

Thomas Lahusen

**SAYING NO TO ROMANCE?  
SOVIET READERS RESPOND TO THEIR AUTHOR<sup>1</sup>**

"During the Stalin era every cook was told to produce culture as well. But in practice, only a few specially designated top chefs were given recipes for stardom," writes Svetlana Boym in *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*.<sup>2</sup> The example provided is not taken from culinary art but from cinema – Grigorii Aleksandrov's 1939 musical comedy *Volga Volga*. According to Boym, Aleksandrov's version of socialist realism is interesting for something that transcends the genre itself: "For students of graphomania, the most interesting feature of this film is that its own authorship seems to echo the drama and mystery of authorship that it tells," meaning the political erasure of the film's original scriptwriter Nikolai Erdman. Despite her nostalgia (mediated by irony) for the Soviet common places of the past, Boym distinguishes very clearly between "graphomania" and "healthy writing," "mediocre Socialist Realism" and an "exemplary Soviet comedy of the thirties," although the boundaries, as she admits, are often blurred. At the end of her book, Boym imagines a "collective sanatorium," organized for the nostalgic citizens and expatriates of the former USSR. "In that post-modern Alpine resort, life will be free from 'inauthentic' conventions of Western civility," and, as far as cuisine is concerned, "as a dietary supplement and a relief from healthy food, the eternal mashed potatoes will be served, together with 'Mikoyan cutlets' invented in Stalin's time, complete with the generic rosy 'fruit drink'."

Belonging to those utopian nostalgics who were born in the inauthentic conditions of Western civility and who were never served Mikoyan cutlets, I started to search for the cuisine of the people who lived in Stalin's most uncivilian times. I had to go a long way and here is what I found, far from Moscow: a play, written by two inmates of the Press Sector of the Cultural and Educational Department of the Corrective Labor Camp of the Baikal Amur Mainline, city of Svobodnyi, in 1935. "The Merry Cooks" is a "hellish" musical farce, where the parasites, refusers, wreckers, and other negative elements, who were sent to "Camp Freedom" to serve various sentences of "social protection," are literally fried by the chefs of the camp, as shows the following quote:

Перчику, лучку, картошки кусочек,  
 Горсточку соли и ложку крупы ...  
 В печку готов и готовы супы!  
 Я - повар, ты - повар, он - повар, тот - повар,  
 Все мы, ребята - "во" повара! ...  
 Стоит раз дунуть - блюдо готово!  
 Всякое блюдо берем на-ура!  
 ...  
 Вот вам, пожалуйста, лодырей пара,  
 Все на фаланге их знают у нас.  
 Около кухни, в бараке, на нарах  
 Можете их увидеть всякий раз!  
 Вот он стоит, симулянт всем знакомый -  
 С перчиком, с лучком прожарим его! ...  
 Охает, стонет и ходит к лекпому,  
 Трассы не любит он больше всего.  
 Слушай, отказчик! Ты - враг нашей стройки!  
 Так здесь прожарим, что будешь не рад!  
 Сдачи путей нам указаны сроки ...  
 Если не хочешь работать, - назад!<sup>3</sup>

As far as I know, the authors of the play, B. Pureskii and A. Mulenko, never reached stardom. Possibly, they were "fried" together with the "responsible editor" of the issue, whose name is crossed out – in the copy I saw – to the point that the pencil made a hole in the paper. But the recipe of stardom was undoubtedly given to one of the authors of another comedy, published in the same *Bulletin-Repertoire of the Press Sector of the Cultural and Educational Department*. "An Alien Calendar" is a slapstick comedy on the theme of "reforging" (*perekovka*): "Antonov the first," a typical "refuser" and "trickster" believes that his liberation is imminent on the basis of something he read in the wall newspaper of the camp; the misunderstanding (in which only he believes) is resolved by the arrival of the positive shock-worker "Antonov the second," who decides to stay on the construction site as a free-laborer, to the great satisfaction of the commander-educator and his Stakhanovite comrades. Like Antonov the Second, the author of the play, Vasilii Azhaev, a twenty-year-old prisoner sentenced for "counter revolutionary agitation" in January 1935, stayed on the construction site as a free-laborer after his release in 1937, ahead of schedule. His commander-educator and Stakhanovite comrades gave him the recipe for stardom: eight years of "free labor" in various camps of the Far East, as – according to Azhaev's own words – "head of inspection, organizer, administrator, investigator, 'on special assignments,' including cultural and educational work," and a course by correspondence at the Gorky Institute of Literature. During the years of the campaigns against "antipatriotic" elements and struggle against "rootless cosmopolitanism," Azhaev became one of the top

chefs of Soviet literature. The icing of the cake was a Stalin Prize (first class), received in 1949 for the publication of his production novel *Far from Moscow*. Not unlike what happened with the scriptwriter of *Volga Volga*, authorship was "erased," reality was "varnished," or better (to remain within the realm of confectionery) *glazed* over. The institution that had disclosed the secret of the recipe was of course one of the first asked to taste the product, which was officially endorsed during a readers' conference, organized at the Dzerzhinskii Club of the MGB and MVD (the Ministry of the State Security and the Ministry of the Interior) on 3 February 1949: the MGB/ MVD gracefully accepted its "own" Stalin Prize in literature.<sup>4</sup> The masses liked it too, and it became a feast. There is no doubt that *Far from Moscow* was read by the people. Here is a reader's letter to the author of 9 November 1949:

