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THE SUBVERSIONS OF GRIGORII OSTER IN SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET TIMES

When radical political, economic, and cultural changes took place in Russian life after the dismantling of the Soviet Union in 1991, children's literature, deprived of state subsidies, fell behind its times, leaving a whole generation of post-Soviet children with old and outmoded Soviet books. Despite their educational and literary merits, most of these books were perceived as Soviet "period pieces," whose social and ideological content was historically outdated and unappealing to children growing up in a world dominated by popular culture. (Poriadina3, 19) When the publishing of children's books picked up in the mid-1990s, its top selling genres became science fiction, fantasy, horror stories for children *(ужастики)*, and the children's detective stories. All of these had been previously quantified as 'low' genres, by Soviet standards.

'Playful' literature, whose main traits are humor, irony, and nonsense, also experienced an unprecedented success with both children and adults raised on 'serious' or ideological books. Among the popular established authors writing in the "playful" tradition are Mikhail Esenovskii, Artur Givargizov, Oleg Kurguzov, Marina Moskvina, Sergei Sedov, Andrei Ivanov, who wrote under the name Tim Sobakin, and Andrei Usachev. None of them can compete in their popularity, however, with Grigorii Oster (1947-), the author of a brand of children's books called *Harmful Advice (Вредные советы)* (All translations are by Rudova), avidly read by millions of children and adult readers. This brand is not, however, the only one Oster has produced. Since 1975 when his first book, *It's So Good to Give Presents (Как хорошо дарить подарки)* came out, he has written children's plays, screen plays for cartoons, short stories, poetry, and even a novel for preschool children, *A Tale With Many Details*, 1989 *(Сказка с подробностями)*. There is hardly a genre in children's literature to which he has not applied himself, and recently his artistic territory expanded even to the Internet, when he created the government-sponsored Russian president's web site for children from 8 to 14 years of age, which was launched on January 19, 2004. Oster is so ubiquitous that it would not be an exag-

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geration to say that he has built his own state within the state of Russian children's culture. Currently, his only competitor on the Russian children's book market is Eduard Uspenskii who, being ten years Oster's senior, established himself during a phase of high creative energy in children's literature in the 1960s.

While some critics complain that Oster's books oversaturate the market (Poriadina3, 34), the best examples of his work have become classics and occupy a prominent place in the vibrant tradition of 'playful' literature for children. His creative method arguably, makes him the most experimental of children's authors in contemporary Russian literature and places him within the postmodern literary tradition. This article explains Oster's remarkable success in both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras and discusses his achievements, and innovations as a 'playful' author.

In the Soviet era, Oster's work was viewed with suspicion by the official critics because of its apparent ironic spirit and perceived orientation toward both adult and child readers. 'Playful poetry' traditionally did not resonate positively with literary authorities because of its formalism, use of Aesopian style, and implied challenge to authority, and its value was frequently questioned by educators, parents, and even some well-established Soviet children's authors. In the 1970s and 1980s Oster was known primarily through his children theater plays, as for instance, *A Person with a Tail*, 1976 *(Человек с хвостом), All Wolves Are Afraid*, 1979 *(Все волки боятся),* and *Greetings to the Monkey*, 1983 *(Привет мартышке)*. However, his poetry remained a thorn in the side of official critics, who were convinced that his target readers were adults, and his works implicitly ridiculed Soviet values. For instance, the story "Pete the Microbe" *(«Петька-Микроб»)* was interpreted by some critics as a parody of Soviet people. (Voronova, 313) Oster was forced to switch to screenplays for animated cartoons to save his creative career. Among these screenplays were the highly successful *A Kitten Named Arf*, 1977-1980 *(Котенок по имени Гав), Caution, Monkeys!* 1984 *(Осторожно, обезьянки!),* and *How the Little Goose Got Lost*, 1988 *(Как гусенок потерялся)*. As Oster explains himself, he survived as a Soviet children's writer solely because most bigwigs of the cultural establishment were grandfathers and regularly watched his cartoons along with their grandchildren (Voronova, 314), which granted him protection from the attacks of hack Soviet critics. On the new post-Soviet literary market, however, Oster's playful literature made him a darling of the critics and the readers' favorite.

