals and not merely bolts in a monstrous state machine or bricks in a Tower of Babel” (Berry and Miller-Pogacar 182). With time, Ageev believes, the prose “rid itself of the juvenile rainbow optimism of its originators, rejected the softening moisture of lyricism, and emerged into the world anew [...], and then the new literature turned up in the everyday, ambivalent world of writers of the former forty-something generation” (Ibid. 182). The primary genre of the trend is the novella or a short story, because “very rarely do they call their works novels, as if they had renounced the much respected term *novel* as the exclusive property of their great neighbours in the literary process” (Ibid., original italics). They remain focused on “life,” and, as Skoropanova states, “the realistic principle of condensed life-likeness is the most effective when the authors are reconstructing the new life realia” (Ibid.).

Skoropanova states that Russian literature is at the present time seeking to gain “the artistic mastery of post-Soviet reality, which is accompanied by an explanation of the essence of the processes taking place in the society”(Ibid.). On the other hand, several researchers agree that the new literature lacks didacticism, seemingly having relinquished its rights to assert a dominant point of view on the meaning of life (Zolotonosov and Ageev in Berry and Miller Pogacar 164; 181; Skoropanova 53; Bondarenko 25). Bondarenko supports the idea by stating that “the ruthless young prose of today’s new realists [...] pursues its fearsome narrative



and, alas, sees in life no viable escape. It cannot find the new altar to the unknown god" (Bondarenko 25).

One of the possible explanations for why the postrealists gave up the didactic function in their prose is offered by Mikhail Zolotonosov. He proposes the term "postideological literature". The society, whose literature previously was founded on three pillars -- "socialist mythology, state atheism, and the Communist ideology of total prohibition"-- is now "characterized by a feverish and absurd search for a new social mythology" (as quoted in Berry and Miller-Pogacar 157). "Ideological chaos is exacerbated by pluralism, now proclaimed as an official doctrine and an allegedly productive one" (Ibid.). The literature of previous years was either built on the three dogmas, or stood in opposition to all of them (Ibid.). Aleksandr Ageev agrees with this idea, stating that the two types of ideological makeup are the two bases available for a "great literature" that is always synthetic (Ibid. 177): "Great literature is a coherent system, very clearly and hierarchically constructed with regard to its own values" and it cannot be indifferent to power, "for the totalitarian state is its cradle"(Ibid.). Such a literature "has in its arsenal a perfect model of the world, and sooner or later feels the will to break through the borders of art and establish a perfect model of the universe in reality" (Ibid. 178).

In the society in Russia of the 2000s, which had travelled a long way from the totalitarian Soviet regime, and in which attempts had been made to transform most social relations into the democratic and free market paradigm, such literature appeared to have no place. Ageev confirms such an opinion of ideological literature

being incompatible with freedom and democracy, and claims that the current state of Russian society had produced a literature that

rejects any claims to moral leadership or monumental, ideological pathos. This does not prevent it, as one might think, from posing ultimate questions, but it does prevent it from giving unambiguous answers to them. This literature does not soar in empty space; it labours in a cramped world, knowing full well that by its side stand science, religion, and philosophy, and, not least of all, an enormous number of independent, intelligent people. The new literature trusts them to draw conclusion and give answers (181).

Such lack of didacticism in literature and the delegation of power to find answers to moral and philosophical questions to the reader is often understood in a negative light as making “the contemporary artist too dependant on the contemporary life”(Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).<sup>14</sup> This kind of writing is thought to limit writers to only describing their contemporary circumstances, the society in its current form, without seeing a wider picture:

They realize themselves on the level of the narrow specific actuality, turning the ABC of everyday life into intricate texts. Their horizon is

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<sup>14</sup> Современный поэт слишком зависит от современной жизни. Он реализует себя на уровне сугубой, мелко взятой актуальности, замысловато претворяя в стихах азбуку повседневья. Его горизонт — это горизонт нынешней культурной сиюминутности. Многие слишком верны своей эпохе, а эпоха — глупа и пошла. С такой не нужно бы водиться. Современная поэзия больна абсолютизацией текущего дня и часа», — писал почти десять лет назад в статье «Сию-минутца. Поэт в постклассическом мире» Е. Ермолин («Континент». 2001. № 107) (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).

the horizon of the current cultural ordinariness. Many are too loyal to the epoch, while the epoch is stupid and vulgar. One should not rub shoulders with it. Contemporary literature is ailing with absolutization of the present day and hour (Ibid).

The most frequent concern expressed by contemporary critics is that the content and the aesthetics of the literature of the 2000s are determined by the trend of understanding how the reader understands “the market.” One critic has written: “Market technologies determine the literary process now. The publishing houses declare new names in literature almost every month. The high competitiveness of the market demands a right to find its reader” (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*).

<sup>15</sup> And many agree that nowadays readers are the upscale managers who have a use for literature that is high-quality and “smart,” meaning they are most concerned with reading what is popular and prestigious and only seemingly intellectual, as opposed to seeking literature with deeper meaning (Vazhlian 30). Such an audience is beginning to push the writer towards the abovementioned “sure-fire variants -- tattered, threadbare, and shabbily realistic writing” composed to increase one’s self-importance and feed one’s self-indulgence (Lebedushkina 37; Bykov 25).

Defending the contemporary realist prose, Dmitrii Bykov directs his discussion of the new literature to the topic of readership. He states that “the

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<sup>15</sup> Литературный процесс, как и другие сферы нашей жизни, теперь определяют рыночные технологии. Издательства едва ли не ежемесячно объявляют о появлении новых имен. Большая конкуренция на книжном рынке требует от писателя поиска своего читателя (Cherniak, *Diagnoses and Prognoses*)

majority is ready to read, and wants to read, serious literature. I encounter it while traveling the country as a writer and a journalist: it thinks a lot and tries to work -- wherever that is still possible -- and raises its children well. One only has to write for it" (Bykov 28). On the one hand, the critic states that there is an intelligent public in contemporary Russia that requires a certain kind of sophisticated writing. On the other hand, such a public wants its interests and daily experiences reflected in literature. The market requirements do not always lead to low-level and primitive production. There is a niche market for small prose. Even if literature is only written to be sold and bought, and to answer the demands of the reader, the 'quality' reader will determine the 'quality literature.'

Another question has become an important subcurrent in contemporary debates -- whether the popular realist literature, such as Grishkovets' short stories, is a throwback to the past. Some have seen it in negative terms as "an old and pathetic joke aimed to please sentimental Muscovite maidens, an assembly of self-portraits and portraits of friends and acquaintances" (Turilin 43), while others express the opposite opinion and see in it "an attempt to get through to the honest truth, the actual reality behind our existence" (Ermolin 34).