Вы знаете, что "Далеко от Москвы" полюбили; но вы не знаете, что эту книгу разрывали на листки в рабочих поселках Донбасса (книга была одна, а читать хотели все сразу). Из нее переписывали целые страницы, люди разных профессий. ... Мне довелось видеть эту книгу в доме врача. На книге было написано: "эта книга лучшее лекарство от многих болезней". О книге говорили на партийных активах и рабочих собраниях. Ее сравнивали с Историей партии. Она стала любимой книгой народа. "Далеко от Москвы" нет в книжных магазинах, даже нет на латышском языке.<sup>5</sup>

Is *Far from Moscow* an example of Soviet "popular culture"? Recently, the Stalinist thirties (and forties, to a lesser extent) have become popular. Scholars have discovered "Hollywood in Moscow"; excerpts from *How the Steel Was Tempered*, *The Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal*, or *Cavalier of the "Gold Star"* are now published together with Marshak's tale for children *Mister Twister*, songs by Lebedev-Kumach and Dunaevskii, "purge poems" of 1937, anecdotes, and even a recipe of "gasoline cutlets," cooked at the North Pole by Soviet explorers (from I.T. Spririn's radio sketch of 1938). These examples are all taken from the 1995 anthology *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*, edited by James von Geldern and Richard Stites.<sup>6</sup> Like the latter's *Russian Popular Culture*, published three years before,<sup>7</sup> the collection seeks to avoid both Frankfurt School elitism and traditional Sovietology. It shows that Soviet culture under Stalin was not limited to Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Pasternak, and other great dissident writers. The editors argue that socialist realism was not always gray and uniform, and that it had even some virtues: despite triteness and cliché, it "steered Soviet culture toward the mass audience" and "made culture accessible to most citizens."<sup>8</sup> At the same time, "any success needed consumer collaboration." It seems to me that such focus on the "consumer," the "mass audience," who "craved entertainment," is not unproblematic. Rescuing Soviet popular songs, films, urban

folk tales, and anecdotes from oblivion is most valuable, but to equate the culture of the Soviet masses with "entertainment genres" can be seen as a new type of colonization: market economy and democratic values for the present, "popular culture" for the past. Also, I wonder whether the use here of the very concept of "popular culture," which is after all a very recent and localized construct, does not run the risk of introducing a kind of reverse elitism. "Good" mass culture seems to be perceived by the editors of *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia* as "counterculture": "interesting" socialist realism of the early thirties has its roots in the avant-garde. When Soviet culture becomes finally "frozen into a conflictless and actionless tranquillity" during the years following World War II, it "finds no resonance within the mass public." According to Stites and von Geldern, there were only a few popular alternatives, a couple of Tarzan or cowboy films – Nazi booty recycled during the era of Soviet "film hunger." They perceive the real alternatives, or "parallels" to Stalinist culture in society's margins: the culture of prison camps, and the *Stilyagi*, who "listened to American jazz, flaunted Western wardrobe, and spoke in a willfully un-Soviet slang." These were the "pioneers of the 'unofficial' culture that would drag Soviet society out of stasis."<sup>9</sup>

How can we explain the resonance of *Far from Moscow* within the mass public? Was it the author's "erasure," Gulag counterculture, or something else, that the masses perceived? Azhaev's private archive contains several stenographic accounts of readers' conferences and many hundreds of letters, written to the author. I propose to listen to some of them, just to give these participants and letter writers a chance to define their own alternative version of "mass" or "popular culture," at a time when – to cite von Geldern and Stites again – "the myth of the 'new Soviet man' excluded sex (though not love), ambition, concern for one's own welfare, even individual struggle."<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, readers' letters cannot always be taken at face value: they belong to a certain tradition, probably more alive in Russia than elsewhere, and related to the very status of the writer in Russian society. In the late forties, the reception of literature was institutionalized according to a highly organized ritual, called "readers' conferences." As far as *Far from Moscow* was concerned, the organization of its readership was launched right after the publication of the novel in the July, August, and September 1948 issues of *Novyi mir*. According to a list established by the writer himself, twenty-four "conferences and discussions" were organized between 12 October and 31 December 1948, starting with the Central House of Literati (*Tsentral'nyi dom literatorov*) in Moscow and ending with a middle school in Gzhatsk (Region of Novosibirsk). The next year brought many more. Azhaev's typed list ends on 30 March 1949, with another sixty-five added by hand, the last of which took place in the Higher School of the Ministry of the State Security (MGB). Obviously, the author couldn't catch up. After the novel was awarded a Stalin Prize in April 1949,

meetings and conferences mushroomed throughout the country. They seem to have abated somewhat at the end of 1949. The last two readers' conferences that I found documented in Azhaev's archive were organized in 1951 and 1953, the first in a regional bank in Gor'kii, the second by the mobile library of a factory.

