

## ФИЛОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ

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### О СУДЬБЕ СЛОВ И ВЕЩЕЙ: ЗАДАЧА ИНТЕЛЛИГЕНЦИИ В РОМАНЕ-ИДИЛЛИИ АЛЕКСАНДРА ЧУДАКОВА «ЛОЖИТСЯ МГЛА НА СТАРЫЕ СТУПЕНИ»

**Аннотация.** В статье исследуется проблема сохранения культурной памяти. Источником исследования является роман-идиллия Александра Чудакова «Ложится мгла на старые ступени». В книге представлена широкая панорама жизни русской интеллигенции 1940-1950-х годов 20 века. Роман исследован в свете концепции идиллического хронотопа М. М. Бахтина. На основе глубокого анализа хронотопа и персонажей романа автор рассматривает проблему передачи культурного опыта молодому поколению. Особое внимание уделяется понятию «слово» и его роли в передаче культурного кода.

**Ключевые слова:** роман-идиллия, хронотоп, русская интеллигенция, культурная память, ноосфера, «Слово».

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### ON THE SURVIVAL OF WORDS AND THINGS: THE TASK OF THE INTELLIGENTSIA IN ALEXANDER CHUDAKOV'S NOVEL-IDYLL "A GLOOM IS CAST UPON THE ANCIENT STEPS"

**Abstract.** The article investigates the problem of preserving the cultural memory. The source of the research is Alexander Chudakov's novel-idyll "A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps". The book presents a wide panorama of the life of the Russian intelligentsia during 1940s - 1950s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novel is investigated in terms of Bakhtin's concept of the idyllic chronotope. On the basis of the profound analysis of the novel's chronotope and characters the author looks into the problem of transmitting cultural experience to younger generations. Special attention is given to the concept «word» and its role in conveying the cultural code.

**Keywords:** novel-idyll, chronotope, Russian intelligentsia, cultural memory, noosphere, "Word".

Alexander Chudakov (1938–2005), is a renowned literary scholar, known primarily for his monumental studies of Chekhov's art. Chudakov's only work of fiction, the novel-idyll *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* (the original Russian title is *Ложится мгла на старые ступени*) was first published in the October 2000 book of the journal *Znamia*. In 2001, the novel was short-listed for the Russian Booker prize that, that year, went to Ludmila Uliitskaya for the novel *Kukotsky Case*.<sup>1</sup> However, in 2011, Chudakov was awarded the Russian "Booker of the Decade" prize for this novel (posthumously).<sup>2</sup> In 2013, a new edition of the novel, accompanied with selections from Chudakov's letters, memoirs and diaries, and prepared by Marietta Chudakova, the author's wife and a prominent scholar and activist, came out.

*A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* is set primarily in the town of Chebachink in northern Kazakhstan where the family clan of the Savvins-Stremoukhovs spends the 1940s-1950s in a self-imposed exile from the horrors of the Stalin-era totalitarian system, and where the novel's autobiographical protagonist, Anton Stremoukhov, lives during his childhood. Anton's gift is his phenomenal memory; the childhood years which he spends surrounded by exiled Russian pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, are the years of his learning. His main mentor is his grandfather, but he absorbs knowledge from his parents, his grandmother, his aunts, other exiles in town, and from the Soviet school that he attends. The narrative of the novel vacillates between this central chronotope of Anton's childhood in Chebachinsk and others, including the vanished world of old Russia (pre-revolutionary years of Anton's grandparents' life in Vilno), the time of Anton's father's youth in Moscow, Anton's own student years in the 1950s-1960s Moscow, and contemporary times, when Anton is an older man, a well-known scholar and a grandfather. The novel has a frame structure: in the beginning the older Anton visits his dying grandfather in Chebachinsk, this visit unleashes his reminiscences that constitute the bulk of the novel and, at the end, Anton's grandfather passes away.

Chudakov's novel was favorably received by the academic and critical circles as well as by the general reader. There are numerous book reviews but the most interesting scholarly articles are gathered in one issue of *Tynianovskie chtenia* (13 (2008)). Interestingly, Chudakov's novel is still primarily studied by Chekhov scholars, among them are Radislav Lapushin and Andrei Stepanov, whose articles I will quote today. (Stepanov, *Problemy kommunikatsiia u Chekova*, 2005 – also, his PhD thesis; Lapushin, *Dew on the Grass: The Poetics of Inbetweenness in*

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.russianbooker.org/archive/2001/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.russianbooker.org/news/45/>.

