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**WRITING THE URALS: PERMANENCE AND EPHEMERALITY  
IN OL'GA SLAVNIKOVA'S 2017**

Ol'ga Slavnikova's novel *2017* (Vagrius, 2006) made her the second woman to win Russia's coveted Booker Prize, garnering conflicting critical responses in the process.<sup>1</sup> Many hurried to label the narrative a dystopia: *2017*'s last hundred pages depict the centenary of the November 'revolution', chronicling how crowds commemorate the event by dressing up as Reds or Whites and slaughtering their enemies (Chantsev 287; Eliseeva 14). Other critics, and Slavnikova herself, see dystopia as only one strand in the work (Slavnikova 'Mne ne terpitsia', 18; Basinskii 13). As Elena Elagina observes, this is a work whose different layers appeal to varying readers, yet ultimately the narrative is less stratified than interwoven as it portrays the life of one Veniamin Iur'evich Krylov, a gem poacher (*khitnik*) and skilled carver of valuable stones (Elagina 217). Krylov, who lives in Ekaterinburg, discovers that his new love, the enigmatic yet nondescript Tania, is none other than the Stone Maiden of local legend—a being who shows some men the location of buried gems and lures others to destruction. According to the idiosyncratic rules of their relationship, they meet at randomly chosen locations, knowing neither the other's address, nor phone number, nor real name—a scenario that results in Krylov losing contact with Tania after a terrorist attack disrupts their planned rendezvous (Slavnikova *2017*, 324, 255-56, 84-86, 31). When he finds her, Krylov discovers that Tania is now less a human than a stylised image. This change is explained by the folklore of the Urals—first brought to readers' attention by Pavel Bazhov's *The Malachite Box* (Malakhitovaia shkatulka, 1939)—which shows that *2017* reflects on the problems of past and present as much as the future (Slavnikova, 'Verkhonii i nizhnii', 295). In fact, oppositions structure this novel, emphasising the interaction between ephemerality and permanence.

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<sup>1</sup> The author thanks two colleagues at Miami University, Nicole Thesz and Margaret Ziolkowski, for their comments on an early draft of this article. Evgeny Pavlov, Henrietta Mondry, and an anonymous reviewer at *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* also made a number of helpful suggestions. In 2007 Marian Schwartz was in the process of translating *2017* into English—the first chapter appeared in *Subtropics* (4) 2007, 27-43, and was published earlier as 'Krylov's Childhood', *Glas* 30 (2003), 175-209. For a discussion of Slavnikova that markets her to Western audiences, see [http://www.nibbe-wiedling.de/slavnikova/english/titles\\_en](http://www.nibbe-wiedling.de/slavnikova/english/titles_en). Last accessed 11 October 2008.

Elagina terms *2017* a *gustopis'*, a neologism recalling the importance of sound (*zvukopis'*) in prose (218). This label illuminates two key aspects of the work— density and complexity—as well as the author's wish to establish a Urals text similar to what Nikolai Gogol', Aleksandr Pushkin, and Fedor Dostoevskii did for Petersburg in the nineteenth century (Slavnikova 'Verkhonii i nizhnii', 299). Unlike a dystopia, this novel re-educates readers not politically but geographically, moving their gaze from the centre (Moscow and St. Petersburg) to the periphery (the Ural Mountains, the border between Europe and Asia).

*2017* is to date Slavnikova's most recent novel, appearing in 2006, yet it is also her first effort at a long work—an early version of the manuscript was begun more than ten years before (Reshetnikov 25). While creating *2017* the author published various stories and three other novels—*A Dragonfly Magnified to the Size of a Dog* (*Strekoza, uvelichennaia do razmerov sobaki*, 1996), *Alone in the Mirror* (*Odin v zerkale*, 2000), and *Immortal* (*Bessmertnyi*, 2001). Slavnikova, born in 1957, first gained recognition with the story 'First-Year Student' (*Pervokursnita*, 1988). Graduating with a journalism degree from Ural State University in Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg), she oversees the Debut (*Debiut*) literary prize for young authors and contributes widely to various 'thick' journals, including the local *Ural* she unabashedly champions (Amusin 201; Slavnikova 'Verkhonii i nizhnii', 301). *2017*, like most of her works, is set in Ekaterinburg, for the author a "metropolis-spectre": the state did not authorise its original founding in the eighteenth century, meaning that the city's four million inhabitants today live in the ghost of a city that should have never been (Slavnikova 'Verkhonii i nizhnii', 299-300). This image again evokes the long shadow of the northern capital—Mikhail Epstein notes that the idea of Petersburg as phantom runs throughout the modern Russian experience, signalling a centuries-long postmodernism *avant la lettre* (192-93). *2017*'s Ekaterinburg is paradoxical—even its invented details seem real as Slavnikova tries to solidify the metropolis's stature using elaborate illusions (Beliakov 187).