Most of the readers' statements reflect the ideology of the moment and offer few surprises, responding to a scenario planned well in advance. For example, conference No.76 on Azhaev's list, which took place on 24 March 1949 in the Sovetskii district library of Moscow, was organized according to a plan provided five weeks earlier, listing the following items:

1. Укомплектовать библиотеку максимально возможным количеством экземпляров книги В. Ажаева "Далеко от Москвы".
2. Составить плакат-объявление в 3-х экземплярах.
3. Составить примерные темы для обсуждения романа.
4. Оформить рекомендательный список, папку-материала, критические статьи из газет и журналов.
5. Подготовить к выступлениям по конференции не менее 15 читателей.
6. К 1 марта уточнить темы обсуждения для каждого выступающего читателя на конференции.
7. Организовать сбор читательских отзывов о книге В. Ажаева "Далеко от Москвы" и выпустить посвященный ей бюллетень.
8. Составить текст пригласительного билета и отпечатать 300 билетов.
9. Пригласить на конференцию читателей автора книги В. Ажаева.
10. Обобщить материал конференции, провести среди участников конференции сбор отзывов впечатлений и пожеланий.
11. Оформить альбом, посвященный конференции читателей по обсуждению романа В. Ажаева "Далеко от Москвы".<sup>11</sup>

A few months later, the plan itself "went public" in an article entitled "Chitatel'skie konferentsii" (Readers' Conferences), published in the July issue of *Novyi mir* and signed by N. Kovalev, "Party Organizer of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) in the Stalin Automobile Factory" (in Moscow).<sup>12</sup> After a general introduction, the lengthy, inevitable quotation from Lenin's "Party Organization and Party Literature," the demonstration of the superiority of Soviet belles lettres over all others, of the free and democratic character of this literature, "read not by the 'top ten thousand', bored and suffering from obesity," but by "millions and tens of millions of laborers," the institution itself is presented through the example of the "Palace of Culture" of the Stalin Automobile Factory in Moscow, or simply ZIS, for *zavod imeni Stalina* (Stalin Factory). In the "Small Hall" and "Lecture Room" of the Palace, recent discussions were held on a series of literary works, among others Azhaev's *Far*

from Moscow. Then follows a detailed description of the conditions under which the conference will take place, containing the same elements that we already saw itemized in the plan of the Sovetskii district library, plus a few details that are worth mentioning:

И вот наступает день читательской конференции. Страстные читатели художественной литературы (а таких на нашем заводе много) не задерживаются в цехах и отделах, а стараются пораньше попасть домой, чтобы успеть понарядней приодеться, лишний раз заглянуть в книгу, перечитать наиболее понравившиеся места, подготовить заметки к выступлению. Кое-кому, вероятно, нужно отменить назначенную встречу или провести ее до начала конференции, справиться с домашними делами и так далее...

Но вот постепенно заполняется Малый зал или помещение Лектория. Малым залом он называется не потому, что действительно мал, а потому, что во Дворце культуры есть и Большой зал, еще более вместительный. В Малом зале на читательской конференции обычно присутствует до пятисот человек. В Лектории - просторном помещении со скамейками, расставленными амфитеатром, как в студенческой аудитории, - триста - триста пятьдесят. Участники конференции заполняют все места, все проходы.<sup>13</sup>

According to Kovalev, the readers' conferences "represent the last link of a long chain of tremendous work, provided by the Party organizations and the Party committee of the factory in the propaganda of ideas contained in the works of literature."<sup>14</sup> As a result, literature is explicitly deprived of any autonomy. Kovalev writes: "Our readers, in contrast to some backward critics, compare the books to life, and not to some kind of literary genre. One can understand the worker Borisoglebskaia when she speaks angrily of these aesthetes who see in the heroes of V. Azhaev's novel not living people but only schemes." And he quotes her words: "These aesthetes don't know the living people, they are detached from them, but we know them well, we are ourselves similar to V. Azhaev's heroes, every day we meet Beridze and Kovshov in our factory."<sup>15</sup> (Beridze and Kovshov are two of the main characters of the novel).

It is interesting to compare Kovalev's article to the original stenographic account. Both the article and the report reproduce a speech given by a certain "comrade Muromtsev," foreman of the Motor No. 2 division of the Stalin factory, during a discussion of Azhaev's *Far from Moscow* on 22 April 1949. Going beyond copy editing an "oral" text for publication, the editors of *Novyi mir* literally "make sense" of the at times incoherent sentences of comrade Muromtsev's speech. The still formless material of the foreman's performance is elevated into the well-formed ideal of state language and thought. At the same

time, something gets lost in the operation: the flow of Muromtsev's original discourse, with verbal islands of the "Big Other" alternating with words and phrases from his own world, a world that focuses on the "construction site." This is precisely what makes these stenographic accounts so interesting: even if the "line" of the day is reflected in the readers' interventions like in a mirror, with many citations of Lenin, Stalin, Zhdanov, and Gor'kii, this does not prevent them from "reading in" their real-life concerns, using their own formulations, their own language and style, in accordance with their position in the social field, their geographic or class origin, their gender, and other parameters.