*Chekhov*, 2010). In the West, the scholarly interest to the novel is still primarily limited to short overviews in several articles devoted to contemporary Russian literature. This is partly explained by the fact that the English translation of the novel (undertaken by Timothy Sergay of University of Albany, SUNY) is still not published, although at least two chapters from it have appeared in online publications.<sup>1</sup>

Critical discussions of the novel are centered on the problem of its genre. The novel can be seen as an example of memoir prose or as a *bildungsroman*.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, frequent vacillations between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> person narration suggest a fictionalized memoir and bring to mind parallels with Nabokov's *The Gift*. Chudakov himself designated the genre as a "novel-idyll." Any discussion of the idyll as a genre of a novel invariably brings us to Mikhail Bakhtin's work, *The Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*, which contains a section on the idyllic chronotope.<sup>3</sup> Stepanov's article "Idyll versus Progress" in *Tynianovskie chtenia* is the most thorough investigation of both markers of the idyllic chronotope in *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* and of the genre's significance for the artistic and ideological structure of this novel.<sup>4</sup> For example, speaking about the novel's treatment of time (in an idyll, time is cyclical and excludes progress—the forward movement), Stepanov talks about "the pause, the stop" in the movement of time, the time after "the end of history."<sup>5</sup> He finds other markers of Bakhtinian idyllic chronotope, including the portrayal of Chebachinsk as an "earthly paradise" with a healing climate, beautiful landscapes, and rich soils.<sup>6</sup> Chudakov's idyll describes the life of the family clan, the members of which "are united by common work, common culture, and by love."<sup>7</sup> The rhythm of life in the clan is dictated by the natural rhythm of the

peasant calendar.<sup>8</sup> Other topics that define idyllic novel, according to Bakhtin, the so-called "life's basic realities": the body, food, everyday life, sexual life, death, children, grandparents, death and birth—are all found at the center of Chudakov's novel.<sup>9</sup> The "idyllic" (circular or spiraling) nature of time might also explain the structural composition of the novel, the constant digressions and the non-sequential order of chapters.

I would like to look at *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* as a novel about the intelligentsia and for the intelligentsia. I am interested in how Chudakov's discourse on the intelligentsia fits in the tradition of Russian/Soviet literature and in Chudakov's own scholarly work. Occupying a prominent position in the row of 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels about the intelligentsia (such as Olesha's *Envy*, Nabokov's *The Gift*, Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Bitov's *Pushkin House*, Trifonov's *A House on the Embankment* and others), Chudakov's novel completes the conversation (started by these authors), reaffirms the mission of the intelligentsia and, according to one critic, "brings the Russian 20<sup>th</sup> century to a close."<sup>10</sup> I think that, in Chudakov's novel, the intelligentsia strategically accepts the rift between themselves and the people (who are stuck in their peasant idyll where nothing changes and the cultural life is "refrigerated"). Thus distancing itself from its 19<sup>th</sup>-century goals of educating the people and finding its roots in the peasant *mir*, the Russian intelligentsia must concentrate on its survival and the higher task of passing its culture on to future generations. I suggest that the main question asked by Chudakov's novel, both on the level of its plot and its structure, is: what is the most appropriate form in which the cultural tradition should be passed on? should it be passed on as history? as fiction? as a collection of artifacts? I would like to argue that while Chudakov aims to capture the totality of human existence (that includes historical, cultural and material aspects of culture), he concludes that the cultural tradition is ultimately passed on in the Word.

Traditionally, the idyllic (or the pastoral) mode refers to descriptions of a tranquil rural life led by simple people who live and toil on the background of beautiful landscapes. The topic of work is prominent in Chudakov's novel and in scholarly and critical discussions of it. Chudakov's handling of this theme fits the Bakhtinian model very well. The idyll described in the novel is a combination of the "idyll with a focus on agricultural labor work" (трудовая), the "idyll dealing with craft-work" (ремесленно-трудовая); and the "family idyll" – such a combination of idyll types being common to modern novels, according to Bakhtin.<sup>11</sup> Here, I would like to look at the theme of work in *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* through the prism of the Bakhtinian idyllic chronotope but only

<sup>1</sup> Chudakov, Aleksandr. "Claimants to the Inheritance." Chapter 2 of Chudakov's *A Gloom Is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* (*Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni*). Pen American Center website. 25 Feb. 2007. Full text is available at <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/1257/prmID/1408>. Chudakov, Aleksandr. "Arm Wrestling in Chebachinsk." Chapter 1 of Chudakov's *A Gloom Is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* (*Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni*). *Words Without Borders: The Online Magazine for International Literature*, August 2004. Full text at <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=ArmWrestling>. Chapters 2-20 and 37-38 are also translated. (Information from Dr. Sergay's curriculum vitae, available at [http://www.albany.edu/llc/faculty\\_TSergay\\_CV.pdf](http://www.albany.edu/llc/faculty_TSergay_CV.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> The non-linear portrayal of time and the autobiographical nature of the narration make the book seem more of a memoir than a "novel."

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Formy vremeni i khronotopa v romana," *Epos i roman*, St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000, 157-176. English translation can be found in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays*, edited by Michael Holmquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holmquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Andrei Stepanov, "Idillia vs. Progress: Zametki o proze A. Chudakova," *Tynianovskii sbornik: dvenadtsatye, trinadtsatye, chetyrnadchatye Tynianovskie chteniia*, vyp. 13: 400-411, Riga: Vodolei, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* Also Cf.: Mikhail Bakhtin, "Formy vremeni i khronotopa v romana," especially p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> Irina Bulkina, "Istoriia syna veka," *Znamia*, No. 8 (2012), online version, accessed 1-20-2014.

<sup>11</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 224.

insofar as it sheds some light on the discussion of the role of the intelligentsia and its relationship to the people.