Images of the permanent and ephemeral shape the city and the novel as a whole. The qualities paired with these two overarching concepts are in many ways unsurprising—*2017* associates permanence with truth, while the temporary connotes a virtual reality that masks falseness (Kasper 122; Remizova 170). This dichotomy shapes the protagonist. Even as a small boy, Krylov is guided by the desire for truth, a longing that brings only confusion and a realization that the world is governed by forces beyond his

ken. In his early childhood Krylov and his parents flee from Bukhara to Sverdlovsk as unemployment and ethnic tensions drive Russians out of Central Asia (Slavnikova 2017, 475). One of the few memories of life in Uzbekistan begins a key theme in 2017: Krylov's pursuit of transparency (*prozrachnost*), the quality that promises truth and permanence.

[I]n his hand he found a sliver of blue glass, curved, from a bottle probably, through which the flashes of sunlight on the irrigation canal looked (this is a later insertion) like welding sparks. [. . .] He felt it with inutterable clarity at the time: the blue sliver contained something that almost never occurs in the simple matter around us: *transparency*, a special, profound element, like water and sky.  
(Slavnikova 'Krylov's Childhood', 178, italics in original)

Krylov has discovered not merely another component of the world, but the potential for an alchemy of perception, promising "flashes" leading to "inutterable clarity"—these are valuable commodities in a troubled family soon to be refugees in its own country. It is at this moment that "he became aware of himself as an intact human continuity" and has the first glimmer of his lifelong obsession with gems (Slavnikova 'Krylov's Childhood', 178).

Very quickly, however, the boy learns that transparency is easier to desire than achieve. Once, trying to "extract the orange glass-juice that was trapped in the thick walls of his aunt's vase," Krylov smashes it into shards.

The shards, though—some of them flew into the sneering sycamore or under his aunt's tubs—were just as self-contained as the intact object. Choosing the very best, bottom piece, with the thickest color, young Krylov continued to smash it on the scraps of the now slivered and silvered newspaper until he ended up with a totally white, hard powder. The only color in the powder came from his, Krylov's, unanticipated blood, which looked like a chewed up raisin. Not a drop remained in the powder of the *transparency* for whose sake his experiment had been performed. [. . .] He had learned that what is transparent is unattainable and, like everything precious, is connected with blood.

(Slavnikova, 'Krylov's Childhood', 179, italics in original)

Krylov's first attempt to extract transparency from the world is a resounding failure—the mystery remains. While 2017 is not a *Bildungsroman*, this

scene is the first of many experiences shaping Krylov's interaction with the world and those who inhabit it. Objects in Slavnikova's prose have a latent animacy manifest through metaphor and simile: trees may "sneer" and a child's blood is like a "chewed up raisin."<sup>2</sup> For Krylov, however, the world now contains two classes of objects: the transparent and everything else. His search for transparency accompanies him from Bukhara to Sverdlovsk, outlasting the aunt (who vanishes from the family) and the apartment they hurriedly sell to Uzbek bandits (Slavnikova 2017, 62).

In Russia, Krylov's mother works at the regional museum, providing her son with another fateful discovery. Tagging along behind a guide, he intently listens when she explains to schoolchildren that miners who die underground can petrify and become their own statues. "Afterwards Krylov wasted no time clarifying whether or not this was so. It turned out that, indeed, under specific conditions organic remains can be replaced with sulfur-pyrite. There was no impermeable boundary between the mineral world and living nature" (Slavnikova 'Krylov's Childhood', 177). The boy's fascination is not a joyful awakening to the wonders of the universe—instead he recognises that one's status as organic is only a matter of external factors. What appears permanent is only temporary; the border between the animate and inanimate can be crossed at any time (regardless of personal choice). Examining history through the *longue durée* of geologic time, humans are lost in nature's slow movement from living matter to fossil or gem.