Let us take the very first and most official readers' conference organized at the *Tsentral'nyi dom literatorov* in Moscow on 12 October 1948: as the stenographic account shows, some interventions explicitly addressed the issue of "popular culture." "Azhaev is good every time he writes about the production process," said one reader. "But when he treats such problems as love and the personal feelings of the heroes, he falls to the level of very low-quality belles lettres."<sup>16</sup> Aleksei Kovshov's conduct in love "sounds hypocritical," stated the critic Anatolii Tarasenkov, who also touched upon the problem of rewriting history by pointing out some of the novel's "historical inaccuracies": the fact that the characters use personal radios, which were confiscated during the very first days of the war, and that Stalin is characterized as "commander in chief," a title assumed "only later." All this shows that Azhaev "violated the artistic truth of the image."<sup>17</sup> Comrade Akshinskii, who came from the Far East and was an "auditor of the Higher Party School attached to the Central Committee," expressed institutional and regional concerns. Akshinskii regretted that Azhaev had failed to attach enough importance to the role of the Party and to "the transformations by which the Nivkh, Nanai and other small peoples of the North joined the great Soviet family."<sup>18</sup> For the writer Aleksandr Chakovskii, on the contrary, the publication of *Far from Moscow* represented the "triumph of the communist world view" and "served as an example for the Stakhanovite movement."<sup>19</sup>

The response of the "Stakhanovites" to Azhaev's novel can be deduced from the stenographic account of a readers' conference organized among the Builders of the Zaporozh'e Industrial Complex "Zaporozhstroii" on 22 October 1948.<sup>20</sup> The typed transcript reveals the intervention of a pen, probably belonging to the one who "prepared" the readers' interventions (and the author's response) for publication in the newspaper of the construction site. Some passages or words (such as names of local bosses) are crossed out, others are underlined, or queried in the margin. The transcript also contains critical comments or editorial remarks, such as: "to be kept," "to be corrected, but very slightly [*nado popraviti', no ochen' miagko*]," "and what about the conclusion?," and so on. Finally, each page is numbered and initialed by the typist, whose name is spelled out at the end of each reader's text.

Most of the readers praise the novel and point out only minor "inaccuracies." But Ivan Vikent'evich Sobolevskii, the Party organizer of Zaporozhstroi has a lot to say against Azhaev's novel.<sup>21</sup> He is the alter ego not only of N. Kovalev, the *partorg* of the Stalin automobile factory who made it to the most central pages of the press with his article on "Readers' Conferences" in *Novyi mir*, but also of Zalkind, the Party organizer in *Far from Moscow*. Comparing the two construction sites – his own and the one depicted in the novel – Sobolevskii wonders about the conditions that led to the catastrophic situation depicted at the beginning of the book, when almost everybody wanted to leave the shores of the river Adun, discouraged by the inefficiency of the (former) leadership which had brought the project almost to a standstill. He raises questions about Azhaev's Party leaders, where they were at that time and why the Party organizer Zalkind allowed the situation to degenerate. At the Zaporozh'e construction site – says Sobolevskii – it was enough for the Party leaders and the builders to intervene, and most problems were solved. Sobolevskii gives very concrete examples from the year 1946, when Zaporozhstroi missed its first government deadlines. After a successful struggle headed by the Party organization, both the director of the construction, Nazarenko, and the main engineer, Komissarov (both names are crossed out by the "editorial pen"), were "dismissed with great noise [*sniaty s treskom*]," including the "recovery of unauthorized expenditures [*s nachetom*]" and reprimands." They had been more interested in their personal affairs than in the construction: Nazarenko "had brought back a radio from Germany and was busy building his own house." As for Komissarov, he "liked to drink." Therefore, argues Sobolevskii, those who were responsible for slowing down the construction in *Far from Moscow* "should have been depicted as saboteurs, counter-revolutionaries, or as members of some underground organization." Following comrade Zhdanov's directives on the need to organize "socialist competition," the Stakhanovites of Zaporozhstroi made the construction a success. The characters in Azhaev's novel, however, failed to follow these principles: although the book depicts the enthusiasm of the leaders, it neglects the participation of the workers themselves. Sobolevskii frankly dislikes the communications mechanic Tania Vasil'chenko (a pretty Komsomol shockworker, whose job was to rig up a temporary telephone line stretching from tree to tree through the taiga). He demonstrates that "there are no such people in reality": she takes too many liberties with the leaders; she even uses *ty* (the second-person singular) and other familiarities in addressing the *partorg* and other leaders. We also see her in the editorial office of the newspaper of the construction site, where she starts to rummage through the papers. In life, she would have been thrown out of the office immediately. Commenting on the negative character Kondrin (a wrecker who ends up by being discovered and shot), Sobolevskii notes some disturbing inconsistencies: at the end of the novel, Zalkind discloses Kondrin's identity – he was the son of a kulak. "For whom did



he work before?" asks Sobolevskii. "Where did he come from?" "How can it be that he is first a dangerous wrecker, but then turns out to be a pitiful coward?" "The novel takes place in the Far East, i.e. in the border zone. It would have been correct to link Kondrin's activities to the very real presence of Japanese spies. All this would have served to educate the reader to be more vigilant."

In these comments Sobolevskii effectively reconstructs one of the subplots of the novel, related, as we already know, to "prison camp culture," a subplot that had been "erased" by the author and various editors when *Far from Moscow* was written and rewritten. Sobolevskii admits that "it would be unjust to say that the novel is not interesting"; for the problems "are well posed, and in practical terms correct." But instead of showing the builders themselves, Azhaev showed only the leadership: "We have to attract to our construction effort the carpenter, the bricklayer, the plasterer, the electric welder, the gas welder, so that they will see their heroes in the novel and will imitate them. When they showed *Chapaev* in the movie theaters, the next day the militia had to disperse the population, who started to riot: some were playing Chapaev, others the machine-gunner, the fights spilled over into one street after another ... (laughter)."<sup>22</sup> Sobolevskii concludes by encouraging Azhaev to correct his novel and to add "more fighters, more Matrosov."<sup>23</sup>