In Chudakov's novel, the daily life of central characters (members of the Savvin-Stremoukhov family who belong to the intelligentsia) revolves around work: they master the "natural economy of the late feudal period." Anton recollects that "they grew and produced everything. It was possible because all necessary jobs were represented in the family: an agronomist, a carpenter and a tanner (grandfather), an organic chemist (mother), a certified zoo technician (aunt Larisa), a chef (grandmother), a cook (aunt Tamara), a locksmith, a lumberjack, and a haymaker (father). They knew how to be carpenters, to sew, to knit, to dig, to do laundry, to work with a sickle and with a pitchfork."<sup>1</sup>

In the novel, the Savvins-Stremoukhovs tend their garden, improve the soil, work with farm animals, make tools and, in fact, create everything that the family needs, including leather, soap, sugar, medical thermometers, quills, calendars, fuel, and hay. Their mastery of the natural economy lets them live most entirely by the fruits of their labor. So, on the first glance, the Savvins-Stremoukhovs, like simple peasants, become fully integrated into the idyllic chronotope.

How does their seeming assimilation into the idyllic life fit in the history of the intelligentsia's contacts with the people and the peasant world? What happens when a member of the intelligentsia enters the peasant realm, the peasant idyllic chronotope, since the relationship with the people is an integral part of the intelligentsia's self-consciousness and mission? In the context of world literature, simple manual labor in the idyllic chronotope has a healing and character-building effect on a man who enters the idyll from the outside (often from a city) – this is a commonplace of many European novels since Rousseau. Russian literature developed three main scenarios for the intelligentsia's encounter with the idyllic world of Russian peasants. The first includes the 19<sup>th</sup> century novels about "going to the people" campaigns (that could result in failures like in Turgenev's *Virgin Soil*, in successes like in Omulevsky's *Step after Step*, or in the theory of the "small deeds" like in Mordovtsev's *The Signs of the Time*). The second scenario is realized in the Soviet-era concept of the "link" between the city and the village (shown in numerous socialist realist novels and films). And the third one, which represents a reaction against the first two and most closely supports the Rousseauian model, is the "village prose" of the late Soviet period (Rasputin, Abramov, Mozhaev, Shukshin, Solzhenitsyn, and others).

On the surface, the grandfather in Chudakov's novel (who represents the Russian intelligentsia

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its "populist" roots), comes from the first tradition. He understands the family's life in Chabachinsk as a reestablishment of the connection to the "roots." Criticizing those members of exiled intelligentsia who do not know how to feed themselves, he says, "Where is that power of the land? Where are the roots? It's high time to find them and, in the process, to feed themselves." [9, p. 60] The experience of Anton's father, who comes to Chebachinsk of his own will and who is able to work as a teacher of history and politics (being the only local professor without a record of political convictions), seems to represent the Soviet master narrative about the success of new idyllic order in the countryside which involves a happy union of the Soviet intelligentsia's "party spirit" ("партийность") and the peasants' "folk spirit" ("стихийность"). Anton, then, upon his return to the Chebachinsk of his childhood, represents the intelligentsia of the "village prose" movement, seeking to reconnect with the simple and more authentic way of life in Russian provinces.

In reality, however, the novel does not conform to any of these three models. The Savvins-Stremoukhovs do not want to educate the peasants or to "simplify themselves" like the populists; they reject Soviet ideology even at the height of the Stalinist era; and they do not find Russian peasants to be in possession of any superior moral or spiritual values like the writers of the «village prose» movement. While affirming the value of hard work on the land, Chudakov draws a boundary between members of the intelligentsia like the Savvins-Stremoukhovs who both can – and love to – work and the common people who want to work and do not know how to do it. Thus, a Soviet stereotype, according to which simple people (workers and peasants) work while the intelligentsia lives in its own world, can't work or understand "the real life," is proven wrong. Anton's father, who is shown as not being sincere in his support of the Soviet ideology, is the best haymaker in Chebachinsk (his friend, also a university professor, Ulybchenko, is the second best) [9, p. 98]. The collective farmers, on the other hand, are not hard workers. One of them attacks the father with a pitchfork while attempting to steal his hay [9, p. 102], and the local Kazakh men who "did not know how to mow" speculate with the hay, gathered by exiled Ukrainian kulaks [9, p. 103]. The Savvins-Stremoukhovs are not only more skilled workers than the local kolkhoz farmers, they know how better to use their knowledge and spiritual resources in order to survive with dignity. A friend of the family, an evacuated sick musician, writes about them in a letter: "Yes, life is such now that only those who are the strongest physically and spiritually survive." [9, p. 140] And the Savvins-Stremoukhovs survive years of war, famine and constant shortages by virtue of their daily hard work. Anton writes, "In spite of working incessantly, from morning till night, to feed ourselves, we did not always have enough food. Later, I asked how the others lived, those who did not work as much as we did, and no one could

<sup>1</sup> Chudakov, Aleksandr. *Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni: roman-idillia*. 6th edition. Moscow: Vremia, 2013, 117. Subsequent quotations from Chudakov's novel are taken from this edition and marked in the text as (Ch., page number).

answer that question.” [9, p. 126] Chudakov further includes episodes highlighting the intelligentsia’s superiority over common people: both physical and moral. Sometimes, people’s fascination with the intelligentsia’s abilities reaches fairy-tale proportions. Thus, according to local gossip among the evacuated academicians, one could levitate and another could swear better than any worker (Later, Anton realizes that this gossip correlated with these scholars’ academic interests.) [9, p. 43].