Krylov searches for transparency knowing that he is entrapped in the shifting relationship between the organic and mineral. During his first year in university—a year he finances with a gem find—he encounters Professor Anfilogov, who embodies transparency and is also a *khitnik* (Slavnikova 2017, 95). His first real mentor is initially a welcome change from the thugs whom teenage Krylov alternately befriended and battled in his forlorn suburb. Anfilogov is himself aware of the permeable border between the mineral and organic, exemplified by the Stone Maiden, who may appear in the taiga or on the streets of Ekaterinburg.

The professor chooses to ignore this folklore on the gem expedition that claims his life. As he and his partner Kolian return to the remote site

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<sup>2</sup> The rich life of objects in Slavnikova's prose recalls the perestroika-era stories of Tat'iana Tolstaia, where things give us flashes of consciousness (Amusin 203-204). Both authors elevate language to the status of protagonist, leading one critic to pay Slavnikova the backhanded compliment of being "Nabokov in a skirt" (Mitiagov 4).

where they had previously discovered a lode of valuable stones, Anfilogov dreams that Kolian's face has become a living skull. Soon afterward he finds his wife's handkerchief in the hole they are excavating—his spouse, the same woman with whom Krylov is having an affair, is none other than the Stone Maiden. Anfilogov, who is fully aware of the dangerous powers of this being, continues to dig. Kolian quickly dies, the victim of cyanide poisoning from a gold mine nearby—a mine unwittingly financed by Krylov's former wife, Tamara. Finding his partner's corpse, Anfilogov realises that Kolian's smile looks as if it has petrified—the professor himself soon succumbs to the toxicity (Slavnikova 2017, 251, 255, 453, 272, 435). The two deaths reiterate that there is no meaningful boundary between the organic and mineral and that all things, living and otherwise, are connected in a most unsettling manner. Tamara for her part, although presented as one of the novel's more humane characters, has a new plan for her lucrative funeral business: a cemetery complex that will preserve its VIP clients in mineral form (Slavnikova 2017, 288).<sup>3</sup> This grotesque proposal (rejected by the would-be customers) partially justifies those critics who label the novel a dystopia—Tamara's plans for such dehumanising experiments recall the prose of Evgenii Zamiatin and Andrei Platonov. The disturbingly mutable boundary between the mineral and organic foregrounds the permanence of the former quality and ephemerality of the latter.

This unstable relationship also complicates Krylov's search for transparency, the elusive apotheosis of the mineral state. Pursuing a spy whom Krylov's employees have paid to shadow the gem-cutter and Tania, Krylov finally corners him in a sleek new building in Ekaterinburg's flashy city centre.

It was impossible to understand whether one was standing in a display window, in a shopping arcade, or under the open sky; only the puddles on the rose-colored tiles and wet strip of washed-out grass made Krylov feel that he had not yet been sucked into the transparent aquariums where people apparently moved through walls. For the first time in his life *transparency* felt hostile. (Slavnikova 2017, 413, italics in original)

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<sup>3</sup> The fate of Anfilogov, Kolian, and the underground miners is a darkly humorous interpretation of Viktor Shklovskii's desire for language to return to the principle of description, "to make the stone stony" (12). The Formalist critic intended to restore the descriptive word to its status of self-sufficient artefact, a drive that is appropriate for Slavnikova as an author who privileges description as a living force within her prose.

The comparison with an aquarium links this tainted transparency to Anfilogov, who hides his most prized gems in a fish tank (Slavnikova 2017, 119). Here, however, it is the denizens of the falsely glittering city centre who seem to float within and through the transparent walls, dwarfed by the enormous building. For Krylov, as for many residents of the post-Soviet city, this is an alien zone whose European style and overpriced cafés are a world removed from the decaying neighbourhoods surrounding them. It is within this context, hoping to finally catch the flabby spy Zavalikhin, that Krylov eyes the building with enmity.

The transparency of this structure promises a better future for the post-Soviet elites overspending to elide their grubby collective past. This consumer utopia is closed to the *narod*, since, as Tamara snidely comments, the common people do not want to live better—a patently false observation that echoes the bitter rant of Dostoevskii's *Underground Man* (Slavnikova 2017, 445; Dostoevskii 15). The ultramodern buildings of central Ekaterinburg are a façade, belying the city's crumbling Khrushchev-era apartments and idle factories. Transparency marks social divide, which itself is a class ceiling protecting Russia's elect from the roiling masses.