Some participants agreed with Sobolevskii that there were too many leaders in Azhaev's novel and not enough real builders. "Where are the carpenters, the concrete workers, the fitters, the boiler-makers, etc.?" "Azhaev knows the construction only superficially."<sup>24</sup> Others disagreed, some quite strongly: "One should not forget the fact that the construction in the novel took place during the war, that the heroes of 1941 did not build like those of 1947."<sup>25</sup> "Azhaev showed the collective and the initiative of the masses correctly," said comrade Usyskina, and rose to the defense of Tania Vasil'chenko and explained her "liberties" by recalling the fact that Zalkind and her father "had been partisans in the same detachment [during the civil war]."<sup>26</sup> What Usyskina is "reading in" here, referring to a passage from the novel, is one of the important myths of the Stalin period: ties created by the Revolution are stronger than kinship, Zalkind is "more than a father" to Tania Vasil'chenko. Mark Ivanovich Nedushko, "former head of Stal'montazh" who was also a welding specialist, noted that "the whole pipeline (the main "hero" of Azhaev's novel) seems to have been built by one welder, Umara Magomet." And he shared with the participants his own experiences: "In order to build 34 km of pipeline in Leningrad, eighty welders were needed, and for the Astrakhan - Saratov pipeline, four hundred." He asked the visitors from Moscow and from *Literaturnaia gazeta* "to take a hard look at our construction, which is a great source for great novels."<sup>27</sup>

The conference ended with Azhaev's response. He explained how difficult it had been to write his first novel and said that "it is easier to write a chronicle than to give the generalized plan that I imagined." He would take the

stenographic account with him and return to it "more than once." His last words (before expressing his gratitude to the Builders of Zaporozhstroi) were addressed to the Party organizer:

Я мог бы пополемизировать в частности с товарищем Соболевским. Я с большим интересом ждал его выступления, мне говорили о нем в Москве много интересного, но по совести говоря я его выступлением разочарован, оно оказалось ниже возможностей товарища Соболевского, может быть у него было мало времени. Он меня призывал исправить книгу, но это вещь не легкая. Это можно бы сделать на основании очень серьезной, квалифицированной критики, предъявленной к роману.<sup>28</sup>

An editorial comment in the margin reads: "This here is not so good [*vot eto uzhe nekhoroшо*]." The stenographic transcript of the conference was published a week after the conference as an editorial on the second page of *Stroitel'* (The Builder), the newspaper of the Zaporozh'e construction site.<sup>29</sup>

Many of Azhaev's readers responded individually to *Far from Moscow*. As of now, I have only been able to read some 200 out of the 1,500 letters that I found in Azhaev's archive. Most of them were written between 1949 and 1952. A provisional "sociology" of the sample yields the following results: the letters were written by slightly more men than women; they came predominantly from the provinces of the RSFSR and republics of the USSR, only a few were sent from Moscow or Leningrad; many were written on simple notebook paper or pages torn from accounting and other official "books." Their writers were mainly students, soldiers, workers, novice or would-be authors, or members of local editorial boards. Very few came from collective farmers or other inhabitants of the countryside. Some of them were written by acquaintances and friends, including former colleagues of the corrective labor camp of the Lower-Amur in Komsomol'sk, who recognized themselves among the heroes of the novel; one suggested to the author to come back and see the progress of forced labor in "peaceful conditions"; another, a former prisoner of the Nizhne-Amurlag, asked for money. Many letters were produced at a school desk or in a workers' club as a result of a "discussion," on assignment by a teacher, or at the suggestion of the director of a reading room or of the Party organizer. Most of them retell the plot, repeat the "correct" commentary, and congratulate the author on his Stalin Prize. At times, whole essays and notebooks of interpretation were attached, and some letters were written in verse. Here is an example:

Я уже стара, мне трудно в возрасте  
таком

Начать писать на книги отзывы  
стихом

И прозой я писать толково не умею  
Скажу слов несколько о Вашей книге,  
как сумею!

Во-первых, хочется мне Вам сказать,  
что если б так, как Вы, могли писатели писать  
Читатель мог бы думать - Вы не сочиняли  
Вы просто точка в точку - жизнь  
пересказали ...<sup>30</sup>

Others expressed in prose a truly endless pleasure of text:

Я домашняя хозяйка состою читателем М. Вишперской железно-дорожной библиотеки с двумя классами образования... Я перечитала книг столько, что сама часто не могу вспомнить... Многие книги читала по два раза, читала и иностранных классиков. Но Вашу книгу несмотря на то, что мне 46 лет читать хочется без конца.<sup>31</sup>

A student of the Tomsk Artillery School compares *Far from Moscow* to *A Thousand and One Nights*:

Ведь только по догадкам, да по словам героя романа, инженера Беридзе, который высказал свои предположения рабочим об окончании стройки, можно догадываться об окончании стройки. Здесь получилось, как в сказках "Тысяча и одна ночь", где сказка обрывалась на самом интересном месте и приходилось ожидать следующей ночи, так же самое и здесь оборвалось на самом ответственном моменте и приходится ожидать, когда же наступит следующая "ночь".<sup>32</sup>