We tend to agree, nevertheless, with Skoropanova who states that though "at the beginning of the 90s [the real literature] was pushed into the background by the 'returned' [previously banned and rediscovered by publishers and readers] and low literature, by the beginning of the new age as it [...] had declared itself as a realized, mature and very interesting phenomenon of culture" (56). We feel that the

new realism, even if we accept its reading as 'reader pleasing' literature, has the potential of satisfying the needs of the readership that seeks deep spiritual reflection on their everyday life and their experiences.

### Chapter 3

#### Grishkovets' Short Stories and Henri Lefebvre's Theory of Everyday Life

In this chapter we will discuss the textual representations of characters' everyday experiences, and how they can be interpreted through the prism of Henri Lefebvre's theory of everyday life and the concept of alienations. To better understand Grishkovets' protagonists, we will start by looking into Grishkovets' readership, and following Ian Shenkman we hypothesise that Grishkovets writes his protagonists and their experiences as the reflection of his readers and himself (Shenkman 17).

Shenkman claims that "the protagonist of Grishkovets is Grishkovets himself, endlessly similar to his reader, a philistine, bourgeois (I do not see anything offensive in these terms). A hundred per cent average person, but the one striving to understand or at least to feel fully what is happening to him or her" (Ibid.).<sup>16</sup> Other critics confirm this idea claiming that the author writes about himself and people like him, the people around him, middle-aged, moderately successful, living in Moscow (Orlova 205; Rodnianskaia 148; Efrosinin 167).

In our thesis we postulate that Grishkovets' readers belong to the class, which Georgii Tsiplakov, a contemporary Russian writer and literary critic, calls "office intellectuals" (64). Tsiplakov describes the "office intellectuals" as the people

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<sup>16</sup> обыватель, мещанин (не вижу ничего обидного в этих терминах). Человек стопроцентно заурядный, но пытающийся понять или хотя бы почувствовать в полный рост, что же это с ним происходит (Shenkman 17).

who “earn their bread, and the butter to go on it, with their own knowledge and skills [...], who are to the middle class what the proletariat in Lenin’s works was to the working class. They are the most “conscious” of the desk jockeys, who, after graduating from college back when, ran up against the problem of earning a living in the wild and woolly days of perestroika and its aftermath. So off they went to work -- some in a home appliances store, some in an advertising agency, some in phone sales, and so on. But what we must focus on is that their cultural needs after college were far more complex than finding an entry-level career position” (64). Such people are considered among their colleagues as “intellectual” and “sophisticated,” and their main qualities are seen as “inquisitiveness, education, artistry, and a lively mind” (Ibid. 64). “While they must not be called greedy, a dignified life cannot be lived without money, and dignity is something they respect [...] They aspire to improve the current rules of the game both in business and in society as a whole. They passionately want others to live well, meaning affluently” (Ibid.).

We have discussed the connection of status and consumer habits with reading in Chapter 1. Indeed, as we mentioned before, books in the 2000s were read by young adults, more often female, with a higher education, residents of larger cities (19 percent of whom are Muscovites), with high consumer status (Dubin and Zorkaia 25). In 2009, in an extensive piece of research on the contemporary Russian readership, Boris Dubin and Nataliia Zorkaia from the Russian Academy of Sciences concluded that “people’s level of prosperity, their consumer status, is very closely linked to the communication of a model of book and reading culture: the

respondents who are better off are consistently in the lead in *all* types of communication of value associated with book and reading, from practices within the home to electronic networks” (Ibid. 48).

Irina Rodnianskaia in her article “Gamburgskij ezhib v tumane” (The Hamburg hedgehog in the mist) wrote that readers in Russia 2000s are “down-to-earth, well-to-do, productive people, for whom a schooled mind, civilized tastes, and the minimum requirements of a classical education are as desirable as a healthy diet, a respectable outfit, and a health-club membership. The computers inside their skulls should be always on, to prevent damage to the neurons filling the space” (as quoted in Tsiplakov 65).

Such are the characters in Grishkovets’ stories. Rodnianskaia describes one of the protagonists of Grishkovets’ prose as “a typical representative of artistic intelligentsia, who more or less has reached the middle-class level in his income and social status and trying to settle in this unstable social niche, but not without psychological and even metaphysical problems”(Rodnianskaia 149).<sup>17</sup>

So, what are these psychological and even metaphysical problems that Grishkovets’ characters and his readers, the “office intellectuals” in Russia post-1990s go through? The answer could possibly be found in Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life*, where he describes the struggles of a modern man living in a capitalistic society in the following way:

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<sup>17</sup> Представитель художественной интеллигенции, дотянувшей по своим доходам и общественному весу худо-бедно до уровня среднего класса и обживающей эту неустоявшуюся социальную нишу не без психологических, и даже метафизических, проблем (Rodnianskaia 149).



People are now *alienated*, divided from themselves. Division of labour, labour itself, individual roles and functions, the distribution of work, culture and traditions, all impose themselves as constraints. Each person experiences the collective achievements of society as the work of an alien power (*Key Writings* 82; italics are mine).

In his work Lefebvre presents the theory of *alienation* understood as “a loss of control over essential human capacities and powers that should be firmly rooted in daily existence” (Gardiner 75). In capitalistic society, according to Lefebvre, social activities that people engage in become highly differentiated, and cease to be consolidated into a unified whole. All spheres of a person’s life are alienated from each other, while the person is detached from people around himself or herself.

The division of labour and the schism between the process of work and its essence are the two main alienations experienced by a modern individual, according to Lefebvre. Grishkovets’ characters show a wide range of behaviours linked to disassociation from their social roles and functions. Sometimes it is an inevitable rejection of these roles due to the restricting, externally enforced nature of the characters’ circumstances and work responsibilities. Such is the quiet and determined rebellion of Jamal Beridze, a young Adjarian sailor in the story “Drugie” (Others). He is drafted to the fleet and hardly speaks any Russian. He does not understand why he is forced to follow other people’s orders that seem illogical to him (as an unjust punishment he is told to peel potatoes with a spoon), cannot understand the bullying and does not comply with the statutory norms and

regulations.<sup>18</sup> Jamal's struggle is the reflection of the narrator's personal experience while serving in the army. The two soldiers are often put on certain duties on the ship together.