Russian culture has long seen transparency as a dubious trapping of modernity. Nikolai Chernyshevskii's paean to the Crystal Palace at London's Great Exhibition (1851) inspires Vera Pavlovna's most utopian dream, where a glowing edifice promises to enshrine humanity in social justice (370). For the *Underground Man* this structure signals the delusional dreams of rationality (and those of Chernyshevskii in particular), while for Zamiatin the transparent buildings of the Unified State highlight the death of the individual (Dostoevskii 18).

In 2017 transparency is an ideal that is both problematic and, at least for Krylov, unattainable. Anfilogov is one character associated with this quality—the other is Anfilogov's third wife and Krylov's current lover, the unprepossessing yet compelling Tania. Her quality of ultimate clarity turns out to be an illusion: *prozrachnost'* becomes *prizrachnost'*, a spectral quality signalling Tania's connection to the supernatural world (Slavnikova 2017, 385). Despite Anfilogov's fate, at the end of the novel Krylov is at the same train station where he first met Tania, leaving in a presumably doomed effort to locate the buried treasure that destroyed the professor (Slavnikova 2017, 526).

For those in Slavnikova's Urals there is no boundary between the natural and supernatural, just as the organic and mineral, ephemeral and permanent lie on a single continuum. *2017* repeatedly uses the neologism *rifeiskii* to denote this fictionalised image of the region and its inhabitants (*rifeetsy*). This term suggests the Rhipaeen Mountains, a description of a mythical range possibly near the present-day Urals (Smith vol. 2, 710). "Rifeiskii" also resembles the modern Russian *rif* (reef), an underwater geologic formation whose life is hidden from view.<sup>4</sup> In *2017* the Urals are a "stone creature with a broken spine," where the gems hidden beneath the surface give the land "the pattern of a reptile" (Slavnikova 2017, 153). The author, discussing Ekaterinburg and environs, notes that its underground landscape changes just as much as the region's mountains and rivers (Slavnikova 'Verkhonii i nizhnii', 295). This shifting truth is hidden from human eyes; searching for such knowledge (and the financial gain it promises) motivates the gem poachers.

The *khitniki* must learn to see the landscape as a conduit to what is below. Kolian and Anfilogov follow a river to the location of a gem lode more magnificent than any they have ever seen. As they move slowly upstream in the cold Urals autumn the narrator observes that such rivers are the surface repository for underground treasures (Slavnikova 2017, 122). Readers must revise how they look at the world; they must see the region's natural resources as a hint at the more profound beauty beneath its surface. It is tempting to characterise *2017* as a work comprised of strata. At times the plotlines are distinct layers (Kolian and Anfilogov's expedition, Krylov's relations with his ex-wife), but ultimately they are inextricable, all part of the *gustopis'* Elagina identifies: Tamara's wealth is founded partially on the gold-processing that leached cyanide into the groundwater, eventually killing the professor and his companion, and perhaps ultimately Krylov as well. In such instances, *2017* implies, geology is destiny.

This is not, however, a novel that unequivocally privileges permanence. While much of the narrative depicts the subservience of flesh to stone, the mineral world exists alongside a series of elaborate but fleeting illusions. This opposition between the permanent and ephemeral begins in Bukhara, shortly after Krylov's discovery of transparency. Admiring a reproduction of a famous painting by Ivan Shishkin, the boy later learns that the original is in Moscow's Tret'iakov Gallery.

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<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Stephen Nimis and Vitaly Chernetsky (both at Miami University) for helping with the Greek and modern Russian echoes of *rifeiskii*.

It was hard for him to believe in the Tretyakov's reality and, consequently, Shishkin's painting itself vanished from reality. The world appeared to young Krylov as a series of copies without an original—assuming an original, striving to engender it with their spontaneous accumulation and merge with it, but in vain. (Slavnikova 'Krylov's Childhood', 180)

For the protagonist the universe is an unsettling place, where a copy can erase the original. It is significant that Moscow—the centre of Russian culture—is also by extension excised from Krylov's imagination. Instead, the Urals are the focal point, with the capital merely a venue for the political chaos dominating the novel's last section.