The opening chapter of the novel, “Arm Wrestling in Chebachinsk,” provides a great metaphor of the complicated relationship between the intelligentsia and the people. There, we witness an arm-wrestling competition between Anton’s grandfather and the proverbial representative of the “people,” a smith, Kuzma Perepletkin. Perepletin, who had just won over the “fighter from the slaughterhouse,” Bondarenko, is unable to pin the grandfather’s arm to the table. Although the competition ends in a draw, we are told that the grandfather who, as the opening sentence of the novel says, “was very strong” [9, p. 7], could have “laid” the smith’s arm but chose not to in order not to “put a man in a awkward situation,” [9, p. 9] a typical intelligentsia’s punctilliousness (щепетильность). Thus, a cohabitation of “the people” and the intelligentsia in provincial Chebachinsk is not an idyllic unity but rather a confrontation, euphemistically described in this chapter as a sport. The intelligentsia and the “people” in Chebachinsk live not in idyllic unity but in a situation of truce.

The question, then, is the following: why does Chudakov’s novel celebrate the idyllic world of agricultural labor but insists that it is the intelligentsia and not the people who are best equipped to inhabit it?

The answer can, perhaps, be found with the help of the idyllic chronotope. An idyll is a proverbial space of “common people,” of peasants and, therefore, it is also a perfect metaphor for Russia. The space of the Russian idyll is both boundless because it encompasses the entire known world (Russia is one huge province) and localized because it is usually confined to one village (in the situation of practically no travel when even nearby villages and towns are largely inaccessible: each village then represents the entire known world). The time in the Russian idyll is cyclical; it does not move forward; the only movement is the peasant calendar of planting, growing and harvesting. The boundless space of Russian provinces exists as a timeless and ahistorical space. In other words, for centuries, Russian idyll was untouched by the movement of time, history and progress. Even the grand transformative Soviet project left the foundations of Russian peasant life unchanged. Those foundations are, of course, not the peasant *mir* or the commune, but the “natural economy of the late feudal period,” described in Chudakov’s novel, and visible even today – in the culture of Russian dachas. As Chudakov writes about them, “All that love for the land, for the fields, for the tillage – all that ancient

poetry of agricultural work – had moved to individual garden plots” [9, p. 119].

While the peasant idyll celebrates tradition and denies progress, the Savvins-Stremoukhovs (and the intelligentsia that they represent) embrace both tradition and progress. Unlike for the common people of Chebachinsk, knowledge, history, science and progress play an important role in the Savvins-Stremoukhovs family. They do not just plant and harvest, they do it according to the most scientifically advanced methods. Knowledge in the book comes from all available sources. For example, the grandfather, a certified pre-revolutionary agronomist, possesses an album of clippings saved from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century journals but he is also an ardent follower of contemporary debates (e.g., he hates Lysenkovism and collectivization). The Savvins-Stremoukhovs’ rejection of Soviet science does not come from their rejection of progress and a desire to live in the idyllic world of the Russian peasant but from a conviction that Soviet science is anti-science. For the Savvins-Stremoukhovs, forward movement (progress) is essential and desired, and they choose to live in the idyllic chronotope of Chebachinsk only out of necessity.

While both the work of the kolkhoz farmers and the Savvins-Stremoukhovs is forced, the former bring to it something that the common people can’t: the spiritual wisdom of the grandfather’s religion. In the context of Soviet-era literature about forced labor (the GULAG literature), Chudakov is closest to Solzhenitsyn. Unlike Shalamov, who claims that forced labor destroys humanity in people, for Solzhenitsyn, even forced labor could bring positive experience. Ivan Denisovich’s love for work is something that unites him with the Savvins-Stremoukhovs, and especially, with the grandfather’s philosophy of life. Not accidentally, the grandfather’s speech shows affinity toward Solzhenitsyn’s vocabulary and style of speech. The grandfather teaches the joy of work and the wisdom of “living with a smile.” But unlike Solzhenitsyn’s “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich,” in Chudakov’s novel, it is the intelligentsia, not the people, who have the gift for “living and working with a smile.” Maybe it is not surprising, considering that the values of Christian living have always been kept and taught in Russia by the clergy which, incidentally, was also one of the main sources of the Russian intelligentsia.<sup>1</sup> And his own love for simple work Anton also learns from his grandfather. He later observes that “he had never experienced such pleasure from reading or writing a scholarly article as he did from digging a serious pit.” [9, p. 143] For him, compulsory drivel such as lectures on the history of the Communist party “were the lie, and this [the digging] was the truth.” [9, p. 143]

Like the theme of work, the theme of “teaching and learning” is also central to the novel. The idyll, according to Bakhtin, always brings together

<sup>1</sup> The grandmother says that the grandfather, a former seminarian, comes from the “church-bell gentry” (колокольные дворяне).

