

# THE SHAPE OF APOCALYPSE IN MODERN RUSSIAN FICTION



DAVID M. BETHEA

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FOR KIM AND EMILY

We hoped; we waited for the day  
The state would wither clean away,  
Expecting the Millennium  
That theory promised us would come,  
It didn't.

—W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter*

The rider on the white horse! Who is he then? . . . He is the royal one, he is my very self and his horse is the whole *mana* of a man. He is my very me, my sacred ego, called into a new cycle of action by the Lamb and riding forth to conquest, the conquest of the old self for the birth of the new self . . .

—D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*

What tense would you choose to live in?

"I want to live in the imperative of the future passive participle—in the 'what ought to be.' "

I like to breathe that way. . . . It suggests a kind of mounted, bandit-like, equestrian honor. That's why I like the glorious Latin "Gerundive"—it's a verb on horseback. . . .

Such was the dialogue I carried on with myself as I rode horseback through the variegated terrain of wild and cultivated uplands, nomadic territories, and vast pasturelands of Alagez.

—Osip Mandelshtam, *Journey to Armenia*

## A Note on the Transliteration

The system of transliteration I have used is that recommended by Professor J. Thomas Shaw in his *The Transliteration of Modern Russian for English-Language Publications* (Madison, 1967). In the text itself as well as in the substantive sections of notes, I have used Shaw's "System I," which is a modified version of the Library of Congress system for the purpose of "normalizing" personal and place names for the generalist Western reader. References to secondary literature in the text and notes are to *abbreviated* titles (the complete bibliographical information being found in the "Works Cited"). In the "Works Cited" section and in transliteration of words as words I have used "System II," which is the unmodified Library of Congress system, with the diacritical marks omitted. It is hoped that any confusion that might arise from the combination of these two systems (e.g., "Andrey Bely" in the text but "Andrei Belyi" in the "Works Cited") will be compensated for by the increased readability afforded the non-specialist and the greater precision afforded the specialist.



## Preface

"There are," as the philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev once wrote, "two dominant myths which can become dynamic in the life of a people—the myth about origins and the myth about the end. For Russians it has been the second myth, the eschatological one, that has dominated." This statement, which fairly revels in its lack of qualifiers and scant context in the original (*The Russian Idea*), would undoubtedly strike the historian as excessive, yet at the same time it expresses an idea, *the Russian idea*, which many writers have taken to be true and have assumed as a point of departure for their fictions. The objective and received truths of this statement are not at all the same, just as the objective and received truths of America's "chosen" status, its "manifest destiny," are different. This study, which is essentially about the "End" of history as presented in selected works of modern Russian fiction, has, as is usually the case in such matters, a history of its own. The original conception developed in response to what I saw to be a distinct gap in the existing scholarship and criticism: while the Western, or more precisely Anglo-American tradition has been blessed with a number of studies about apocalypse as both historical and literary phenomenon, there has as yet been no sustained attempt to bring what is known about the Russian view of the *eskhaton* to bear on the form of Russian prose fiction. The works of those such as M. H. Abrams (*Natural Supernaturalism*), Norman Cohn (*The Pursuit of the Millennium*), and Frank Kermode (*The Sense of An Ending*) have become classics in their fields for anyone interested either in the roots of Western apocalyptic or in the impact that social and cultural models of the End have had on literary form. Yet this tradition and these models have a decidedly *Western* bias, and Russian historiographers and philosophers of history have never been comfortable with their country's ability, or inability, to fit western paradigms. For our purposes, therefore, these studies are at best anachronistic (*if* Russian cultural models are indeed, belatedly, becoming "westernized") and at worst irrelevant (*if* Rus-

sia's Byzantine and Asiatic legacies, together with the Western one, have made these models unique and indigenous). When no less an authority than Abrams can claim that "the nation possessed of the most thoroughly and enduringly millennial ideology . . . is America" ("Apocalypse: Theme and Variations" 357), one has to wonder, as did Lévi-Strauss in his exposure of Sartre's insider's cultural bias, how "savage" at times can be the sophistication of the Western mind.

The tasks I set myself in these pages are several: (1) to provide close analytical readings of five major novels, which, though written in different periods, are each related to the others through their prominent allusions to the Book of Revelation and through their common concern with the narration of history (and historical closure); (2) to take some of the generalizations about the "messianic" and "eschatological" impulse in the Russian historical character and show how, in each context, they provide powerful models for structuring these works of fiction; (3) to indicate where this theme of apocalypse actually enters into the realm of narrative structure, where it takes on dynamic shape and expands into a moving picture of history in crisis; and (4) to outline a possible typology for these "apocalyptic fictions" that would, with its essentially Christian orientation and implication of a God-Author beyond the *Finis* of history, stand as a kind of counter-model to the Socialist Realist classic, with its essentially Marxist orientation and implication that immanent laws within history guide our steps toward a secular paradise. These tasks, which now seem crucial to the integrity of the project, were not obvious at the outset. Like Ivan Petrovich Belkin, Pushkin's endearing but feckless historiographer in "The History of the Village Goryukhino," I had to order the material in a way that seemed consistent and honest in view of the "facts," which brings me to the question of the shape of my narrative, itself about the fictionalized shape of history.