Sometimes such disassociation from one's social circumstances and obligations happens when a character's personal beliefs and goals do not match the social environment around him or her. "Dekan Dankov" (Dean Dankov) in the collection *Traces on Me* is a story of an imaginary Dean of the Faculty of Philology in Kemerovo University. He is a prominent scholar, fanatical about the language sciences he teaches, but on the other hand he is bitter, cruel and bigoted towards his students, whom he calls "a disgusting collection of insects." He cannot accept that they do not dedicate all their time and energy to their studies. The narrator in Grishkovets' story is Dankov's former student, who is looking back on those years and calls the teacher a "villain," characterizes him as "evil," a person who "had ruined so many young lives, and if not ruined then wounded and traumatized" (Sledy na mne 6). The narrator himself wonders how Dankov became so alienated from "the vital and beautiful" that is contained in the books that he is teaching and how those books became mere texts for him.<sup>19</sup> Dankov is disassociated from the

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<sup>18</sup> Джамал остро чувствовал несправедливость и с трудом принимал условия военной субординации. А когда на него кричал кто-нибудь из офицеров, он всё равно поднимал правую руку к груди и говорил: «Э-э-э», – и укоризненно качал головой. <...> Ему было сложно, но он не задавал вопросов. Он старался сохранять спокойное выражение лица всегда. И чем непонятнее была ситуация, тем спокойнее, молчаливее и горделивее держался Беридзе (Planka 6).

<sup>19</sup> Я не понимаю, как из парня, который родился где-то под Тамбовом, который с юности фанатично любил и был предан лингвистической науке, русской словесности и всему тому гуманистическому, живому и прекрасному, что хранили и хранят те книги, которые он с таким трепетом брал в руки, постигал их, любил... Как из него получился такой злодей? Как он оторвался от той земли, которую понимал и знал много лучше, чем мы? Как он оторвался

people around him and fails to fulfill the main purpose of his work, which is to pass on his love and appreciation for his subject.

The process of alienation has been described by one commentator in the following terms: "Under modernity imaginative and creative human activity is transformed into routinized and commodified forms, and the exchange-value of things holds sway over their utility, their use-value, leading to what Marx called 'fetishism' of the commodity" (Gardiner 77). While Jamal does not understand the purpose of following senior officers' orders as he has not chosen the social role he is in, and Dankov has lost the understanding of the essence of his work, the majority of Grishkovets' characters are closer to the image of the "office intellectuals," and for them their work becomes the means of achieving a certain level of income and consequently comfort. The latter in their opinion depends on the amount of material goods they can obtain. Objects purchased become the expression of their success in their social roles.

Lefebvre reflects on such replacing of a person seeking meaning behind the work itself by their endeavour to acquire material goods:

Relationships between men are masked by relationships between objects, human social existence is realized only by the abstract existence of their products. Objects seem to take on a life of their own. The market dominates human beings; they become the plaything of anything with which they are unfamiliar, and which sweeps them

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от людей и остался среди книг, и как книги умерли в его руках и превратились в тексты? Я не понимаю (Sledy na mne 6).

along. The market is already a machine and an inexorable destiny (Lefebvre *Key Writings* 82).

According to Lefebvre, capitalism is a system for producing merchandise. When it becomes a merchandise, “an object becomes detached from itself, so to speak. It enters a system of relationships that are expressed through it, so that in the end it seems to be the subject of these relationships, their causal agent” (*Key Writings* 82).

Many critics point out Grishkovets’ remarkable ability to capture the images of objects from everyday life and characters’ relationships with them. Efrosinin points out how “those who watched Grishkovets’ plays or read his books, obviously firstly noticed how precisely he manages to reflect the small things in our everyday life” (163). We hypothesise that the images Grishkovets creates in his prose are selected in order to illustrate the alienations experienced by his characters. Such replacing of the actual product of one’s work with the commodities that are now available for purchase because of a certain level of income and status can be seen in the images of the scarf in the “Lechebnaia sila sna” (Healing Power of Sleep). It is a story of a young man travelling to Paris, for a long-awaited business trip. Exhausted by the fast pace of business life in Moscow, and heavily sleep-deprived, the protagonist dozes off accidentally and spends his only day in the French capital asleep in his hotel room. Just before his flight back, he purchases a scarf. This becomes for him the symbol of the trip, which he boasts about, and in which he later shows great pride.

The scarf becomes a symbol of business success for Vadik. It is not purchased for keeping the person warm; it is the material reflection of the illusion Vadik tries to retain: the full experience of visiting Paris, which he does not achieve, having spent only one day in the city, and having slept most of the time he was there.

In the same way the apartments in the story “Nad nami, pod nami i za stenami” (Above us, Below Us and Behind the Walls) and “Spokojstvie” (Calmness) play a similar role. They are symbols of status, they determine relationships between characters, which is wittily reflected in the title of the first story. In “Above us, Below Us and Behind the Walls” the reader is presented with two groups of images: descriptions of the tenants, with their personal history, their experiences and their emotions; and, as a contrast, a second groups of images revealing the banal, sometimes absurd, materialistic perceptions of an apartment as property, and not a place for living. Two characters in the story are worth comparing: Volodia, a renovations enthusiast from the apartment below the protagonists’; and German, another neighbour of the protagonist, a person with a surprising past. The descriptions of the lives and the apartments of the two men are given one after another, and create a fascinating juxtaposition. Volodia is a former navy officer, a man with a vivid past life -- he has travelled, had multiple romantic relationships, and claims to have achieved financial success, but has had to move around a lot. He is depicted as a loud, self-assured, middle-aged man, fond of drink and food. After introducing the character, Grishkovets paints a vivid and striking image of Volodia’s sudden interest in redecorating his apartment: one day Volodia starts using an

electric hammer drill, from morning till night, never after hours, but constantly. It causes a lot of discomfort for the protagonist, whose infant daughter cannot sleep with all the noise. The protagonist visits Volodia's apartment, and discovers that every wall in the apartment covered in rows of narrow, inch wide planks of wood, each screwed to the wall with multiple screws. The protagonist sees this as a "calamity." Not only has Volodia created an absurdly unattractive space around him, but he has failed to consider how his efforts might affect the people around him. On the other hand, Volodia is convinced that his project is a "masterpiece," a proof that he "knows how to live" (22).

Meanwhile, the next neighbour the narrator turn to is German, a soft spoken, pleasant man, whom, initially, the narrator-protagonist does not find particularly interesting. Their families are even related, though distantly. One evening, when a Belgian friend of the protagonist visits, it turns out that German possesses an extraordinary knowledge of geography and political life around the globe: he remembers the names of the smallest towns, and produces the most detailed information about the infrastructure. German, it is revealed, served in radio intelligence, and in a few short, precise sentences the narrator describes the sadness, and the trauma that German carries within himself as a former serviceman, something that can be seen in his warm-hearted laughter and melancholic eyes (23).

In our opinion, Grishkovets in this story creates an antithesis. On the one hand, the reader is presented with the loud, superficial personality of Volodia, with his banal and incongruous preoccupation with the "beautification" of his apartment

– a preoccupation that causes disruptive and intrusive noise for every tenant in the building. And on the other hand, the reader meets German, whose fascinating personal history is hidden behind the quiet facade of an ordinary life and unassuming habits. By revealing the attitude and behaviour of tenants towards the material world, Grishkovets creates a deeper understanding of the characters' personalities.