“childhood and old age,”<sup>1</sup> and indeed, the episodes of Anton’s learning from his grandfather and the detailed descriptions of the grandfather’s teaching methods are among the most “idyllic” (in a broad sense of the word: “very peaceful, pleasant and enjoyable”) pages of the entire book. In fact, most members of the Savvin-Stremoukhov family are teachers. The grandfather is a former teacher of primary school; as a former clergyman, he is also a teacher of moral and spiritual values in the family. Both of Anton’s parents are college teachers. His grandmother, a former graduate of the Institute for Noble Maidens, is a very strict and patient teacher of refined manners and etiquette. Teaching is also a quintessential sphere of action for Russian intelligentsia. Moreover, the condition of exile (or self-imposed exile) to remote areas of Kazakhstan, in which the Soviet intelligentsia finds itself in the novel, resembles the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “going to the people” campaign. Chebakhinsk, during Anton’s childhood, is filled with the intelligentsia. Anton says that, later, he “has never seen such a high concentration of the intelligentsia per unit of land.” [9, p. 43] In order to evaluate how Chudakov’s depiction of the educational mission of the Russian intelligentsia fits in this broader tradition, we should remember that the populists’ goals during the “going to the people” campaign were two-fold and included a sense of mission to educate the people and also a desire to share the life of the people and learn from them. As we will see, neither occurs in Chebakhinsk.

The intelligentsia seems to have no effect on the education of the common people of Chebakhinsk. *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* presents a striking example of failing outcomes of teaching. Among them is a hilarious story of Anton’s school friend Vaska “Eighty-Five,” “a genius of orthography” who manages to make 140 spelling errors in the text composed of 100 words. [9, p. 80] Vaska is also an enthusiast of artistic declamation of poetry: he pronounces Nekrasov’s lines “I’m soon to die. My mis’rable estate/ oh country mine, to thee I do bequeath” with an original emphasis: “I’m soon to die – My mis’rable estate!”<sup>2</sup> Other examples of the futility of the Savvins-Stremoukhovs’ teaching efforts are the numerous “grandmother’s hangers-on” from lower classes. After feeding them, she patiently and in great detail, tells them about the survival techniques of her family (including the recipes of her dishes and tips for effective gardening). They listen “politely” but “everyone accept for the grandmother understood that, for them, [her advice] was something as foreign and inaccessible as the sky.” [9, p. 120] While, as the grandfather observes with irony, exiling the intelligentsia to provinces is “a great” and “a typically Russian way” to increase the

level of culture [9, p. 43], the cultural renaissance of Chebakhinsk does not occur.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, even if the intelligentsia brought any culture to Chebakhinsk, it is effectively extinguished by the time Anton comes to visit his dying grandfather. So, the intelligentsia in the novel does not bring knowledge and education to the people. It seemingly has no access to the people, does not seem to regret it or want to establish it.

Similarly, the other side of the old mission of Russian intelligentsia – that of learning from the people – also does not occur in the novel. The ignorance of the common people is often highlighted in the novel. Hearing about yet another example of such ignorance, a practice of treating a fresh wound with dusty cobwebs collected from a shed’s corner, Anton’s grandmother observes, “calmly emphasizing the social distance”: “What do you expect. They are commoners.” [9, p. 26] When Chudakov describes instances of specialized peasant knowledge being passed on, it rarely involves common people. So, it is the exiled Professor Rosenkranz who becomes the best builder of traditional Russian stoves in Chebakhinsk, observing to its inhabitants who have been building these stoves the same way for centuries, “not everything traditional is good.” [9, p. 416] In fact, the intelligentsia and nobility are shown to have traditionally been masters of all (peasant) trades. Anton’s grandmother likes to repeat phrases like “Like any prince, he knew turnery.” [9, p. 29] In those cases when knowledge is passed on from the common people [like the secrets of digging or heaping up coal], it is passed to the intelligentsia, to Anton, who keeps and cherishes that knowledge, and not to the people. The intelligentsia’s receptiveness to knowledge is what makes them different from the common people. As Andrei Stepanov observes, “precisely, the ability to remember the tradition and being thankful to one’s teachers (and not politeness and education) is what makes the intelligentsia differ from the people.”<sup>4</sup> The people in the novel seem to stay behind, in their peasant idyll of eternal return and no forward movement. Even the teaching of values, moral and spiritual, is confined to the Savvin-Stremoukhov household. Contrary to the usual stereotype held by Russian intelligentsia, the common people are not more moral than they are. In the novel, they steal and commit crimes. Speaking about Kolka and Katka (Anton’s cousins who grew up in extreme poverty, living in a cowshed) who became greedy, who always lied and often stole from their family, the grandfather observes: “The paupers are never moral” [9, p. 17].

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, *Siberia and the Russian north* also did not experience a cultural renaissance after thousands, millions of intelligentsia were exiled there during the purges. We can hardly speak of a renaissance in Siberia after the Decembrists were exiled there. If they had any effect on the cultural level of the provinces, it occurred on a small scale and did not last.

<sup>4</sup> “Именно памятью к традиции и благодарностью к учителям (а не вежливостью и образованием) отличается интеллигенция от народа.” Andrei Stepanov, “*Idillia vs. Progress*,” 406.

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 225.