A good deal of intellectual energy has been expended and ink spilled (or computer diskettes filled) in recent theoretical discussions about the "open" boundary between history and fiction, between facts as such and their inevitable narration. In the Russian context this issue goes back at least as far as Karamzin and Pushkin: Karamzin began as a belletrist and ended his career as Russia's "first historian and last chronicler"; Pushkin, fascinated by the difference between fact and artifact, explored these very boundaries in such later works as *The Tales of Belkin*, the already mentioned "The History of the Village Goryukhino," and *The Captain's Daughter*. As intriguing as all this may be, I must confess that as "historiographer" I have for some time had the distinct impression that it was not I who was "pre-figuring" my field of study, enclosing facts within the "meta-" viewpoint of a (hi)story, but the facts themselves that were constantly shaping and changing the rough sketch first dictated by intuition. Thus, if what follows



has a bias, as indeed it must, this bias is not naive; it has been checked and re-checked against the information supplied by specific authors, texts, and contexts. The reader has every right to call my arrangement of the facts a "fiction," just one of many possible narratives, but it is my underlying argument, one shared not only by these authors but also by the very structure of their works, that not all such narratives are created equal.

In order to free my narrative from the heavy hand of an a priori theoretical framework, which seemed to me essentially dishonest (it was the works, not the binding idea "from outside," that came first), I began each chapter as a "chronicler" rather than as a "historiographer." My aim was to read and analyze each work *on its own terms*. Hence the first mental draft envisioned five very different studies linked loosely by a common *theme* ("revolution and revelation"). Only later, in the course of analysis, did the theoretical considerations, the narrative interstices out of which a chronicle becomes a history, emerge. This is not to say that my priorities are the only appropriate ones, or that an opposite ordering of the material (theory over close reading or, in structuralist linguistic terms, *langue* over *parole*) would not be possible and even rewarding, but simply that these priorities seemed to me the best way of dealing with the concept of apocalypse as it surfaced in specific texts and contexts, with their own agendas and dialogues perhaps quite different from ours. To borrow Hayden White's terminology in *Metahistory* for the possible paradigms (formist, organicist, mechanistic, contextualist) available to one "explaining" (narrating) history, my approach is fundamentally contextualist.

Nevertheless, it would be equally disingenuous of me to claim that, as work progressed, the idea of apocalypse, and thus the theoretical issues involved when inscribing the biblical End in narrative form, did not loom larger, attracting more of my attention and requiring additional effort to raise my perspective from the synchronic flatland of the individual text to the heady atmosphere of diachrony, the mountain aerie or "overview" from which some of the most important works in Russian literature could be seen as reworkings, in *their* time and place, of the same biblical plot. Although my study does not pretend to be a literary history of "apocalyptic fiction" on Russian soil (the very idea of a series of close readings militates against breadth of coverage), it posits, in skeletal form, the existence of such a history. For each of the novels treated—Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Bely's *Petersburg*, Platonov's *Chevengur*, Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, and Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*—is an active participant in a formidable web of allusion and intertextuality; this web leads back to Pushkin, Gogol, and *their* views (as refracted through the novel or narrative poetic form) of Russian history in the first half of the nineteenth century, at a time when modern Russian historiography and historical consciousness were being

born. (The symbolist poet Innokenty Annensky probably said it best: "Pushkin and Gogol—our two-faced Janus. Two mirrors on the door that separates us from our past.") In other words, these works, dominated as they are by the overwhelming sense that national history and biblical plot are in a state of fatal alignment or parallax, continually look from the "presents" of their contexts *back* to a pre-history, or "epic past," when Russia's future was a still open book. This "Great Time," as the scholar of myth Mircea Eliade would call it, may be the old *Rus'* before the Petrine reforms or some folk ideal such as the underwater kingdom of Kitezh. More importantly, it is the necessary "before" that preceded a "fall" into history and that allowed these writers to explain the shape of what followed, up to, and in some cases *beyond*, the events depicted in their apocalyptic presents. As I demonstrate in the Introduction, the works of Pushkin and Gogol are significant as late "pre-history" because the tensions driving them—the temporal "old"/"new," the spatial "East"/"West"—are, while ominous, far from being resolved and because the dynamic images (Bronze Horseman, troika) embodying historical momentum and radical change are, while not "apocalyptic" in context, capable of becoming so in the eyes of later generations, when social and political ferment in the second half of the nineteenth century made the threat of revolution seem imminent and inevitable.