In "Spokojstvie" (Calmness) the protagonist named Dima has an apartment that is his pride and one of the attributes of his success. However, it loses its charm for the protagonist, when after being isolated from his usual social interactions he starts feeling alienated from his previous lifestyle. After spending several weeks in it alone, after his family has left for vacations, he loses interest in the pursuits he cared for before: he does not spend time with his friends and colleagues, does not pursue the women he has had affairs with, etc. These are not the only changes happening in the character (we will discuss those in more detail in later chapter), but we find it is important to observe how Dima's attitude towards his place of living shifts in this story. After this unusual period of isolation and calmness, the signs of prosperity do not interest Dima. There have been renovations done in Dima's block -- for example, new benches have been put around the building -- but Dima does not notice until his wife points out the changes when she returns home at the end of the summer. On the other hand, the space Dima lives in gains new meaning for him: grocery shopping, cleaning, and cooking, previously perceived as chores, suddenly bring Dima pleasure, and support his sense of calmness. The actions are no longer

mechanical, forced upon him. We will discuss the emotional changes in the protagonist and their significance below, when looking at the next kind of alienation discussed by Lefebvre.

Lefebvre points out another form of alienation: a splitting of an individual's personal and public self-perception. Separated from organic community and from authentic intersubjectivity, individuals become "isolated and inward looking" (Sohn-Rethel 1978 as quoted in Gardiner 76). Gardiner in this way presents Lefebvre's understanding of the everyday life of a person in the capitalist society:

Consciousness is split into public and private self, and labour divided into its mental and manual components. Social interaction tends to be purely utilitarian, dictated by the imperatives of production and of the marketplace. People spend most of their lives constrained and defined by rigid, immobile social roles and occupational niches. Everyday takes the form of largely unconscious actions and performances (75).

The aforementioned story "Spokojstvie" (Calmness) is a story of an average, successful businessman Dima who stays in the city during the summer months while all his family, friends and acquaintances leave to resorts or to their cabins. He initially explains his decision by work circumstances but later realizes that no work is done during the hot summers. He stays at home, seemingly doing nothing, and with time whatever things previously seemed important and valuable for him (work meetings, signing some contracts, going out with his friends, his love affairs) start losing their appeal. He refuses his friends' offers to go out with them. Dima is



overcome with calmness; all his pursuits cease (29).<sup>20</sup> He even anthropomorphizes the calmness; when he tries to return to his previous mindset, the weather changes and he feels that the calmness is punishing him (30).<sup>21</sup> Whatever commodities he previously perceived as the reflection of his wealth and status (food, clothes, renovations in his apartment building) become less important than the unusual state of thoughtfulness that he is experiencing (Ibid.).<sup>22</sup> He stops understanding himself and others through the previous paradigm of exchange of good relationships. Through the experiences of that summer, Dima becomes aware of the alienation he feels towards what mattered to him before: his firm, his family, his other pursuits.

Lefebvre perceives capitalist society as “this ungraspable creature, this heavy, impalpable cloud, burning and alive with the insane, indissoluble will of the *fetish* by which we are compelled to live” (*Key Writings* 83; italics are mine). The theory of fetishism states that “commodities -- and increasingly simulacra of commodities -- now become the essential medium of exchange and communication” between people in society (Gardiner 93). Lefebvre states that to survive consumerism one requires “large dollops of make-believe and fantasy, and these are injected into everyday life at every opportunity” (Ibid.) People are constantly presented with new fantasies that stand for their needs, their motives and

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<sup>20</sup> Периодически поступали предложения извне... Предложения поехать к кому-нибудь на дачу или с кем-нибудь на рыбалку. Дима придумывал разные отговорки и никуда не ехал. Спокойствие, которое неожиданно на него упало, было глубже, ценнее и важнее любых летних благ (Planka 30).

<sup>21</sup> Спокойствие испытывать не стоит, а изменять ему просто нельзя (Ibid).

<sup>22</sup> Спокойствие! Оно было таким, что Дима не пил даже пива. Не хотелось. Было спокойно. Мысли приходили в голову забавные и какие-то посторонние. Эти мысли приходили, медленно обдумывались и уходили (Ibid).

incentives are manipulated so that “new-induced artificial needs constantly replace ‘shopworn’ ones” (Ibid.) These words can be applied to several protagonists of Grishkovets’ short stories. Aleksander Turilin when discussing a protagonist in a different prose work by Grishkovets, his later novel *Rubashka*, says “the real collision in the novel is in Nabokov’s words ‘hopeless inability of a consciousness to master its own essence and meaning.’ The protagonist is looking at the Kremlin, and the only thing he sees is a postcard or an image from TV. [...] He is looking at an object and all he can see is the reflection of himself” (44).<sup>23</sup>

In the story “Lechebnaia sila sna” (Healing Power of Sleep) that we mentioned above, Grishkovets’ protagonist is Vadik, a young successful ministry employee who is expecting his first trip to Paris. He is going for one day and for work purposes, but for him Paris becomes almost an obsession. He mentions it in every conversation he has in the two weeks preceding the trip, he discusses where he can go in Paris; he even receives a list of restaurants to visit from an acquaintance, although he will only have one evening there. When his plane is landing the first thing he looks for is the Eiffel Tower. For him Paris is a symbol, a postcard; this trip is a milestone. He is not satisfied with many things in his life (his schedule, his lifestyle, his constant sleep deprivation, his personal life) and he convinces himself that after the trip everything will change.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Герой смотрит на Кремль, но видит только изображение на открытке или телевизионную картинку. [...] Он смотрит на вещь и видит в ней самого себя (Turilin 44).

<sup>24</sup> Он ждал поездки в Париж и последние недели в любом разговоре с приятелями, а особенно с приятельницами, старался как-то вернуть, что скоро у него деловая поездка в Париж. <...> И как раз в связи с поездкой в Париж он думал: вот до Парижа будет маета, но он всё сделает, хвосты всех дел обрубит, всё подытожит, и чистый полетит в Париж. А после Парижа будет другой период в жизни... как раз такой... размеренный. В его бумажнике вместе

One day in a busy European city becomes so much more for him. Vadik does not see the real Paris, which he understands only on the level of cliches and media images. On the airplane he purposefully ignores a stranger who tries to tell him about his real, authentic experiences with Paris. Vadik prefers his illusion.

To summarize, Lefebvre characterises the struggle that a person in a modern society undergoes as a result of their alienation in the following way:

In a society that has not gone beyond the stage of alienation, where people have not yet regained their identity, consciousness can only be uncertain, painful and conflicted: the consciousness of the slave, the devotee or the mystified. Uncertainty and torment, the “unhappy consciousness,” spring from this double source: people feel they are seized and swept along, but at the same time they sense that things could be different. They try to regain their identity, but [...] they have created only other fetishes, reflections of reflections, more external projections of themselves: religion, theology, philosophy, art, alienated culture (*Key Writings* 82).