<sup>2</sup> The English translation of Vaska’s version of Nekrasov is taken from: Timothy Sergay, “Zametki o trudnostiakh perevoda na angliiskii iazyk romana A. Chudakova,” *Tynianovskii sbornik: dvenadtsatye, trinadtsatye, chetyrnadchatye Tynianovskie chteniia*, vyp. 13: 412-419, Riga: Vodolei, 2008, 416.

As Chudakov's novel demonstrates, knowledge is successfully passed only within the class of the intelligentsia. The most successful example of learning is Anton Stremoukhov. Endowed with a phenomenal memory, love for the "Word" and an appreciation of culture in all, including the material, aspects of its existence, Anton is an exceptional student. Overall, the successful outcome of teaching and learning in the novel – the case of Anton – is shown to be an exception, almost a miracle, and not the rule. On the other hand, teaching and learning is the central motif of the novel, built around Anton's absorbing the wisdom and knowledge of his grandfather. If the intelligentsia in the novel is not interested in educating the people or learning from the people, why is the theme of learning so important for Chudakov? I think that the mission of the intelligentsia in the novel is not to connect with the roots or find unity with the people through shared work; it is not to educate the people or to learn from the people. Rather, the intelligentsia in the novel is shown to be a self-sufficient community, almost a cult, the purpose of which is to ensure the survival of their cultural tradition and the passing of it on through the only vessel in Chebachinsk suitable for this purpose – the boy Anton.

In Chudakov's novel, the imperative to preserve the continuity of culture trumps usual tasks of the Russian intelligentsia because the normal process of transmittance of cultural memory is interrupted and the entire world order is destroyed. After the Revolution, the mechanisms of cultural transmittance are on the brink of disintegration ("a gloom is cast upon the old steps"), making the mood of Chudakov's "idyll" elegiac, even tragic. Talking about the "idyllic life" of the intelligentsia in Chebachinsk, Stepanov describes it as "the pause, the stop" in the movement of time, the existence after "the end of history."<sup>1</sup> In the end times like these, the intelligentsia concentrates on its mission of ensuring the continuity of Russian civilization by preserving it, in the fullest possible form, and passing it on to future generations. In Chudakov's novel, Anton's mission consists in passing on the world of the Russian intelligentsia in the form that it was kept alive in the house of his grandfather. The originality of Chudakov's novel and its contribution to the debate of the role of the intelligentsia consists in his original view of how to define what constitutes the fullest form of Russian culture that needs to be preserved and what the best mechanisms of passing it on to future generations are. For Chudakov, this form implies the unity of its historical, cultural and material aspects.

The importance of the historical aspect of Russian cultural tradition is emphasized by the fact that Anton becomes a professional historian, specializing in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century: the time associated with his grandfather, as well as the time when Russian intelligentsia came into being and formulated its main theoretical and practical concerns. The preservation

of historical knowledge becomes Anton's passion and professional duty. However, his attitude to traditional history, formed during his childhood in Chebachinsk under the influence of conversations with his grandfather, is skeptical. Anton often thinks about what he calls "the futility of history as discipline" [9, p. 52]. According to his grandfather (with whom Anton agrees), "we know the Pugachev uprising from 'The Captain's Daughter'" and the war of 1812 from *War and Peace*. The knowledge of all factual inaccuracies of historical fiction will not change the image of historical events as they are portrayed by great writers because, according to the grandfather, "the existence of a man in history" is found at a crossing point of traditional "history of ruling dynasties, political formations, revolutions, philosophical schools and the history of material culture" [9, p. 52]. "Such a view of history," as Anton's grandfather thinks, "is the view of a writer alone" [9, p. 52]. In other words, the truth of history, according to Anton, is [as we like to put it nowadays, interdisciplinary, it is] both humanized and fictionalized. The entire novel is, essentially, self-referential and based on this principle: the genre of the book is the cross between fiction and non-fiction. In its non-fictional aspect, the book is a memoir and a collection of oral histories. Anton is very particular about recording stories and events in all detail and is saddened when information is lost or forgotten. "I forgot the last name," he regrets on one occasion, "and now it is lost forever" [9, p. 148]. In its second aspect, the book is a novel (its genre: novel-idyll is clearly designated) which uses literary tropes, the system of motifs, and a frame structure. This fictionalized non-fiction is the shape of the historical aspect of knowledge that Anton needs to pass on to future generations.

A conversation about the cultural aspect of civilization that needs to be preserved should start with an assertion that the contemporary condition of humankind is life in culture. Not accidentally, the concept of *noosphere* is so important for the novel. In one of the earlier chapters of the book, Anton's father shows him Vladimir Vernadsky. The creator of the concept of the *noosphere* (the sphere of human mind and of culture, created by it), is standing in line at a food store among other evacuated members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Later, Anton composes poems about this encounter and remembers the meeting for the rest of his life [9, p. 43]. *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Old Steps* is a good illustration of what *noosphere* is all about.

Atestimony to the effectiveness of his grandfather's teaching methods, Anton becomes the perfect vessel for the culture of the old Russian intelligentsia. Two qualities make him extraordinarily suited for his role: his phenomenal memory and his "selflessly-poetic" attitude to the Word.<sup>2</sup> Anton remembers everything

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, 403.