The counter-world of copies without originals follows Krylov, intensifying as he gets older. His ex-wife Tamara, who has become a successful businesswoman, surrounds herself with assistants who resemble exactly the type of employees they should be. Her life is a series of copies without originals, as the narrator explicitly states, placing Tamara in the same category as one of her clients, a bandit turned finance minister. "In Sakov the powerful instinct of reproduction was the instinct to flee from authenticity," in his case by producing children who will continue in their father's footsteps (Slavnikova 2017, 166, 164, 294).

Multiplicity also may distort the original, as the television journalist Marina discovers in Slavnikova's novel *Immortal*. Working for a candidate running for the provincial Duma, she characterises the future parliamentarian Krugal' as a decreasing series of copies that belie the solid physiognomy on his campaign leaflets. Not only is there a gap between image and essence—Krugal' on paper and Krugal' in the flesh—but the man himself contains the images that make him seem to recede into nothingness. In an obvious commentary on 1990s politics, the candidate is elected after bribing the voters from his grim working-class district (Slavnikova *Bessmertnyi*, 61, 209).

The most prominent image of copies eclipsing the original in *Immortal* is the paralyzed veteran whose longevity gives the novel its name. Marina's stepfather, Aleksandr Afanas'evich Kharitonov, worked as a spy during the Great Patriotic War, strangling Germans with a silk rope. He has been bedridden for fourteen years. His family, to avoid a fatal repeat of the stroke that almost killed him, has not told Kharitonov of the sweeping



changes since the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup> To Nina Aleksandrovna, his wife, the veteran seems like an impostor of Leonid Brezhnev, whose portrait graces the “red corner” in the room (Slavnikova *Bessmertnyi* 5, 121). The General Secretary was himself a copy without an original, a leader whose fictionalised economic successes and ghost-written memoirs masked a yawning emptiness. Krugal', Kharitonov, and Brezhnev are images that critique lingering Soviet values (political and military fealty, sacrifice for the nation)—after the USSR they are signifiers pointing to a deracinated signified.

Both novels examine the paradoxical permanence of illusion, recalling Epstein's discussion of Jean Baudrillard in the context of Russian culture. Baudrillard's idea of simulation—the generation of artificial reality (simulacra) to such a degree that actual reality no longer matters—dominates the postmodernism Epstein sees in Russian history. Beginning with Vladimir's conversion of Rus' to Christianity and intensifying with the Petrine reforms, Russian culture has produced an image of reality (simulation) that masks divergent actual conditions (Epstein 189; Baudrillard 166; Epstein 190-91).<sup>6</sup> From this viewpoint, Slavnikova's elaborate system of illusions and copies without originals only widens a pre-existing gap between word and deed, ideology and practice.

Critics were quick to observe that simulation plays a prominent role in *2017* (Chantsev 289; Remizova 170). Sergei Beliakov outlines how “each character has his double-reflection [*dvoinik-otrazhenie*], or even several reflections. And these ‘reflections’ rather strongly distort the original image” (194). Krylov makes this discovery when chasing the spy and unintentionally causing his death. The unfortunate Zavalikhin, hired by Krylov's employers in hope of gaining the gems found by Anfilogov, is pasty

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<sup>5</sup> Slavnikova's publisher strongly hints that the plot for the film *Good Bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) was stolen from *Immortal*, which was in press at the time (Slavnikova *Bessmertnyi*, back cover). No study has yet systematically compared these two works or addressed this accusation.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Lipovetsky has also advanced this debate, focusing more on simulation as a feature of Russian postmodernist prose. Lipovetsky argues that for Baudrillard the postmodern self is no more than an accumulation of simulations. This damning assessment is appropriate for many of the minor and more obviously parodic characters in *Immortal* but does not fit Krylov, whose personality comes from stable ideas and values evident from childhood onward (Lipovetsky 11). On the extensive debate surrounding the success and failure of Christianity in Kievan Rus' and Muscovy, see Eve Levin's summary of the historiographical issues in her ‘*Dvoeverie* and Popular Religion’.

and wan—as is Krylov toward the end of *2017* (Slavnikova *2017*, 429, 350, 481).<sup>7</sup>