The sender of the last letter shows us precisely what made *Far from Moscow* a "hit" in the late 1940s, something that writers of "popular culture" have been using, from Scheherezade to the authors of the serial *The Rich also Cry* (*Bogatye tozhe plachut*), an open-endedness of the story that leaves a space for the reader's self. Defending "her author" against criticism voiced in the press, one letter writer states that

Ваш роман имеет свой особенный (ажаяевский) колорит. Пусть Вас не огорчают все эти умненькие кривлянья литературных импотентов, о них забудут, а роман Ваш останется.<sup>33</sup>

*Far from Moscow* is also open-ended in terms of plot. The last page of the novel shows the young engineer Aleksei Kovshov boarding a plane, which will take him from the city of Rubezhansk to Moscow. In the capital he will report to the authorities on the completion of the task – a pipeline built along the shores of the "mighty river Adun," from the city of Konchelan on Taisin Island to the oil refinery of Novinsk. The production theme is tied to a "tragic" love story: Aleksei leaves behind Zhenia, a sexy young woman who loves him tenderly. But he was strong enough to resist, uniting duty to marital faithfulness. In Moscow, he will not only meet with the highest officials of the Soviet state, but also with his wife Zina, a partisan hero of the Great Patriotic War, who miraculously escaped from behind the German lines.

Many readers wanted to know about the "next night" and many responded with their own stories: some didn't go much further than the "line" of the day, and their responses reflected the "myth of the new Soviet man." Others told more about themselves, and here I found out that to read *Far from Moscow* could be a matter of life and death:

Драгоценный Василий Николаевич!

Какая я счастливая, могу смотреть на живого и услышу составителя интересного романа "Далеко от Москвы". Такая интересная мысль у меня появилась в голове, когда Вы только вышли на сцену. В какой мере он /роман/ мне понравился, судите сами. В 1949 году мне предстояла сложная большая операция. Я не надеялась перенести этой операции, и все-же я дала согласие на ее. Но я призналась врачам, что я не хочу умереть не дочитав книги "Далеко от Москвы" и они перенесли день операции до того дня, когда я прочла книгу. Честно говорю, что это было. Я это никогда не забуду. И врачи после операции мне говорили, что у них не было в практике того случая, чтобы они пошли на уступок больному да еще когда так срочно нужно лечить да по такой причине. Они поняли, что это нужно.<sup>34</sup>

Some other letter writers seem to have sensed the "drama and mystery of authorship" that is inscribed in *Far from Moscow*. The following letter, sent from the Udmurtsk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, informed "comrade Azhaev" of the friendship that its author had felt for books and their creators since his childhood. But the real grounds for his message were more serious:

Мне никогда не были чужды мероприятия проводимые в жизнь нашим государством, я никогда не сомневался в правильности их, но вот неожиданно случилось так, что я очутился за бортом жизни нашего государства. Более того я уже однажды был преступником перед государством, находился в заключении, освобожден досрочно за хорошую работу, но после этого не только не стал лучше, но наоборот, при огромном желании быть честным бойцом коммунизма, превратился в заблудшую овцу, которая никак не может выбраться с дремучего леса, чтобы прийти к своему делу... Почему я не знаю, где хорошо где плохо? Вобщем у меня есть хорошее и плохое но отсортировать его я не могу один. Оно перепуталось и привело меня к тому, что даже обрадовался когда мне сказали, что меня арестуют. Неужели другим путем я не могу найти свое место в жизни?<sup>35</sup>

According to the author of this letter, *Far from Moscow* shows that its creator knows "what fills the human soul" and how to "sort things out." He would like to tell him everything, from the beginning of life to the present moment.

However, what predominantly filled the human soul after reading *Far from Moscow*, was the unfinished love story. Some readers thought that the author should have allowed the love of Zhenia and Aleksei a chance to blossom on the shores of the river Adun. But the majority of them rejoiced, anticipating the return of the faithful husband to his wife Zina. Many women, especially, appreciated the second type of resolution, where family values prevail over romance. And here, at times, the stories told by the readers responded to each other, creating a new plot and continuing the author's novel:

Дорогой товарищ! Мой любимый писатель!  
Горячо прошу Вас откликнуться на мое большое личное горе. Ваше мнение, Ваше доброе слово могли бы сыграть огромную роль в моей жизни. Вопросы, с которыми я обращаюсь к Вам, сложны. Но мне кажется, разрешение их все-таки возможно. А это так необходимо! Я и мой муж вот уже пять лет живем в разлуке. Причина только одна: мой муж, глубоко уважая меня как человека, не может полюбить. Живет он одинокой жизнью, тяжело, так же, как и я, переживая это непостижимое нам двоим недоразумение.

Все эти годы я глубоко любила и страдала, сознавая свое бессилие укрепить нашу семью. Но я верила, что горячая, преданная любовь со временем одержит победу и заставит сердце любимого человека пробудиться. Ведь мы же равные во всем и в первую очередь в труде! У нас прекрасная дочка! Но пока это не произошло.

1. Скажите, возможно ли наше соединение при наличии любви только со стороны жены?

2. Может ли наша дочь сыграть решающую роль при разрешении этого вопроса?

3. Может ли советский человек воспитать у себя чувство любви к другому, сознавая жизненную необходимость этого?

4. Как бы поступил в таком случае настоящий советский человек?

Я верю, что Вы не останетесь безучастны к судьбе трех простых советских людей. Ваш ответ может открыть нам глаза на очень многое, может воссоединить нашу семью.