The Introduction sketches the salient features of the Russian apocalyptic tradition and attempts a brief typology of what will be called "apocalyptic fiction," dwelling in some length on the role played by the images of the horse and train in this tradition and typology. Thereafter, each subsequent chapter has the same basic format: a discussion of the historical and biographical contexts out of which the work in question grew precedes and introduces an in-depth reading of the text itself. The important difference between "apocalypse" and "utopia," between a divinely inspired conclusion to history leading to an atemporal ideal (the New Jerusalem) and a humanly engineered conclusion to history leading to a secular paradise (one model being the classless society), becomes an issue only in the work of Platonov. All the other authors write works whose epistemological point of departure is essentially Christian and apocalypticist; Platonov, whose novel is related to the others structurally and typologically, blurs and confuses the Christian and Marxist approaches to history under the influence of the philosopher Nikolay Fyodorov. Thus *Chevengur* is included in this study as the expression of yet another artistic means, together with those of the "Christian" Bulgakov and Pasternak, of dealing with the fact that the End (and Beginning) promised by the revolution was a failure, was *not* equivalent to the one foretold in Revelation. Dostoevsky, whose *Idiot* was written before the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and Bely, whose *Petersburg* was written between them, create texts permeated with a nervousness and urgency that

enters into every aspect of their structure and style and shows their perceived position in history to be "after" the fall and "before" (*right* before in Bely's case) the End. Depending on its time of writing, therefore, each work possesses a "prospectivist" or "retrospectivist" view of the revolution that must be integrated not only philosophically but structurally into its view of biblical apocalypse or (in Platonov's case) utopia. The Afterword suggests its own retrospective view of the typology as well as a prospective view of where that typology, faintly and in various subterranean guises, may still be operating.

If I had to describe my approach, or what I hope is my approach, it would be, as a distinguished colleague once said of his ideal marriage of criticism and scholarship, "structuralism with a human face." The categories and paradigms adduced to marshal one's material should, ideally, be both germane and open-minded, be capable of engaging the text as it speaks and listens to the realities of society, polity, culture, and art. In the language of Yury Tynyanov, a formalist who did become a structuralist with a human face, the "auto-function" (that which links similar elements within different systems of discourse) and the "syn-function" (that which links different elements within the same work) are constantly flexed in a very real, yet often subtle and invisible equipoise. This is the hidden musculature, as it were, that operates below the surface of otherwise arbitrary literary signs to give the text its homeostatic dynamism, its historical personality—what it meant "then" and what it means "now." What is ironic in the case of these authors of apocalyptic fictions is that they, in varying degrees of consciousness, used *the very limitations* of the novel form to imply a reality beyond it. Feeling all the integumentary tugs of their works' hidden musculature and knowing that words were all they had to project what was finally dumb to human figuration, they nevertheless undertook to incorporate Western civilization's ultimate figure of closure in a form that traces its generic origins to the concepts of openness, contingency, desacralization, irreverent laughter, perpetual contact with "profane" time and space. Therefore, while the thinking of those such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Arthur Danto, Mircea Eliade, Michel Foucault, Edmund Leach, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Yury Lotman, and Hayden White has been a constant goad to my own and a source of many of the ordering principles in this book, I do not always agree with them.

Any reader of these Russian apocalypticists should know how, for example, Foucault's now famous prediction of the end of "Man" and the humanistic tradition—"a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea"—would fit into their fundamentally Christian systems of thought and their artistic structures. This statement, after all, is Foucault's adaptation, a century later, of Nietzsche's most provocative pronouncement. But Dostoevsky was

horrified (though also fascinated, to be sure) by history "as such," without God; forestalling Nietzsche, he answered history's inquisitorial proof that "God is dead" with a non-verbal kiss; and against the diamond hard and sharp postulates of Raskolnikov he offered up the stammering meekness of Sonya, whose voice acquired authority only when another voice, coming from the Book, spoke through hers. Thus it seems fair to assume that, at least for Dostoevsky and the tradition that followed, not all voices, regardless of their logical persuasiveness and flair for *ore profundo* (Foucault's being a prime example), are created equal. For what Dostoevsky and the others were trying to do was logically (but not mythopoetically) impossible—the incorporation of life's openness within the closure of God's plot. And to explain this through the immanent binary rules of discourse posited by structuralism or through the relentless accretions to meaning provided by the ubiquitous "other" of post-structuralism is to deny a priori the essential ingredient in an apocalypticist view of the world—that there is such a thing as "revelation," as a radical and total shift in time-space relations, and that it comes *from beyond*. Hence the thinkers to which I freely resort to counterbalance the ones just listed are usually Russian Orthodox in faith and, in several cases, they actually influenced, as metaphysical god-fathers, the novels being discussed: Nikolay Berdyaev, Sergey Bulgakov, Georgy Fedotov, Pavel Florensky, Georgy Florovsky, Nikolay Fyodorov, Ivan Kireevsky, Alexey Khomyakov, Konstantin Leontiev, Vasily Rozanov, and Vladimir Solovyov.