The double bifurcates personality and fate. One character even combines three identities: the Stone Maiden and her two manifestations—Ekaterina Sergeevna (Anfilogov's wife) and Tania (Krylov's lover) (Beliaikov 193; Slavnikova *2017*, 498, 518). Tania, who is the most developed of these, is of indeterminate age, mousy yet oddly attractive, and, most importantly, linked to Anfilogov and then Krylov in their search for the gems. After learning that she has inherited the professor's wealth following his death, Tania/Ekaterina Sergeevna changes sharply. When Krylov finally finds her after a prolonged search, she is not so much cold as indifferent. Tania plans to go abroad and have plastic surgery that, as he notes, will make her a series of artificial parts—a simulation. Krylov leaves for the expedition that may be his last, hoping that Tania will call him from Switzerland—he is unwilling to recall the legends of the Stone Maiden and how she destroys men. As the narrator tells us, his love has gone to watch over her treasure: Tania has vanished from Krylov's life (Slavnikova *2017*, 507, 516, 518). The protagonist does not recall the lessons of his childhood, e.g., copies can erase the original and nothing is permanent.

Erasure and the ephemeral also mark Ekaterinburg as the novel's setting. The modern skyline has a spectral nature. For years a crumbling television tower that locals call the Toadstool (*Poganka*) has teetered dangerously over the area. When municipal authorities finally destroy it, the result is not immediately apparent.

Even when the cumulus dust, thinning and translucent, rose to almost the full height of the vanished tower, the lambency didn't disappear; the dusty spectre of a fatter Toadstool lingered in the air for several days [. . .] Afterward, whenever the dust came up, it was like a faint impression being powdered in the air, or if the sun came out from behind a cloud at an unusual angle, the tower became visible; people saw it in a thick snowfall, as if it had washed the violet shadow with

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<sup>7</sup> Linked nature is reflected in surnames. Krylov is seemingly blessed by the wings of success, while Zavalikhin (*zavalit'*) is doomed to collapse yet obstructs others. Anfilogov, for his part, recalls *anfilada*, a series of receding rooms that give an illusion of endless depth. The height of Slavnikova's symbolic names is, appropriately enough, the Party boss turned democrat, Apofeosov, who loses the election to Krugal' (Slavnikova *Bessmertnyi*, 27).

soap. Lots of Uralers had trouble believing they'd ever physically been there. (Slavnikova 'Krylov's Childhood', 196)<sup>8</sup>

The narrator does not miss the irony that Ekaterinburg's most famous landmark is first an unwanted eyesore and then a mirage that refuses to vanish as it should. Significantly, the Toadstool's dusty legacy is depicted by words alternating between the spectral and the transparent—for Krylov and his city these attributes are inseparable.

The effect of the Toadstool's destruction on the Uralers is also telling. First, like Krylov, they confuse a copy (the dust cloud) with its original, i.e., the destroyed tower that logically can no longer be there. However, there is also an opposite trajectory: now that the Toadstool does not exist, locals find it difficult to believe that it ever did. The copy has replaced the original not only in the present, but in the past—the Toadstool's vanishing/remaining/having vanished exemplifies simulation. The disconnect with reality that destroys Anfilogov (and probably Krylov) is not limited to *khitniki* in the taiga—it suffuses the world Slavnikova portrays.

Illusion and impermanence play an even greater role in *Immortal* as the family desperately shields Kharitonov from reality. In a symbolic sense Nina Aleksandrovna, Marina, and her shiftless husband feed off of him—his pension as a veteran is their only stable source of income. In turn, Nina Aleksandrovna physically gives him the nourishment his paralyzed body has provided for the family (Slavnikova *Bessmertnyi* 31, 102). This tautological scenario combines the real/permanent (Kharitonov's paralysis) and the invented/ephemeral (the ersatz news mother and stepdaughter create for him). Marina uses the television station where she works to edit old footage of Party congresses while Nina Aleksandrovna reads reworded articles from *Pravda*. The family comes to see this domestic simulation as more real than the unfathomable changes and astronomical prices of the post-Soviet era (Slavnikova *Bessmertnyi*, 85, 27, 39).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The destruction of the Toadstool exemplifies what Beliakov identifies as Slavnikova's invented details, blending her fictionalized landscape with the real locale of Ekaterinburg—in 2008 the Toadstool was still standing and even slated for improvement. See 'Telebashi v Ekaterinburge dostroiati k 2011 godu', <http://www.g2p.ru/publications/index.php?opn=39956&part=1>. Last accessed 11 October 2008.

<sup>9</sup> One of Slavnikova's distinctions is her richly grim portrayals of the 1990s, when the self-evident hypocrisy of Boris El'tsin's 'democrats' helped drive the populace into the authoritarian arms of his successor.