<sup>2</sup> «Бескорыстно-поэтическое отношение к слову». Radislav Lapushin, "Zhivaia svezhest': K poetike romana-idyllii A.P. Chudakova 'Lozhitsia mгла na starye stupeni.'" Tynianovskii sbornik: dvenadtsatye, trinadtsatye, chetyrnadchatye

that he reads or hears; Radislav Lapushin says that Anton is totally immersed in the Word.<sup>1</sup> Each night, he talks himself to sleep, repeating words, names, titles – everything that he finds particularly expressive and beautifully sounding. His “aesthetic” attitude toward the Word ensures that the knowledge is passed on without becoming a subject for ideological modifications.<sup>2</sup> This “enchantment with the Word” is not only a characteristic of Anton as a character; it is also a property of style, it is the very fabric of narration in the book.<sup>3</sup> Intertextuality, the saturation with other voices, is self-conscious in the novel which is framed by two citations: the line from Blok in the title (“A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps”) and the line from Nekrasov’s poem (“Muteness before death befits a Christian man”) which closes the novel (this last sentence contains the dying words of the grandfather).<sup>4</sup> Lapushin calls Chudakov’s novel a “multi-voiced narration”: it is saturated by marked and unmarked quotations from Russian literature: from Tjutchev, Chekhov, A. K. Tolstoi, Gogol, Chekhov, etc.<sup>5</sup> Unmarked citations, according to Lapushin, highlight an important “ideological motif”: “the silenced voices continue to sound, and their live and vocal presence can still be felt.”<sup>6</sup> Saturated with words and texts, Anton’s memory and Chudakov’s novel are treasuries of Russian culture. This is the embodiment of the concept of the *noosphere*.

The third major component of Anton’s grandfather’s world that needs to be preserved, the material aspect of culture, was a subject of special interest for Chudakov as a scholar. His studies of the materiality of culture are found in his books on Chekhov, and in his ideas for the total commentary to *Eugene Onegin*. As Chudakov writes in his diary on February 27, 1985, “All my ideas about the world of things, ecology, the contemporary condition of men, and the *thing-ness* [вещеустройству] of the world will never fit into the tradition genres of scholarly articles and even into another monograph (I thought about that!). This is something I have to write creative fiction about” [9, p. 516].

On one level, Chudakov’s particular attention to the material aspect of the world is consistent with conventions of the idyllic genre. In a tradition idyll, Stepanov notes that “the everyday existence (=byt) and everyday objects always play a significant role.”<sup>7</sup>

Bakhtin observes that, in an idyll, “everything that has the appearance of common everyday life [...] look[s] like the most important thing in life.”<sup>8</sup> But the traditional idyll presents “these basic life-realities... not in their naked realistic aspect... but in a softened and to a certain extent sublimated form.”<sup>9</sup> Material objects there appear in a “conventionalized and poetic” aspect. In Chudakov’s novel-idyll, however, each material object is individualized and historicized: the history of the “origins and manufacturing of each object are always narrated.”<sup>10</sup> The function of the material world in the novel is different from its function in an idyll.

The materiality of the grandfather’s world in the novel is inseparable from its immersion in history, spirituality and culture. Like *Eugene Onegin*, the novel can be called “an encyclopedia of Russian life”: it contains numerous realia from the world of the Russian intelligentsia of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and all particularities of the *byt* of the 1940s-1950s Chebakhinsk, including the know-how of maintaining an effective natural-economy based household, with detailed recipes and concrete and useful tips. The Savvins-Stremoukhovs cherish material objects, especially those that they had preserved from their life before the Revolution (such as the grandfathers’ black Boston tweed jacket, his cambric shirts, the grandmother’s elaborate dinner service, or an old Swiss watch that that lost one minute in fifty years).<sup>11</sup> The material aspect of culture is most precious because it is the first one to disappear. Anton says that “the lost dishes were irreplaceable” [9, p. 129]. Throughout the novel, we witness a gradual disappearance of the material trace left by the old intelligentsia. By the time Anton is summoned by his dying grandfather to “sort out the questions of inheritance,” there is nothing left from the former life, except for the old house itself. “Inheritance” (наследство) becomes “legacy” (наследие). And, again, Anton is shown to be an ideal vessel for his grandfather’s legacy. We learn that “Anton loved the order in the material world in each separate moment of life.” [9, p. 127] And although material objects destruct even in his hands (he drops and breaks his grandfather’s watch at a bathhouse, and the bent axes cannot be repaired by today’s repairmen), he preserves them in his memory. This world of the novel does not resemble an antique store; the realia of the lost world exist there not in their material form. The grandfather’s world is preserved in words. According to Lapushin, in the novel, “it appears impossible to separate the world of

*Tynianovskie chteniia*, vyp. 13: 381-399, Riga: Vodolei, 2008, 382.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, 381.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid*, 382.

<sup>3</sup> “The propelling force of the narration.” («Завороженность словом... движущая сила повествования»). *Ibid*, 383.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 392.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> «... идеологический мотив: умолкшие голоса продолжают звучать, их живое и говорящее присутствие по-прежнему ощущимо». *Ibid*, 391. Cf also.: “The main character is not so much a person as he is a magnetic field that attracts dispersed and heterogeneous elements. He is not a character type but a poetic impulse; an impulse to save as many voices from the oblivion as possible, “to call everyone by his name,” to use Akhmatova’s expression from “The Requiem.” *Ibid*, 398.