This struggle for identity as a result of one’s alienation from their surroundings and community can be discussed on the example of Kostia, the protagonist of the story “Shram” (Scar). Kostia is a young man who after having three months in an internship in Moscow cannot seem to find his place in his native

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с деньгами лежал листочек бумаги, на котором были написаны названия и адреса нескольких парижских ресторанов, где ему непременно нужно было поужинать, чтобы отведать вкус Парижа в единственный свой парижский вечер. Эти названия и адреса написала ему одна его знакомая, которая часто бывала в Париже и знала толк в ресторанах (Planka 19).

smaller city. Everything seems provincial to him, the only place he enjoys being at is the hotel “Poima,” the most prestigious and stylish bar and lobby in the city. For Kostia the hotel becomes the embodiment of the lifestyle he was introduced to in Moscow: going to a coffee shop with his peers, drinking coffee and having long conversations.<sup>25</sup> He adopts the behaviour he observes in the visitors of the hotel, their business-like manner of talking and reading newspapers.<sup>26</sup> Coffee, the newspapers, the place, all becomes fetishes for Kostia, replacing any real belonging or success in life.

Once he gets exposed to the reality of the life he strives to lead, his illusion shatters. He finds a wallet of a well-off businessman from Moscow and instead of keeping the large sum of money he finds inside he decides to return it to the owner. He gets insulted and berated by the businessman, who not only does not show any gratitude but mocks Kostia’s generous gesture. Kostia acutely feels the humiliation, especially as he thought that his decision would show the Muscovite their kinship. Kostia feels that there is something he does not understand in life and possibly will not understand in the nearest future.<sup>27</sup>

Kostia’s “distinct realisation that he does not know what to do, how to

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<sup>25</sup> В Москве, например, Костя привык подолгу сидеть с приятелями в кофейне, недалеко от библиотеки. Там можно было провести полдня в беседах, новых знакомствах или даже чтении вполглаза. Ему это понравилось, он пристрастился и остро чувствовал нехватку такого способа жизни в своём городе (Planka 14).

<sup>26</sup> Ему приятно было чувствовать себя нездешним и вести себя соответственно этой нездешности. А в том, что ему нравилось так себя вести, он чувствовал свою приверженность столичному или даже европейскому поведению и укладу (Ibid 15).

<sup>27</sup> Он стоял на набережной и очень остро понимал, что не знает, что ему делать, понимал, что не понимает, как со всем этим справиться, и ещё Косте было отчётливо ясно, что он не скоро это поймёт... (Planka 18).

handle all this, and more so, his clear understanding that he will not understand any of it soon” (Planka 18) bring to mind Lefebvre characterizing the main problem in the modern man’s spiritual and psychological outline: “Many men, and even people in general, *do not know their own lives very well, or know them inadequately*” (*Critique* 94; original italics). The lack of self-awareness, mechanical repetition of actions within the everyday routine, and finally lack of understanding of the nature of the everyday are the sources of people’s alienation and frustration.

On the other hand, Lefebvre was often called an “optimist who thought that man’s only future is in the everyday” (Sheringham 134). His views of modernity and people’s everyday experiences are eminently dialectical, and “not prone to either nostalgic ruminations about a lost ‘golden age’ or abstract utopian predictions about a perfect future society” (Gardiner 77). Lefebvre states that everyday life contains within itself the possibility of transfiguring a modern man’s existence to achieve “the total conception of the worlds, the possibility of the *total man*,” capable of superseding all the limitations of life and thought, to organize a “whole” (*Critique* 198; original italics).

According to Lefebvre, the nature of the everyday contains in itself the potential for *dis-alienation*, which occurs when an individual manages to overcome their alienated state and see the authentic behind their experiences. In the next chapter we will look at Lefebvre’s idea of a “total man” as a person who manages to escape the alienation and the glimpses of the “total man” that can be seen in Grishkovets’ protagonists.

## Chapter 4

### Henri Lefebvre's Total Man and the New Hero for Russian Literature

Lefebvre's theory of the everyday life offers the prospect of escape from alienation. In this chapter we will examine Lefebvre's concept of the total man, compare it to certain elements in Grishkovets' prose, and hypothesize a correlation between the total man and the "new hero" of Russian literature.

Alienation is described by Lefebvre as the main ailment of the modern man (*Critique* 72). On the other hand, he holds an optimistic view that an individual has the potential of overcoming the alienations through thorough analysis of the everyday life and search for the authentic lying behind a person's routine experiences. Lefebvre believed that "modern society contains within it both repressive and emancipatory qualities" (Gardiner 77), that capitalist society brings upon an individual alienation but also the hope for breaking out of its constrictions. In his works he held out the possibility of a radical "dis-alienation of social life, of the complete empowerment and fulfilment of humanity's species-being, and the realization of what he calls 'the total man'" (Ibid 78). Lefebvre pronounces the importance of "extracting what is living, new, positive -- the worthwhile needs and fulfilments -- from the negative elements: the alienations" (*Critique* 42).

These views seem applicable to Russian postrealism prose, which was written at a time that the society was struggling with the transition to capitalism,

consumerism, and an emerging market economy, competition and product advertising. The path to the *total man*, a man who has overcome the limitations of the modern capitalist society, in Lefebvre's understanding lies in demystification of capitalistic ideology, in gaining a critical understanding of everyday life, one that according to him provides the possibility of "dis-alienation" in itself (*Critique* 40). Lefebvre believes that every individual feels a real need, a genuine utopian impulse, however alienated and mystified he or she is (Gardiner 85).

In this typical phrasing, Lefebvre answers his own rhetorical question: "What is the total man? Not physical, physiological, psychological, historical, economic or social exclusively or unilaterally; it is all of these and more, especially the sum of these elements of aspects; it is their unity, their totality..." (*Writing on Cities* 157).

For further discussion of alienations and the total man Lefebvre proposes the concept of *moment*. Moments are those instants that we would each, according to our own personal criteria, categorize as authentic, that "break through the dulling monotony of the 'taken for granted'". Moments outflank the pretensions of wordy theories, rules and laws, and challenge the limits of everyday living" (Shields 58). Moments are revelatory of the totality of possibilities contained in daily existence. Such moments are "ephemeral and would pass instantaneously into oblivion, but during their passage all manner of possibilities -- often decisive and sometimes revolutionary -- [they] stood to be both uncovered and achieved" (Harvey 429).