For Kharitonov's family the red corner and portrait of Brezhnev are microcosms of the Stagnation era which, the narrator states, refuses to let time progress (Slavnikova *Bessmertnyi*, 116). The twenty years preceding perestroika were an epoch of carefully managed sameness—for Kharitonov's family it now seems a period of relative stability. In both novels such constancy implies a permanence that is only temporary. In *2017*, as the government goes through a series of crises, it staves off food shortages by stocking the shelves with surplus rations from the Great Patriotic War, soothing fears and also evoking a longing for the days of low prices and a dependably unchanging state (Slavnikova *2017*, 370). For Baudrillard and Linda Hutcheon such nostalgia indicates that simulation has used the false image of a more liveable yesteryear to vanquish the past, which in the Soviet context meant deficit goods and a government oscillating between hypocrisy and repression (Baudrillard 171, Hutcheon 230). In *2017* authorities convert memories of actual conditions into a radiant past that never was.

Critics have linked simulation to the masked revolution (*Riazhenaiia revoliutsiia*) of costumed Reds and Whites (Aleksandrov 5). Krylov first sees the combatants while waiting for Tania on Ekaterinburg's central square during a local holiday. Just before the Reds attack and a series of explosions rock the city centre, he observes that the marchers form an optical illusion where "[e]ach White was repeated several times in his row, as a result of which it appeared that his strength was increasing in geometric proportion" (Slavnikova *2017*, 315). The reader, conditioned by the narrative, identifies the marching monarchists as another instance of copies and their effect on the original. Here, however, multiplicity increases the value of the individual while undermining permanence—each officer's strength comes from his temporary position in the formation.

This scene questions both permanence and truth. Later, after losing Tania in the ensuing chaos of the clash between Reds and Whites, Krylov muses that there should be some sort of reality behind the belligerents' historically inaccurate dress—the Whites, whose stature is elevated by marching in rows, are revealed to be another instance of simulation (Slavnikova *2017*, 326-27). Following Baudrillard's logic, Krylov and the reader conclude that the 1917 revolution and Civil War were as pointless and misguided as their farcical re-enactment—the manufacture of reality first erases reality itself, then questions its validity. Given that Ekaterinburg was the site of the Romanovs' execution, Slavnikova's depictions critique both

those who glorified the Soviet revolution and the supporters of the murdered Tsar.

Marina Remizova sees the 1917 re-enactments as yet another confirmation that these characters inhabit a culture of falsity (173). The novel depicts not life but a desperate attempt to live its simulation: Tamara tries to remake death for her clients, Ekaterinburg's centre mimics a European city. Krylov, who embodies the spirit of this metropolis-spectre, desperately searches for the woman he knows is not who she claims to be. This universe of falsity, linked to ephemeral identities and the delusion of nostalgia, contrasts sharply with the permanence of the Urals and their hidden gems (Hutcheon 39).

Opposition also structures temporality. Krylov's pursuit of the spy, his affair with Tania, and the calamities of the masked revolution constitute human time, while Anfilogov and Kolian's expedition occurs in geologic time, the temporality of the underground landscape Slavnikova emphasizes. Geologic time moves slowly, imperceptibly shaping the region through the eons. Humans are subsumed by its pace. Anfilogov and Kolian lose track of days—their measure of time means nothing to the Stone Maiden and the taiga she inhabits. This and Slavnikova's thick prose disorient readers, who make their way through the novel at a sometimes frustratingly slow place.

Loss of human time kills both *khitniki*, who are experienced enough to know the symptoms and speed of cyanide poisoning. Bewitched by the stunning beauty of the gem lode, they fail to notice how their organisms respond to the environment. As with the description of the petrified miners, Anfilogov and Kolian unwittingly embrace geologic temporality and cross the boundary separating the organic from the mineral.

Human time is jarring after the beautiful but slow taiga passages. The last portion of *2017* rushes headlong through Krylov's search for Tania and Zavalikhin, causing one critic to compare its pacing to that of a Hollywood thriller (Dardykina 8). Krylov succeeds in finding Tania and destroying the spy, yet the results reveal that his frenzied efforts were in vain. Krylov's actions occur against the backdrop of the masked revolution, which Pavel Basinskii sees as the dystopian plot (13). This plot, however, is more like a geologic stratum, which is far underground throughout much of the novel. It surfaces at the end of *2017* and also near its beginning, which depicts Krylov's mixed successes as a teenage bandit in the chaotic 1990s.