Playful elements are the core of Oster's literary world, which is in turn filled with fanciful transformations, comical and absurd situations, nonsense, hyperbole, and inventive language. In Soviet children's literature, Oster was from the beginning associated with the so-called 'non-traditional children's poets' whose creative inspiration came from the avant-garde OBERIU (the Russian acronym for Association for Real Art) poets active in Leningrad in the late 1920s and early

1930s. The OBERIU group included such authors as Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii, Nikolai Zabolotskii, Yurii Vladimirov, Boris Levin, Konstantin Vaginov, and Igor Bakhterev. Evgenii Shvarts and Nikolai Oleinikov who also wrote for children were close to OBERIU and its playful spirit. Among later 'non-traditional' children's poets were Genrikh Sapgir, Boris Zakhoder, and Uspenskii. Their children's literature lacked the required Soviet didactic and ideological overtones and appealed to the curious and questioning young minds. Within the ideologically and stylistically regimented Soviet literature, non-traditional playful poetry was an oasis of creativity and freedom from socialist realist parochialism. Rather than following the prescribed official models, "non-traditional" poets embraced the commandments that the "dean of Russian children's literature," Kornei Chukovskii (1880-1969) (Morton, xii), had developed in his celebrated book, *From Two to Five*, 1925 *(От двух до пяти)*. Central to Chukovskii's commandments is the concept of playfulness.

This playful literature of OBERIU was suppressed under Stalinism. However, after the dictator's death, during the period of relative cultural liberalization that extended into the 1960s, known as the *Thaw*, Kharms's works were republished and became an astonishing literary event. Children's literature became a haven of creative experimentation for many original poets and writers and in the 1960s children's poetry experienced a tremendous burst of creativity. Such talented children's poets as for example, Zakhoder, Emma Moshkovskaia, Irina Tokmakova, Roman Sef, Sapgir, Valentin Berestov, and Uspenskii received an opportunity to work in the literary tradition of playful poetry. The favorable reception of playful literature, however, came to an end with Leonid Brezhnev's ascension to power and the subsequent strengthening of censorship. In the 1970s, when Oster made his first steps as a children's author, "a strong sense of lethargy, even despair" (Sokol, 205) marked the cultural climate in the Soviet Union, and the vibrant creative experimentation in children's literature was considerably decreased.

Yet in the midst of cultural stagnation, Oster was able to carve his own artistic space and invent a fictional world that enchanted millions of young and adult readers. His work was from the beginning generally eclectic, stylistically innovative, and ideologically liberating. He was a disciple of the playful avant-garde tradition in Russian children's literature but his work also revealed many features of postmodernist aesthetics. They were so prominent that Mikhail Epstein and Aleksander Genis included Oster's name in their list of "Who's Who in Russian Postmodernism." (Epstein and Genis, 491) On this list, Oster is the only children's literature representative among approximately one hundred and seventy authors who "contributed to the development of a Russian post-totalitarian literature," but never belonged either to the socialist realist or dissident (critical realist) camps, or the historical avant-garde of the 1920s and whose work displayed "stylistic eclecticism, intertextualism and the citational mode, the interplay of signifiers,

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irony, parody, pastiche, and (self-)deconstruction of artistic discourse." (Epstein and Genis, 469)

While this critical discussion of postmodernism in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian literature continues to be vigorous, its application to children's literature is not widely practiced. Placing children's literature in the context of postmodernism becomes, however, increasingly common in Western criticism. Deborah Cogan Thacker argues that postmodern tendencies in contemporary children's literature are impossible to neglect because they reflect important changes in society itself. (139) Among these changes she mentions the powerful role of the media and technology in shaping public tastes and opinions, the disintegration of the nuclear family, the marred image of religion, the sexualized representation of the body in visual and commercial cultures, and the increased child criminality. These social phenomena seep into children's literature to the disapproval of many parents and critics who fear that children might imitate the behavioral models they read about. (140) Yet children's literature continues to lose its 'innocence' by opening up to popular culture and uncomfortable social problems. More often than not, young readers' choices of what to read depends on the media that consistently infuse "low" culture into children's books. This "splicing" of the 'high' and the 'low' in children's literature in the West has defined its postmodern tendencies since the 1950s. (142)

In Russia, postmodernism, or rather postmodern critical discourse, is a much later phenomenon, originating in the 1980s, but the processes that Thacker talks about take place in Russian children's literature as well. Moreover, Thacker's claim that postmodernist tendencies in literature originated in children's poetry (142) is especially fitting in the Russian context. Such postmodernist features as challenge to authoritative discourse (socialist realism) and Bakhtin's carnivalesque elements (performance, parody, and laughter) were ubiquitous in Russian children's playful poetry. The peculiarity of Soviet postmodern culture lay in the nature of its mass culture. In his discussion of Russian postmodernism, Genis proposes to replace the Western formula of postmodernism, "avant-garde plus pop culture" by "avant-garde plus socialist realism" to illustrate how 'mass,' or Soviet, culture was absorbed into the Russian variant of postmodernism. (206) Images of mass Soviet culture played the same role in Russian postmodernism as pop culture did in its Western version. An example of the splicing of official and avant-garde cultural elements could be illustrated by one of Oster's "nasty problems for parents" that he presents as a humorous mathematical problem:

> There are 300 pioneers in a Young Pioneer organization named after Pavlik Morozov. All these pioneers dream to replicate Pavlik's heroic deed but do not have an opportunity to do so because two thirds of them are raised by single mothers. How many pioneers can replicate Pavlik's heroic deed? (Oster2, 30)

Pavlik Morozov (1918-1932), a canonized 13-year old hero of the Young Pioneers, was known to every Soviet child for reporting his father to the authorities for hiding grain during collectivization. Pavlik was allegedly murdered by the *kulaks* after his father had been sentenced to ten years in exile. Oster's joke subverts not only the ideologized genre of Soviet school textbooks but also undermines the status of the 'positive hero,' central to socialist realism and to the myth of heroism for the Soviet state. In a playful manner, this joke also exposes the deteriorating marital institution in the USSR. This combination of the popular narrative form of the *anekdot* (joke) and images of mass culture is ubiquitous in Oster's work, and presents a double-coding for dual audiences: Where the child laughs, the adult may chuckle ironically.

Oster's most original work, *The Tale with Many Details*, is a novel with a non-linear structure split into numerous narrative particles that connect to each other through the text's characters and events. Oster releases the traditional narrative from its linear, chronological prison-house and lets it wander in many directions. While this is not a new phenomenon in world literature, and has been particularly popular since the advent of modernism, using a non-linear narrative strategy for young children is, at least in the Russian context, unusual. But not only Oster's narrative strategy subverts the normal system, his very use of the novelistic genre for pre-school children's literature is innovative. His text has a central organizing principle that Poriadina appropriately identifies as hypertext. (Poriadina3, 35) Since Oster used the hypertext principle for the narrative structure of *The Tale with Many Details* in the pre-Internet, and even pre-mass computer technology period in the USSR, his novel was truly innovative and ahead of its time. This was probably the main reason why the critical attention to his inventive and intelligent book was negligible. Oster did not write another novel, but as post-Soviet Russia entered the cyber space, he took charge of creating a presidential web site for children, *Know Your President* (www.uznai-prezidenta.ru), upon the request of Vladimir Putin's presidential office. This sophisticated site is a masterpiece of political education for the new generation of Russian children growing up with computer technology.

Even in the stringent literary climate of Soviet days, Oster played with generic hierarchies. In a collection of stories, *Legends and Myths of Lavrovyi Street*, 1980 *(Легенды и мифы Лаврового переулка),* he deconstructs the concept of myths and legends and teaches his readers to question them, "In early childhood, people believe in everything. But there comes a day when they stop believing that cats can be checkered or polka-dotted." (Oster1, 3) Most Soviet readers associated myths and legends either with official culture, or revolutionary history, or with the remote cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Myths and legends are stories of the past that one 'knows' and accepts as a part of 'high' culture, but in *Legends*, Oster recontextualizes and brings them down to earth, to non-heroic time and space. He

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plays with the reader's expectations of a mythical narrative and especially with the way myth is understood in socialist realism. Among the myths created by Soviet literature, including children's literature, were the myths of the "great family" (the Soviet state) and 'positive heroes' that populated some "extraordinary reality." (Clark, 10) Ordinary reality was considered realistic only when it "reflected some form, or ideal essence, found in higher-order reality." (Clark, 146) This extraordinary mythical realm was an ideological projection far removed from real life, and gradually, as the USSR was entering a tangibly non-heroic age, especially during Brezhnev's period of stagnation, perfect and larger-than-life positive heroes became unreal and obsolete for the new generation of children.

Oster's *Legends* has a different, more personal, and more human understanding of a 'legendary' or 'mythological' reality that does not comply with socialist realist prescriptions. His characters lack the epic and heroic qualities of positive heroes of socialist realism. Instead they are mischievous kids and eccentric adults. The legends told by the parents of Lavrovyi Street do not resemble official legends either: they are unheroic and personal. The parents of Oster's stories tell 'legends' about a boy who was dirty and then lived all his life on a tree; about a girl who did not like to eat and became so light that the wind blew her away; or about a boy who was unable to dress himself. None of these peculiar 'legendary' characters would fit the Soviet mythological parameters, but there is hardly an attempt in Oster's book to mold them into 'positive heroes.' The constraints of Soviet myth break down in the artistic space of Oster's *Legends*.