Lefebvre is critical of the banality of everyday life, especially as it results from capitalism, but he refuses to give up on everyday life. Moments are themselves born within everyday life. They puncture the “everydayness”, or banality of repetitive tasks like a ray of sunshine through clouds. Banality is broken up or divided by *moments* (Shields 60; Italics are mine). In effect, these *moments* are what redeems everyday life for Lefebvre.

Instead of two distinct sets of human everyday experiences -- one alienated, bad, everyday; the other special, good, unalienated *moments* -- Lefebvre proposes two overlapping sets. Each element of the alienated everyday is also potentially an element of the unalienated extraordinary set. This overlap means that each and every activity must be rethought as a dialectic of *presence* and *absence* (a word that Lefebvre uses as a synonym for alienation and dis-alienation; for example in *La presence et l'absence* written in 1990, quoted in Shields 70). Each activity is simultaneously an opportunity both for alienation and for dis-alienation. Furthermore, Lefebvre recognised that alienation and disinterest always set in once activities have become routine or once skills have been mastered.

Lefebvre describes not only the negative quality of alienation but also its dialectical entwinement with dis-alienation and wholehearted involvement (Shields 70). He proposes the following formula:

$$\text{Everyday Life} = \text{Banality} \div \text{Moments of Presence}$$

Everyday life emerges in Lefebvre's theories as the ground of resistance and renewal, which is punctured by “essential moments and flashes of unalienated



presence” (Shields 69). Such “resistance and renewal” are born from the contained in the very nature of consumerism based society ability to stimulate in individuals authentic desires that “it cannot possibly satisfy through the proffering of commodities and images” (Gardiner 95). Although satisfaction is the aim and objective of consumer society, and remains its official justification, production and consumption of objects cannot “sell happiness, however much it claims to” (Ibid 96). The result is a generalized sense of unrest and dissatisfaction, and a profound crisis of values that shows no sign of ending within existing horizon of consumer capitalism (Shields 70).

To summarize, modernity contains within itself its own self-criticism (Gardiner 96). Each individual has the potential to achieve *totality* through *moments of presence* in their everyday life. We will see now how such a theory can be applied to the reflections of the everyday experiences of some of Grishkovets’ characters.

While agreeing that the short stories are indeed a great example of new realism, Efrosinin in his review of the collection *Planka* claims that “the main intention of Grishkovets as a writer is to attempt to find those conditions, in which a person can most acutely, most vividly feel the reality of the current moment” (163).

We see the reflection of Lefebvre’s idea of dis-alienation in Grishkovets’ “reality of the current moment.” We believe that in Grishkovets’s prose the momentary experiences of characters can be understood in terms of Lefebvre’s concept of a moment of presence. Critics and philosophers seem to interpret

Lefebvre's idea of presence in diverse ways, perhaps due to Lefebvre's vague, metaphorical presentation of the idea. We interpret the quotation "extracting what is living, new, positive -- the worthwhile needs and fulfilments" (*Critique* 42) as an illumination of Lefebvre's theory. It suggests that behind the urges and desires enforced upon a person by the consumerist, capitalist society, there lie genuine needs and their fulfillment, and the experiences of the characters that would fall under such category can be understood as moments of presence, signs of dis-alienation taking place in a character.

At the end of the story "Calmness" the protagonist Dima faces the end of his unusual, isolated summer. His wife and daughter return from their trip to a resort, and he picks them up at the airport. Their flight is delayed, and Dima has some time alone with his thoughts. He notes that the calmness that he has achieved through his unusual experiences in the summer is still with him, and then he is surprised to realise that not only has he enjoyed this time, but that he might never again have such a good summer. When he is reunited with his family, Dima acutely feels how much he has missed them. He feels genuine and ardent love towards his daughter. The description of him carrying her, sleeping, out of the car, is detailed, and evocative. It is an obvious contrast to their earlier interactions: at the beginning of the summer Dima called his family, and the conversation was a polite and meaningless exchange of empty phrases. The reader grasps the physicality of his experience of carrying the child through his short whispered remark that she is heavy and warm. Unlike the interactions with his colleagues and acquaintances,

which Dima dislikes, or avoids altogether, Dima's reunion with his family is an experience that can be seen as worthwhile, bringing him a genuine fulfilment, through an everyday experience.

The motif of a protagonist seeing his or her life through a new lense in the everyday circumstances can be found in another story in the same collection. In "Pogrebenie angela" (Angel's Burial) the protagonist, Andrei comes home from an evening with his friends in a sports bar and finds out that his dog has died. His wife tells him to take the corpse away from their flat so as not to upset their small daughter. He decides to bury the body in one of the city parks. Thus starts a night that he spends in the city trying to find a place for his dog's burial. He meets different characters, common people familiar to him in his everyday life: two young policemen, who notice him in a park, a sales lady in a pharmacy store where he needs to stop because he suddenly feels thirsty and somewhat unwell. These characters seem almost stereotypical: the policemen are rude, boorish, and inconsiderate; the sales lady, initially reluctant to help him, frets around Andrei after he asks for water, and she assumes he has a blood pressure condition. Other characters, briefly encountered by Andrei, are juvenile delinquents that yell after him; couples of high school students going for a stroll; semi-familiar dog owners taking their pets for a walk. Altogether, Grishkovets draws a familiar, banal landscape of life in a suburban district in Moscow: the same old faces, in the park, the school yard, the pharmacy.

Eventually Andrei buries his canine friend in a small grave in an abandoned construction site. There are no extraordinary events in this story, besides the death of the animal, but something changes in the protagonist's perception of his own life and the city around him. Here is the second to last paragraph in the story:

Something had changed in the city. The light. The buildings, because of some different colour. It was not lighter, but the buildings had become somewhat more distinct, and they had no lit up windows. And there were no cars. Andrei walked alone.<sup>28</sup>

The reader assumes that nothing has changed in the city. It is Andrei who has been pulled out of the routine of his everyday life, and in that moment, while walking through the empty city, he perceives the authentic. In his case, the protagonist feels the sincere, genuine need to pay a last homage to his canine friend, who has been loyal and devoted to him and his family. Several times in the story Andrei is tempted to dispose of the dog's body -- to leave it by the road, in a garbage bin, in the box where street sweepers dump fallen leaves. Andrei recoils from such thoughts, they seem cold and shameful to him. After burying the dog, he feels fulfilment, and peace.