Как бы мы были тогда счастливы! Для этого так много возможностей, кроме одной.

Очень и очень прошу Вас ответить.

С приветом

Анна Гаврилова.<sup>36</sup>

Уважаемый товарищ Ажаев!

С чувством глубочайшей признательности к Вам пишу я это письмо.

Мне хочется от всего сердца поблагодарить Вас за такую чудесную книгу как "Далеко от Москвы". Это - замечательная книга и цельностью образов и удивительно подробным описанием работ по строительству нефтепровода и описанием подвигов строителей его и многим другим.

Но для меня лично эта книга имеет неоценимое значение.

Вы простите меня, возможно излишнюю навязчивость, но мне хочется объяснить Вам, за что именно я благодарна Вам.

Я студентка. У меня есть семья - муж и дочка двух с половиною лет. Я даже могла похвастать особой слаженностью нашей семьи, особенно пониманием, так необходимым между мужем и женой.

И мне и моему мужу по 25 лет и наша маленькая семья была далеко не на прочной основе построена, возможно, как большинство сейчас ранних браков.

Мы часто спорили с мужем, часто не находя ничего общего между собой, во взглядах, интересах, мы стремились на время разъехаться и ... расставались на 2-3-4 месяца. При встрече все снова было хорошо, но проходило несколько месяцев, год и мы снова мечтали о разлуке. Можно подумать, что мы не любили друг друга. Нет, это не так. Когда мы были в разлуке, мы стремились к скорой встрече и были рады, когда она наступала. Мы не понимали себя...

Случилось так, что во время моих зимних каникул муж был здесь, в Москве и вот, тут-то, а не далеко от нее, мы оба прочитали Вашу книгу "Далеко от Москвы".

Вы не можете себе представить, как перевернула она, эта книга, все наши отношения. Как мы оба поняли, как дороги друг другу, как увидели, каким святым должно быть чувство к

жене, к мужу, на примере Алексея Ковшова, какая чудесная семья у Залкинда! Какие есть сильные, стойкие люди!

Особенно сильное впечатление на нас произвел Батманов. Этот строгий к другим и себе, способный магически действовать лишь взглядом на подчиненных ему людей, человек.

Этот необъятный кругозор, способный охватить буквально все уголки стройки.

Он - восхитителен просто.

Мы с мужем оба прочитали эту книгу еще раз, уже он - будучи в Астрахани, а я здесь. И надо сказать, фраза Батманова - "Разве я могу сказать, что по-настоящему ценил семью! Честно признаюсь: я как бы не замечал ее! ...не дорожил я по-настоящему своей семьей и любовью, слишком поздно научился дорожить" - особенно ценна. Вот именно за то, что Ваша книга дала возможность нам с мужем понять вот это - ценность семьи и дорожить ею, сделать счастливым и нас и нашу дочь - мне хочется от всей души поблагодарить Вас, товарищ Ажаев.

С глубоким уважением к Вам Элла Иванова.<sup>37</sup>

How to appreciate these letters is of course a matter of taste, and this goes for all the others as well. Some are too sweet, some are too salty, and some are bitter as wormwood, but they were all cooked in the communal kitchen of Soviet "popular culture" during Stalin's time. According to Svetlana Boym, this communal kitchen "hardly resembles the dream of the utopian architects: to be a place of women's liberation from the daily chores." Women have to bear most of the communal interactions and negotiations, the world of the communal kitchen is "matriarchal by necessity and not by choice." And it is a place that exemplifies the kind of communality to be avoided": the communal apartment is a "domestic Nagorno-Karabakh," as says one of her recently interviewed communal apartment residents. The "socialist idyll" of the utopian house-commune has been transformed into a "social farce." For Boym, "any utopia is a u-chronia; in other words, it assumes a certain atemporality, a cessation of the time-flow and an immobility of life. What an architectural utopia does not take into account is history and narratives about inhabiting places."<sup>38</sup> What the author of *Common Places* seems to forget here is the dynamic and "positive" side of the concept of utopia, the "principle of hope" that it has preserved through centuries, since Thomas More invented his "island," and certainly up to the Stalinist 1940s. As Frank and Fritzie Manuel remind us in their *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, "the spirit of neologism possessed the future saint" from the very beginning: "He combined the Greek *ou*, used to express a general negative and transliterated into Latin *u*, with the Greek *topos*, place or region, to build Utopia. In the playful printed matter prefixed to the body of the book the poet laureate of