But not only the canons of the genre or the official socialist realist literary conventions, as in the previous example, are subverted in Oster's books; the boundaries of power relations are challenged as well. The subversion of the repressive power of adults, school, and state is one of the features of Oster's books that teach the readers to think critically about power structures — be it the adult-child relationship or social hierarchy. Here are two examples of unorthodox advice on how to become a 'disobedient' child:

> There are many educational books
> In the world.
> Let them not scare you
> By their thickness.
> If you tear a thick book
> In the middle,
> You could read it
> Twice as fast. (Oster3, 194)

> Plug your ears
> Before the first day of school
> And quietly rest
> In your classes in silence.

Observe how your teacher
Soundlessly opens his mouth
And moves his lips by the chalk board. (Oster3, 193)

In these two pieces of harmful advice, Oster points at the absurdities of dry didacticism, narrow-mindedness, and rigidity of public education that he 'fights' in many of his books. (Poriadina1, 28)

After an overwhelming success of the first book of *Harmful Advice*, Oster serializes it and in fact, as some critics complain, begins "to bake them like pancakes" (Poriadina1, 27). Yet the original *Harmful Advice* (1990) was a timely literary creation: it "filled the ideological vacuum" that emerged after the collapse of Soviet ideology and the disappearance of verses about Lenin, the Motherland, and the Communist Party. Perhaps *Harmful Advice* would have been more socially effective during the years of stagnation or *perestroika* — not after the discrediting of Soviet ideology, as Poriadina suggests (ibid.) — but despite its belated appearance, Oster's books of *Harmful Advice* became an invitation to the readers to think independently and construct their own concept of the world and power relationships.

For his "harmful advice," Oster uses *prikol*, which the dictionary of Russian youth's slang describes as "something original and funny done for the sake of entertainment."(Slovar') *Prikol* can be a witty joke, amusing anecdote, or entertaining piece of news. It can be completely superficial or perceived as such but it can "make things strange," as the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky would put it. *Prikol* playfully suggests to the listener/reader an alternative way of looking at things, concepts, or situations, as, for instance, in the following piece:

If you have decided to stand
In the first row among your countrymen
Never try to catch up
With those who overtake you.
In five minutes
They will run back cursing,
And then you race ahead
In front of the crowd. (Oster3, 179)

This *prikol* is double-edged: it can simply entertain but it can also prompt the reader to meditate about the devious ways of the power game (think of Putin's road to power, for instance). Oster's *prikoly* (plural of *prikol*) have a carnivalesque dimension, which Mikhail Bakhtin described as "[a] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order, it mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions." (Bakhtin, 10) Carnival laughter is all-permissive, it is the world of "heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled."

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(Stallybrass and White, 8) The *prikoly* of *Harmful Advice* translate perfectly into the subversive language of postmodernity and reach beyond the text; they confirm the postmodernist recognition of the potential of young readers to turn against any authority, be it parents, teachers, or other adults.

This indeterminacy of meaning of Oster's work may appear way above the head of young readers. Yet while his main audience is unquestionably children, he defies the segregation of readers into children and adults and erases the border between them, as did his two great predecessors of the Russian playful tradition in children's poetry, Samuil Marshak and Kornei Chukovskii. Oster considers himself a children's author but says that all his books, including *Harmful Advice*, are "simply for people." (Shatalov) In Oster's works therefore there is something for everybody: language play and nonsense for a pre-school reader, irony for a middle-school child, and satire and parody for an adult. But Oster's books are also an invitation to the adult reader to suspend seriousness and common sense and look at the world anew. Thacker writes, "The attraction of children's fiction for an adult audience can be seen as part of the postmodern condition" and "adult nostalgia for a notion of [childhood's] evanescence." (147)