A similar transformation through an everyday experience occurs in another story we have looked into before, "Healing power of sleep." It allows the protagonist to perceive the underlying presence of reality. As we have discussed earlier, Vadik goes to Paris for one day on a business trip. For him Paris is an image created by

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<sup>28</sup> В городе что-то изменилось. Освещение. Дома стали какого-то другого цвета. Светлее не стало, но дома теперь были какими-то более отчётливыми, и освещённых окон в них не было вовсе (Planka 29).

films and postcards, his trip a constant reason for him to brag. In Paris he accidentally falls asleep in his hotel. It is indeed an accident. He is sleep deprived after many months of an unhealthy schedule and lifestyle, and although he has ambitious plans for the evening, most of which are hardly fulfillable, as soon as his head touches the pillow, he falls asleep and does not wake up till the next morning when it is time to go back to the airport. When asked about Paris Vladik sincerely says that he really liked the city. He honestly admits that he did not see much of the city, but he liked it and feels that he could even live in it.<sup>29</sup> The trip brings a new perspective into Vladik's world outlook: he wakes up in Paris in high spirits, enjoys his food; upon his return Moscow seems to him renewed and very beautiful, even the slush that he so ardently hated when he was leaving, seems to be "squelching pleasantly under his feet" (23).

In the epilogue to the story the reader finds out that a month later Vladik falls in love, and a year later he takes his wife to Paris for a honeymoon. This short remark seems to contrast with the description of the unsatisfying, unpleasant romantic liaison that Vladik leaves behind when going on his trip.

*Sledy na mne* is considered to be a collection of semi-autobiographical short stories. The moments that Grishkovets chooses to describe in these stories are mundane, everyday incidents. The first three stories united under a subtitle "Drugie" (Others) describe his service in the fleet; some tell of short meetings with

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<sup>29</sup> Я в восторге, – ответил Вадик. – Точнее, даже не в восторге. Мне просто очень понравилось. Знаешь, Рома, я там ничего особенного не видел и не почувствовал. Как-то так, спокойно всё было, как не в Париже, а как дома. Просто я понял, что Париж – это мой город. Прямо сразу так и понял. Ты знаешь, я бы мог там жить (Planka 23).

various people in the narrator's life, and describe seemingly unimportant objects from everyday life. "Nakolka" (Tattoo), for example, tells an uneventful story of how his fellow sailor convinced him to make a small tattoo of an anchor on his hand, which is very customary for Russian sailors. Below the surface of what Turilin has described as a "primary layer of existence" that consists of "everyday events and objects, recognizable places" and "equally recognizable emotions -- irritation, inebriation, tiredness, love, sadness," there lies "a different, *real* reality" (44). The crossing of the two layers creates an emotional "acuteness" that allows the protagonist to see the "uniqueness of reality behind the existence of this strange world" (Ibid.).<sup>30</sup>

The focus on everyday experiences led a critic like Tsiplakov to call Grishkovets "the idol of our office intellectuals" (72). According to the critic, the author writes the literature they require, that "cannot be defined in material term" (ibid. 71). "Office intellectuals need their light reading to include complex ideas while also being entertaining and stylistically accessible. They cannot tolerate scientific or bureaucratic language;" and they need literature that is relevant to them (Tsiplakov 71). Tsiplakov coins another term and calls such literature *midlit*, as it is "located midway between various cultural spheres -- the lofty and the

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<sup>30</sup> [В тексте] сосуществуют два пласта. Первый состоит из мелких деталей быта, узнаваемых мест. На этом уровне находится описание эмоций -- раздражение, опьянение, усталость, любовь, грусть. Это своего рода первичная реальность вещи и эмоции. Другой пласт -- мифологический -- представляется нам миром видений и смутных образов, вырывающих героя из неопределенности, в которую он погружен. [Люди, окружающие героя,] предельно реальны, так же как и вещи, которые его окружают. И сквозь это нагромождение пробивается другая, настоящая реальность. [...] Два пласта сталкиваются друг с другом. И это пересечение рождает пронзительность, в первую очередь эмоциональную. (Turilin 44)

commercial, the folkloric and the professional, the elite and the down-the-heel. [...] This 'middle' implies 'central' or 'in the middle ground' rather than middling. Yes, much in it is borrowed and much doesn't work, but when has it been otherwise in a literary quest? It is not perfect but it is *real*" (Ibid. 72; Italics are mine).

This question of what is real and what is not, we think, is the central in the prose of Grishkovets and is associated with Lefebvre's idea of *presence*. Grishkovets' characters seem to be looking for the *real* in their life, through the *moments* they are seeking the elusive *presence* in their lives.

Rodnianskaia in her review of a later Grishkovets' novel *Rubashka* (Shirt) discusses how its protagonist evaluates everything exactly from the point of view whether it is "real" or not. He talks about a woman he is in love with and says she is a "grown-up, real woman." He praises Georgian cuisine as it is real and complex; his best friend Max sells "real concrete bricks"; and in a moment of clarity and self-analysis Max tells the protagonist that the fact that his life is real is the scariest of all. Rodnianskaia explains the novel in the following way: "What Max is trying to express is the life we are living is the only one we will ever have. With its successes, achievements, even if not entirely useless, but we do not have any other alternative. Each life, each destiny has only one corridor, also narrowed down by the society; one cannot choose to swim in two rivers at the same time" (Rodniaskaia 149). And understanding their reality, grasping the underlying meaning of their life, the characters are dissatisfied, because, according to Rodnianskaia, "they are perfectly aware of the reality they live in, but do not know *for what*" (Ibid 153; original

Italics).

Grishkovets' characters are Tsiplakov's "new heroes," "who think a lot and [...] take an active and constructive stance in favour of improving the conditions in society", and seek to validate that stance amid the indifference and passivity that surround them; they want to live well and, which is not unimportant, to live honourably (73). Such understanding seems to go along with our previous statement regarding the new realism's interest in reality as opposed to plain existence in Chapter 2.

Grishkovets' characters in *moments* of clarity question their lives and feel dissatisfied. We think these moments can be associated with Lefebvre's idea of modern life containing this potential for change in itself, and the potential to seek the *presence* behind the every day.



## Conclusion

In our thesis we have discussed the late prose of Evgenii Grishkovets as part of the trend of new realism in the literature of the 2000s in Russia. In Chapter 1 and 2 we reviewed the literary process of the first decade of the twenty-first century and specifically the issue of new realism replacing postmodernism at the centre of the literary stage. In Chapters 3 and 4 we attempted to understand the realist descriptions of Grishkovets' characters everyday experiences through the prism of the theory of everyday life offered by Henri Lefebvre.

In conclusion, we have chosen to interpret such experiences as a part of the process of *dis-alienation*, the idea proposed by Lefebvre. Lefebvre understood this idea as a person striving to overcome the limitations of mundane everyday life within a society dominated by consumerism and fetishization. The French philosopher saw a possible escape from alienation in the figure of the *total man*, a person who is able to see the authentic reality behind the mechanical existence in the modern society.