the island, in a brief self-congratulatory poem written in the Utopian tongue, claimed that his country deserved to be called 'Eutopia' with an *eu*, which in Greek connoted a broad spectrum of positive attributes from good through ideal, prosperous, and perfect.<sup>39</sup> From the "hybrid" vantage point of those who inhabit a "post-modern Alpine resort," organized for the "nostalgic citizens and expatriates of the former USSR," it might be entertaining to see the communal apartment (and kitchen) of the late 1940s as a "social farce." But the narratives of those who inhabited these very places, who lived in the communal apartments of the demographically and psychologically depleted Soviet Union after the Great Patriotic War (and other wars from which many didn't come back), tell another story. From what these people write to "their author," we understand that there was no other choice than to try and *change* the "immobility of life," to "sort things out," to find out how "sacred" should be the feeling of a husband toward his wife, or to find out what would be the conduct of an "authentic Soviet person." In this context, "entertainment" and the very concept of "popular culture" have to be treated with circumspection. If we don't want to produce yet another architectural utopia, a new mythology of everyday life in Russia, it is *this* history and *these* narratives about inhabiting places that must be taken into account.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is the revised version of a paper, presented at the 28th Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Boston (November, 1996). Some parts of it will appear in Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997). I would like to thank Carol A. Flath for help with the translation of some of the Russian citations.
- <sup>2</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 200.
- <sup>3</sup> B. Puretskii, A. Mulenko, "Veselye povara," *Repertuarnyi biulleten' sektora pechati kul'turno-vospitatel'nogo otd.* No. 6 (Svobodnyi, May 1935), 2-5.
- <sup>4</sup> MGB i MVD (Klub im. Dzherzinskogo) - 3 fevralia 1949 goda. Stenographic transcript. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).
- <sup>5</sup> Name of sender illeg. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).
- <sup>6</sup> *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917-1953*, ed. James von Geldern and Richard Stites (Bloomington, 1995).



- <sup>7</sup> Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (New York, 1992).
- <sup>8</sup> Von Geldern and Stites, *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*, xvii-xviii.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. xxiv-xxv.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. xxv.
- <sup>11</sup> "Provedeniia konferentsii chitatelei po obsuzhdeniiu romana Vasiliia AZHAEVA 'Daleko ot Moskvy'. Sostavlen 15 fevraliia 1949 g." (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).
- <sup>12</sup> N. Kovalev. Partorg TsK VKP (b) na avtozavode imeni Stalina, "Chitatel'skie konferentsii," *Novyi mir*, No. 7 (1949): 206-219. For a presentation of Kovalev's article (and his abridged version in the Soviet magazine "for export" *La littérature soviétique*), see Antoine Baudin, Leonid Heller, and Thomas Lahusen, "Le réalisme socialiste de l'ère Jdanov. Compte rendu d'une enquête en cours," *Études de lettres* (Lausanne), 4 (1988): 69-103.
- <sup>13</sup> N. Kovalev, Chitatel'skie konferentsii, 208.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 209.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 216.
- <sup>16</sup> "Tsentral'nyi dom literatorov. Stenogramma zasedaniia seksii prozy Soiuza Sovetskikh Pisatelei SSSR, posviashchennogo obsuzhdeniiu romana Azhaeva 'Daleko ot Moskvy.' 12 oktiabria 1948 goda. gor. Moskva," 32. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5-8. Tarasenkov was one of the central figures of the struggle against "cosmopolitanism." See A. Tarasenkov, "Kosmopolity ot literaturovedeniia," *Novyi mir*, No. 2 (1948): 124-137.
- <sup>18</sup> "Tsentral'nyi dom literatorov. Stenogramma zasedaniia, 31.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 41. Aleksandr Borisovich Chakovskii, author of the "Leningrad trilogy" (1944-47) and of the four-volume *Blokada* (1968-73). Secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers since 1962. *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 8, 428.
- <sup>20</sup> "Stenogramma konferentsii v Zaporozh'i." (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 22-29. All the following quotes of Sobolevskii refer to these pages.
- <sup>22</sup> Reference to the film *Chapaev* by the Vasil'ev brothers (1934). The film emphasized the "class nature" of the civil war and the organizing and leading

role of the Party during the struggle. It became the first experiment with state sponsored film for the masses, as marked by the lead story in *Pravda* of 21 November 1934: "The Whole Country is Watching *Chapaev*": "[*Chapaev*] is being reproduced in hundreds of copies for the sound screen. Silent versions will also be made so that *Chapaev* will be shown in every corner of our immense country: in the towns and villages, the collective farms and settlements, in barracks, clubs and squares." See *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (Cambridge, 1988), 334-335.

<sup>23</sup> Aleksandr Matveevich Matrosov (1924-1943), much celebrated martyr of the Great Patriotic War.

<sup>24</sup> Stenogramma konferentsii v Zaporozh'i, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 36, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 41-43.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>29</sup> Stroitel' (gazeta Zaporozhstroia) No. 183 (10. 2. 1948).

<sup>30</sup> P. Koksharova, letter to V.N. Azhaev, 10. 12. 1949. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).

<sup>31</sup> M. Vishera, letter to V.N. Azhaev, Novgorodskaiia obl., 1. 16. 1951. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).

<sup>32</sup> V.K. Konkin, letter to V.N. Azhaev, Tomsk, 6. 24. 1950. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).

<sup>33</sup> M.V. Prokhorova, letter to V.N. Azhaev, Moscow, 7.18.1950. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).

<sup>34</sup> Prokhorova, letter to V.N. Azhaev, Kurovskii kombinat, n.d. Obviously not the same sender than her namesake from Moscow. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).

<sup>35</sup> Iu. Novikov, letter to V.N. Azhaev, Sarapul, Udmurtskaia ASSR, 11.28.1950. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).

<sup>36</sup> Anna Gavrilova, letter to V.N. Azhaev, Serpukhov, 6.4.1952. (Private archive of V. N. Azhaev).

<sup>37</sup> Ivanova Ella Valentinovna, letter to V.N. Azhaev, Moscow, 6.4.1950. (Private archive of V.N. Azhaev).

<sup>38</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places*, 130, 147.

<sup>39</sup> Frank E. Manuel & Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), I.