Any work such as this is not only a formal dialogue, but an almost endless causerie with those friends and colleagues patient enough to listen and respond to my ideas and to read parts or all of the manuscript in its fledgling form. These individuals will forgive me for not saying more about their contributions, the much appreciated "sub-plots" from "outside" and "others" that found their way into the shape of my narrative: Vladimir Alexandrov, Mark Altshuller, Stephen Baehr, Nina Berberova, Thomas Beyer, Edward J. Brown, Sergej Davydov, Caryl Emerson, Herman Ermolaev, Efim Etkind, Joseph Frank, Boris Gasparov, George Gibian, Eugene Klimoff, George Krugovoy, Eric Pervukhin, Ellendea Proffer, Gary Rosenshield, Natalya Sadomskaya, Thomas Shaw, Victor Terras, Anatoly Vishnevsky, Slava Yastremski, Alexander Woronzoff. Much-needed time for research on the early stages of the project was provided by a year-long fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies and a semester grant from the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Thanks are also due to Mary Heins, Tali Mendelberg, Hana Pichova, Adrienne Shirley (this last of Princeton University Press), and Sonia Yetter-Beelendorf, all of whom spent long hours helping me prepare and edit the manuscript in its various stages. Parts of this study have appeared, in mod-

ified form, elsewhere and are here so noted: "On the Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction: Towards a Typology" (in *Issues in Russian Literature Before 1917: Proceedings from the III World Congress of Soviet and East European Studies*, ed. J. Douglas Clayton [Columbus: Slavica, 1988]); "Remarks on the Horse/Train as a Space-Time Image in Russian Literature from 1820 to 1920" (in *Russian Literary Mythologies: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*, eds. Boris Gasparov and Robert P. Hughes [California Slavic Studies, forthcoming]); "The Role of the *eques* in Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman*" (in *Pushkin Today*, eds. David M. Bethea and J. Thomas Shaw [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming]); "Historicism Arrives at the Station: The Image of the Train and the Shape of Time in *The Idiot*" (California Slavic Studies [forthcoming]); "History as Hippodrome: The Apocalyptic Horse and Rider in *The Master and Margarita*" (*Russian Review*, 41 [October 1982], 373-99). The quotation from W. H. Auden's *New Year Letter*, copyright 1941 and renewed 1969 by W. H. Auden, is reprinted with permission of Random House, Inc., from *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson. The quotation from Yeats's "The Second Coming" is reprinted with permission of Macmillan Publishing Company from *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, edited by Richard J. Finneran, copyright 1924, by Macmillan Publishing Company, renewed 1952 by Bertha Georgie Yeats, and with permission of A. P. Watt Ltd. on behalf of Michael B. Yeats and Macmillan London Ltd. I dedicate this book to my favorite listener and reader, an expert on the beauty and fragility of plots and on their extratextual ties, and to a future listener, whose story is just beginning.

Madison, Wisconsin

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THE SHAPE OF APOCALYPSE IN  
MODERN RUSSIAN FICTION



## Introduction:

### Myth, History, Plot, Steed

As far as I know, this [statue of Lenin in front of the Finland Station] is the only monument to a man on an armored car that exists in the world. In this respect alone, it is a symbol of a new society. The old society used to be represented by men on horseback.

—Joseph Brodsky,  
“A Guide to a Renamed City”

#### MYTH

Humankind has always lived in time, but it has not always lived in history. Archaeologists and anthropologists provide countless examples of societies, “ancient” in time or “primitive” in development, where time was experienced mythically rather than historically, where only those details of life that fit into and recapitulated the master plot of a sacred tale were worthy of remembrance.<sup>1</sup> The British social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski defined myth as

... not merely a story but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in *primaeval* times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. . . . Myth is to the savage, what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of the Creation, of the Fall, of the Redemption by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage (*Magic, Science and Religion* 100).

The phrases most operative in this passage are “a reality lived,” “believed to have happened once in *primaeval* times,” and “continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies.” “History,” on the contrary, is

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best-studied recent example of an older, indigenous culture that has taken on the structural models of Christian apocalyptic (imported via missionaries) is the Melanesian Cargo cult. See Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, and Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*.