Oster's *Harmful Advice* is easy to read and recite and certainly to imitate. Inadvertently, Oster created his own genre and now a number of authors work in it. (Poriadina3, 37) Popular culture loved *Harmful Advice* and Oster's *prikol'nyi* (adjective of *prikol*) style quickly spread into all forms of playful literature for children. Funny horror stories, books of dreams, and above all, textbooks filled with *prikoly* are abundant on the current Russian literary market. They appear either in verse or fiction form and sell like hot cakes. Kurguzov, Sobakin, Esenovskii, and Usachev, among other talented young authors, created a whole generation of books in Oster's *prikol'nyi* style. In 2004 *Harmful Advice* found a new life in Andrei Andreev's theater production in Moscow. It was advertised as a "folk-rock-rap-pop-fantasy for maturing children," from "young parents with little children to adolescents of 15-16 years of age." (Spektakl') *Harmful Advice* thus became a true *Gesamtkuntswerk* and visible part of contemporary Russian pop culture. Some of the numerous *Harmful Advice* books or Oster's other *prikoly* or jokes are available in almost any Russian airport, railway station, or newspaper kiosk. The author himself has dissolved in his own 'folkloric' genre or perhaps even 'died,' as a true postmodern author would. Frequently, Oster voluntarily removes his own authority from the text. In the following example, he offers the readers to play with his text and treat it as liberally as they please:

> If you'd like to defeat
> Your enemies with one blow,
> You don't need rockets, shells,
> And bullets.
> Throw down … (fill in this line yourself)

With a parachute.
In an hour your enemies
Will run to you sobbing and surrender.
If you don't want
To fill in the blank line above,
Choose any other one you would like
From the list below. (Oster3, 178)

This piece of "harmful advice" is completely interactive and provides a multiple-choice list from which the readers can choose an item to fill in the blank in the poem: "younger sister," "Dad," "Grandma," "Mom," "a bunch of dentists," "two bags of two- or three-ruble banknotes," "a copy of *Harmful Advice*," and so on. Oster treats his text as 'public property' because language belongs to everybody and everybody can play with it. In *School of Horrors (Школа ужасов),* Oster leaves some of the stories open-ended and asks the readers to complete them.

Oster's creative method thus becomes a *prikol* itself. The author matters only as long as he brings the original text to life but this text then acquires its own existence. Poriadina persuasively argues that Oster shares the chosen fate of a postmodernist author: he denies and forgets his original voice, begins to imitate himself, allows others to imitate him, and invites his own authorial 'death.' (Poriadina3, 37)

Ekaterina Margolis divides artistic culture into "high," "mass," and "children's." (Margolis) In Oster's playful universe, these three conflate and their fusion creates a true repository of multi-layered cultural memory: Soviet mass culture and ideology, contemporary pop culture, children's folklore, school textbooks, the tradition of playful poetry, cyber space, and, of course, *prikoly*. Oster's intertextual allusions to the images from mass media, folklore, and high culture grant him a special place in children's literature. His idiom is strikingly postmodern: his text is decentered and generically heterogeneous, his language play exuberant, and his outreach is universal. His work reflects the cultural and aesthetic change not only in Russian children's literature but also in Russian society at large.

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ИГРОВОЕ ТВОРЧЕСТВО ГРИГОРИЯ ОСТЕРА В СОВЕТСКИЕ И ПОСТ-СОВЕТСКИЕ ВРЕМЕНА

Резюме

Григорий Остер (1947-) — один из самых популярных детских писателей России. В его книгах темы, образы и язык популярной культуры успешно переплетается с лучшими традициями игровой поэзии, которую он унаследовал от Корнея Чуковского, Самуила Маршака, поэтов ОБЭРИУ, Бориса Заходера, Эдуарда Успенского и других талантливых детских поэтов. Художественный прием Остера — *прикол*. И в советские и в пост-советские времена приколы Остера учили юных читателей критически смотреть на окружающий мир. Остер создал свою собственную жанровую и стилистическую постмодернистскую идиому, которая отражает большие изменения не только в постсоветской детской литературе, но и во всей российской культуре.

Larissa Rudova

TWÓRCZOŚĆ GRIGORIJA OSTERA W CZASACH RADZIECKICH I POSTRADZIECKICH

Streszczenie

Grigorij Oster (1947–) to jeden z najpopularniejszych Rosyjskich pisarzy dziecięcych. W jego książkach tematy, obrazy i język kultury popularnej skutecznie splata się z najlepszymi tradycjami poezji dziecięcej, które odsyłają do twórczości Kornieja Czukowskiego, Samuiła Marszaka, poetów OBERIU, Borisa Zachodera, Eduarda Uspienskiego i innych utalentowanych poetów dziecięcych. Artystycznym chwytem Ostera jest *przytyk*. Zarówno w okresie radzieckim, jak i postradzieckim przytyki Ostera uczyły młodych czytelników krytycznego spojrzenia na otaczający ich świat. Oster stworzył własny gatunkowy i stylistyczny postmodernistyczny idiom, który odzwierciedla zmiany nie tylko w postsowieckiej dziecięcej literaturze, ale w całej rosyjskiej kulturze.

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