<sup>7</sup> Stepanov, “*Idillia vs. Progress*,” 404.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 226.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Stepanov, “*Idillia vs. Progress*,” 404.

<sup>11</sup> Oleg Komrakov, for example, commenting on the novel’s emphasis on preserving memories and material remnants of the disappeared civilization, says that the inhabitants of Chebakhinsk “live by memories alone,” “continue to debate the issues of the time gone by” and “cherish every footprint of the ‘former’ times—photographs, figurines, a tea set—and demonstrate them as the greatest treasure.” Oleg Komrakov, “*Zhizn’ posle katastrofy*,” *Homo Legens: Literaturnyi zhurnal*, No. 2-3 (2012), online version, [http://homo-legens.ru/2012\\_2\\_3](http://homo-legens.ru/2012_2_3), accessed 3-28-2014.

literature from the material world.”<sup>1</sup> “The world had no nonverbal existence,” observes Anton, “things had no materiality of an object – they were drawn in letters, and their literariness was not silent—they sounded with the fullness of a Word”. [9, p. 397].<sup>2</sup> The survival of the material world in the poetic (fictional) word is an example of poetic justice; it is the affirmation of the value of culture, and the assurance of the survival of the cultural tradition.

The special emphasis that Chudakov places on the preservation of the material aspect of the world in this novel should be seen in the context of his scholarly approach to the study of literature and culture. Attempting to recreate Chekhov’s world in his now classical studies on the author, Chudakov employs the same method as he does in his novel: he records a comprehensive assemblage of realia. Parallels between his studies of Chekhov and the novel are often explicit: from the Chekhovian name of the protagonist (Anton) to frequent parallels and coincidences in their biographies (e.g. at school, Anton Stremoukhov sits behind the same type of desk that was used in Anton Chekhov’s school). Some similarities between Chudakov’s method in his books on Chekhov and in his novel are striking. The world of Chekhov is so close to the world of the author’s alter-ego Anton Stremoukhov that some paragraphs migrate almost verbatim from one book to another. Such is the paragraph on the role of Russian provinces in the preservation of vanishing aspects of Russian *byt*—including family nights of reading aloud, quilts, hand-written “albums,” ten-page letters, family dinners under linden trees, etc. – and the role of “provincial literature” in the “preservation” of literary genres (such as a physiological sketch, romantic tale or melodrama) that disappear in big literature.<sup>3</sup> In the novel, Chudakov emphasizes the geographical aspect: the provinces kept the remnants of old Russian *byt*, absorbing which Anton was able to make the lost, pre-revolutionary Russian culture his flesh and blood. In his Chekhov book, Chudakov highlights the literary aspect: the exposure to peripheral literary genres during his childhood and youth determined the development of Chekhov’s literary talent in the future. Thus, the material world (*byt*) and the literary world (*the Word*) become isomorphic and interchangeable.

As the last novel about the Russian intelligentsia

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps* talks about the mission of the intelligentsia in the end times. Distancing from its 19<sup>th</sup>-century goals of finding unity with the people and educating them, the Russian intelligentsia must concentrate on its survival and higher task of passing its culture on to future generations. For Chudakov, this project is even more demanding: it is imperative that the culture is preserved in its fullest form, in the living unity of its historical, spiritual and material aspects. Because of his phenomenal memory, his love for the world of material objects and his poetic attitude to the Word,” the novel’s protagonist, Anton Stremoukhov, seems to be the perfect vessel for the culture of his grandfather and he ensures the survival of the cultural tradition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But although it is called an “idyll,” the novel’s mood is elegiac. In spite of Anton’s efforts, the world of his grandfather is still “destined not only for disappearance... but also for oblivion.”<sup>4</sup> The material realia of culture is slowly disappearing and its verbal trace in Anton’s memory (and in Chudakov’s novel) is turning into a collection of signifiers devoid of their signified. After all, the “gloom” is finally “cast upon the ancient steps.” In order for the world of the Russian intelligentsia not to turn into the peasant Russian idyll with its perpetual cycle of life and death without progress, civilization and high culture, Chudakov calls for a new generation of literary scholars, like himself, who can keep the tradition alive in its unity of historical, spiritual and material aspects, and can teach them the methods of its research and preservation.

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<sup>4</sup> Lapushin, “Zhivaia svezhest’,” 398.

<sup>1</sup> Lapushin, “Zhivaia svezhest’,” 391.

<sup>2</sup> «Мир не имел невербального существования, вещи не обладали предметной целостностью – они рисовались буквами, но это была не молчаливая буквенность – они звучали целостностью слова».

<sup>3</sup> Cf.: «Русская провинция! Как периферия литературная – иллюстрированный журнал, газета, малая пресса всегда была холодильником жанров, не сохранившихся в большой литературе, – романтической повести, физиологического очерка, мелодрамы, так периферия географическая, русская провинция сохранила семейное чтение вслух, поскутные одеяла, рукописные альбомы со стихами от Марлинского до Мережковского, письма на десяти страницах, обеды под липами, старинные романсы, фикусы в кадках, вышивки гладью, фотографии в рамках и застольное пение хором» [4, p. 53].



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