The final pages of the work show Krylov preparing to return to the site of Anfilogov and Kolian's death; the nation, for its part, careens towards civil war. Each new political twist has an evident historical referent. As the fateful date of November 7, 2017 approaches, the President resigns. A certain Karenin heads the Provisional Committee, with his name suggesting the short rule of Aleksandr Kerenskii and the cold-hearted statesman of Lev Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* (Slavnikova 2017, 517). This sudden shift in power and the geriatric caretaker regime likewise evoke the August 1991 coup—another herald of calamitous political change (Chantsev 291). References to the 1917 Provisional Government and failed putsch bracket the Soviet experience, implying that this new uprising is nothing but a rerun, another simulation of the people's will. One critic argues that 2017 is less a dystopia than an instance of popular psychosis—this is a perceptive observation that does not go far enough: sharp class divisions plus the novel's scathing assessment of Russian history suggest that psychosis is an enduring feature of the *narod* (Grushko 4). The nostalgia Hutcheon decries and the vain struggles of human time underscore the lack of meaningful progress: the senselessly bloody re-enactment of 1917 occurs just as Krylov leaves for the expedition that killed Anfilogov and Kolian. Human time is ephemeral and fails to move forward in any positive sense.

The permanent and temporary, contrary as they appear to be throughout much of 2017, are both components of the *gustopis'*. What brings them together are Slavnikova's comparisons, the building blocks of her prose. As one critic snidely opines, every object reminds the author of something else, with the results degrading what is being compared (Shishkova-Shipunova, 185). While Slavnikova associates objects with other, often seemingly dissimilar things (young Krylov's blood resembles a "chewed up raisin"), each of these relations has its logic, e.g., raisins recall the landscape and food of Central Asia, site of his first connection between transparency and pain.

Slavnikova's metaphors and similes do not degrade the objects being compared—they provide another layer of interpretation in a novel illustrating both the world as it is (the truth of permanence) and fallible perceptions of this truth (the falsity of the ephemeral). Describing Anfilogov's aquarium, the narrator seemingly digresses in portraying its use as an improvised safe.

The even-tempered fish had become used to the fact that, in the absence of witnesses, a huge object would creep up, puffing up the wa-

ter; having hooked its raw treasures, the professor's paw, decorated with wet fur, would leave the fish in their element, shrunken and roiled, as if it were boiled soup (Slavnikova 2017, 119)

This passage, in addition to enlivening the minute details of the aquarium-safe, foreshadows another description of disturbed water and gems. When Anfilogov and Kolian return to the expedition site abandoned a year ago, they find that the hole they had painstakingly dug has filled with liquid. This hole has absorbed the cyanide from the surrounding ground—the partners extract the stinking skeletons of several poisoned animals, whose decomposing bodies have made the bottom of the hole into a noxious soup (Slavnikova 2017, 254). The search for valuable stones joins these two passages—in Anfilogov's aquarium indifferent fish swim around his “raw treasures”; his hand muddies the water into a stew evoking the toxic liquid that claims Kolian's life and then his own. Everything is connected, with comparisons the vehicle for expressing these links.

It is the narrator—the narrative's simulation of the author—who provides these connections. An earlier Slavnikova story foreshadows this importance. In ‘The Secret of the Unread Note’ (Taina neprochitannoi zapiski, 2002), the narrator comments on the setting, a dating agency with fuzzy armchairs and a clock whose hands recall Cupid's arrows. The agency has now become a trendy coffee bar—in fact, “it's quite possible that the author simply borrowed these items from the coffee bar for the requirements of the present story” (Slavnikova ‘Secret of the Unread Note’, 246). The dating agency may have never existed—what is real is the imagination that created it. The will to envision expresses itself through the endless comparisons enriching Slavnikova's prose.

In 2017, similes and metaphors, as disturbing as they are well-written, use the reader's imagination to join the worlds of the permanent and ephemeral. While young Krylov and his older counterpart see how the organic gives way to the mineral, this monolithic progress is tempered by the inner vision of comparison. What results is a degree of mutability, one of the few signs of choice in a universe caught between geology's unyielding truth and the tantalizing falseness of human endeavour.

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