As described in Chapter 1, the two collections of Grishkovets' short stories, *Planka* (Plank, 2006) and *Sledy na mne* (Traces on Me, 2007) are considered the peak of Grishkovets' writing of the period. They were chosen for analysis in this thesis for their confessional nature, which is characteristic, according to several critics, of the new realism. Although they cannot be considered strictly autobiographical, they contain in them the descriptions of the experiences familiar

to the author from his own past: the service in the navy, the reality of building one's life in early eighties and nineties, the circumstances of the capitalist society of the 2000s.

The stories were written at the end of a decade that, as many critics and writers agree, posed many questions regarding the future development of Russian literature and the increasingly marketized relationships between reader and writer. In our interpretation of the literary process we tend to agree with those who understand the emerging trend of new realist prose as a reaction to the readership that was growing tired of the postmodernist tradition in literature, and that was seeking the apparently simple yet in reality deep spirituality of postrealist writing.

The new realism can be understood as a literary recoil from some of the excesses of postmodernism while, nonetheless, incorporating and containing many of the artistic elements of the latter. Among the elements of postmodernism one could include "understanding the world as chaos," "the crisis of authority," the emphasis on the corporeal. And among the elements of "traditional" realism one could include the "typical character," "typical" circumstances, romanticism ( in the sense of the discord between the ideal and the reality, the antagonism of subjective and surrounding reality). Other elements of this "new realism" include the focus on the existential dead end, a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction, an obsession with the quest and with a tragic gesture.

While many critics have disparaged the new literary trend, there are some who say that even if it is dependent of the laws of the market and the opinions and

demands of its reader, middle class, well-off office intellectuals, the new literature has a valid claim to a place in the history of Russian literature. Just as its reader, the new literature is down-to-earth and carries real, authentic values, it is “not perfect but it is real” (Tsiplakov 72).

Grishkovets, “the idol of the office intellectuals” writes about characters, that are relevant and understandable to his reader. Middle class, relatively successful and well-off, they are inquisitive, sophisticated and intellectual (Ibid. 64), and occasionally dissatisfied with their life. We propose to understand this feeling of unrest and resistance to modern society as part of Lefebvre’s psychological state of *alienation*, understood as a person’s disassociation from their everyday activities and relationships with people around them. And through the moments of clarity, which we interpret within the framework of Lefebvre’s theory of everyday life, they perceive the reality hidden behind their everyday existence and reach an understanding of the authentic behind the life in modern capitalist society.

We argue in this thesis that the reader of the two collections of Grishkovets’ short stories can see Grishkovets’ characters reach the state of Lefebvre’s *total man* through their everyday experiences. We postulate that in Grishkovets’ work one can see the new hero of Russian literature emerge, the one “who thinks a lot and [...] takes an active and constructive stance in favour of improving the conditions in society, and seeks to validate that stance amid the indifference and passivity that surround it” (Tsiplakov 72), and we share Lefebvre’s optimistic view on the

potential of future readers to overcome the alienations in their life and reach the understanding of the authentic meaning of human life.

## Afterword

As an afterword, we would like to note that while this thesis was being written, drastic social and economic changes were taking place in Russia, and consequently the reader and the literature had to go through certain adjustments. The coming to power of president Vladimir Putin at the beginning of the twenty-first century profoundly changed Russian society. The military conflict in Ukraine and the resulting instability in the society and in the economy of Russia, arguably, has led to the disappearance of the very class of “office intellectuals” that we determined to be the readers of the prose of Evgenii Grishkovets.

With the ruble’s currency exchange rate plummeting and the inflation in Russia reaching unprecedented level, the previously well-off, relatively successful middle class readership of Grishkovets now has to face a situation in which its salaries are worth half of what they were not long ago, and this readership lives in fear of losing their jobs at any given moment. The lives of this public have changed, and we can speculate that the same will happen to the books they read.

In this thesis we have argued that a new realist prose, relatable and understandable to the reader who could see himself or herself reflected in the text had a particular place in the literary scene of the first decade of the twenty-first century. We have tried to show that through the description of everyday experiences the author of this new realism brings up authentic, real questions for

discussion. Through the lens of Lefebvre's theory, we indicated how the presence of the real can be detected in the banality of what is described in the text.

Nowadays, the banal and the everyday, which Grishkovets wrote about in his two collections of short stories, is to some degree history; it belongs to a relatively brief transitional period that is rapidly receding. The "decade of the naughts," the 2000s, has concluded, but because of the dramatic events that have shaken Russia and the countries around it, this decade can be clearly distinguished from the years that came after it. The war in Ukraine and the involvement in Syria have brought a decisive end to the decade and the reality that Grishkovets' was talking about in *Planka* and *Sledy na mne*.

The critical works that were used in this paper were written before the events at the Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv in 2013-14 and ensuing events, which fundamentally changed the social scene in Russia.

We still stand by the statement we made in the conclusion of this thesis: there is a reader in Russia, who is intellectual and inquisitive, dissatisfied with life and seeking authenticity and the real, and we think that this reader's attitudes are reflected in the prose of Grishkovets. On the other hand, we have to admit that the time of the new realist prose in Russian literature, has arguably passed, or at least these days the public probably has much less interest in such prose. The everyday experiences of a middle-aged, middle-class protagonist, such as buying an apartment or staying in town for his summer vacation, will, perhaps, have greater difficulty in finding an eager reader while the country is going through an economic

crisis and most people are concerned with supporting themselves and their families and with the potentiality of war affecting their personal lives.

Additionally, we would like to hypothesize that with the growing control of the state over what is being said in Russian media these days, literature also has faced changes. Its content and form has become yet another field in which the current regime exercises its propaganda and expects to see expressed ideas that are favourable towards its view of nation and state power. In the words of Malala Yousafzai, "Let us pick up our books and our pens, they are the most powerful weapons."<sup>31</sup> These words indicate that the potential power of literature will not be disregarded by forces propagating the increasingly authoritarian regime in Russia. We predict that the new realism in the form we saw it in the prose of Grishkovets -- non-didactic, spiritual and filled with his "signature sincerity" -- will have to step aside, while the shelves in bookshops around the country are increasingly filled with state-approved and state-supporting texts.

On the other hand, despite the changes that have taken place in the society and, possibly, have transformed the writer and the reader in Russia after the 2000s, we still believe that the fundamental values and experiences that Grishkovets, if not discusses, then at least hints at in his writing, are still relevant to the current Russian society. In our understanding, the questions of understanding the authentic through everyday experiences, of the human search for meaning behind the

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<sup>31</sup> Yousafzai, Malala. "Speech to the UN Assembly." *Independent. World News*, 13 July 2013. Web. 5 Nov. 2014  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-full-text-malala-yousafzai-delivers-defiant-rip-oste-to-taliban-militants-with-speech-to-the-un-8706606.html>.

banalities of life, and the way characters can be transformed, continue to be asked no matter the political and financial climate in a society.



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