

VICTOR BEILIS

# Death of a Prototype

THE PORTRAIT

Translated by Leo Shtutin



Volskaya would now always introduce herself anew each time she met Maxim:

‘Adele Themistoklovna ...’

‘Adele Usfazanovna ...’

‘Adele Raschidovna ...’

‘Adele Ruprechtovna ...’

And each time she would conduct herself in accordance with her patronymic of choice: if she happened to be called Adele Asmodeyevna that day, well ...

Unfolding against a backdrop of serious and jocular conversations, distorted-mirror parodies and riddles, *Death of a Prototype* focuses on the artistic endeavours of a group of Muscovite intellectuals. The book’s male protagonists – predominantly writers and visual artists – expend their creative energies in fashioning an authentic portrait of Adele, the ever-metamorphosing prototype, but are themselves constantly changing and morphing into other characters. Likewise, the stories they tell – and the pictures they paint – are never the same.

**Victor Beilis**, a scholar of African folklore, is the author of numerous short stories. *Death of a Prototype* is his first novel and was originally published in Russian as *Smert’ Prototipa* (2005).

**Leo Shtutin** is a Russian language translator of literary fiction.

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# DEATH OF A PROTOTYPE

  

## THE PORTRAIT

VICTOR BEILIS

Translated from the Russian  
and with an introduction and afterword  
by Leo Shtutin



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# **DEATH OF A PROTOTYPE**



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# TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

*Give me your hand, gentle reader –*

This is the first work by Victor Beilis to make it into English since the single-volume publication in 2002 of a duo of novellas – *The Rehabilitation of Freud & Bakhtin and Others* – translated by Richard Grose. Beilis remains virtually unknown in the English-speaking world as a writer of literary fiction (although his output as a scholar of African folklore is familiar to specialists in that field), and I hope that this translation of *Death of a Prototype* – his first, and so far only, novel – will serve to generate an awareness of his wider literary oeuvre.

*You won't be frightened, will you now, of the secluded little spots  
that I intend to show you?*

Much like the novellas that preceded it, *Death of a Prototype* is a hyper-allusive and self-consciously 'difficult' work: Beilis delights in intertextual play, inviting the reader to unravel a complex web of quotations, references and paraphrases. This represents a considerable challenge for non-Russians (and non-Russianists), hinging as much of it does on the reader's familiarity with the literature, culture and, to a lesser extent, politics of that country. Nevertheless, the author engages no less closely with an entire spectrum of Western European cultural traditions, from classical antiquity to twentieth-century postmodernism. Unsurprisingly given its subtitle, the visual arts play a particularly important role in the novel. So too visibility in general: seeing and being seen, acts of perception and observation, gazing, glancing and glimpsing.

*How I should like to observe the changes in the expression of your dear face as I tell my story, but –*

The reader is also confronted with an intimidating array of literary styles, all jostling against one another. Alongside several dialogue-heavy chapters – not all that different stylistically from much contemporary fiction – we encounter poetic, archaized prose, self-referential literary analysis, Joycean stream of consciousness, and so on. The novel, then, is structurally heterogeneous and fragmented, with styles, genres and narrators succeeding one another at great speed. And yet it is also highly balanced and controlled, in some ways recalling a contrapuntal musical composition and abounding in thematic echoes and correspondences. Plot has been largely subordinated to texture, so readers expecting a rollicking thrill-ride will, in all likelihood, be disappointed.

*– alas! – I am compelled to walk a little ahead of you, the better to show you the way. Denied the joy of gazing upon your face to face, I shall abandon myself to the delight of storytelling, for to present my history to you – whoever you might be –*

And yet, *Death of a Prototype* is a novel that not only challenges but also rewards the reader, especially one attuned to fine-grain detail. What initially seems incidental and offhand can prove to be of crucial significance many chapters later – so keep your eyes peeled! You'll find some supplementary information at the back of the book ('Explanatory Glosses and References'), but, ultimately, being able to grasp this allusion or that is of lesser importance than opening yourself up to the pleasure of the text as a whole. The text – I guarantee –

*– is happiness indeed.*

Leo Shtutin  
February 2016

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# PART ONE



# Notice

**R**ecently I received by post a weighty package without a return address. Affixed to the manuscript inside was a note advising me that, upon reading the text, I might do with it what I wished, according to my own discretion: discard it or publish it, either under my name or under that of the real author, whom without doubt I would recognise after reading not two of the lines that follow these preliminaries.

I did, of course, recognize the author immediately, without even looking at the first page. N. – an initial will suffice. I haven't yet decided whether to reveal his real name, although in all likelihood I will – I cannot seriously consider publishing his work as my own – but later, not now; now it would be of little consequence. He did, after all, send me his opus anonymously and even proposed (the scoundrel!) the surrogacy of his creation – well, let the question of authorship remain open for the time being. I do not wish, however, to lead anyone into confusion by giving all this the air of a whodunit: the name plays no role whatsoever in the story, or, to be more precise, in the account, set down below. For certain reasons of a personal nature I do not wish to reveal the identity of the creator. Those with more than a surface knowledge of his books will recognize, as I did, the hand of the writer, but, in any case, I cannot withhold the true author from other readers either. And that's that – so don't expect any dead ends or garden paths.

But a few words about N. He was the first professional *littérateur* I became acquainted with as a young man; in fact, he wasn't so much the first *littérateur* – by the time I made his



acquaintance I was already friends with several unpublished young poets and ceaselessly versified myself – N. wasn't so much the first *littérateur* as the first member of the Union of Soviet Writers with whom I unashamedly maintained relations, paying no mind to those among my friends and compeers who condemned any association with engaged literature. N. had a marvellous knack for getting love stories printed in Soviet journals and the biggest state publishing houses of the country despite entirely emancipating their narratives from questions of ideology or industrial production. My poet-friends smiled derisively, but their secret respect was clear to see. Yet I was never a particular admirer of his art: rather, I liked him for what he was – for his utterly undemanding independence, or, put another way, for that particular kind of firmness which, fully self-aware, affords infinite patience and – *softness*. An unfortunate choice of words, perhaps, but that's the best I can do.

At any rate, the story of our interactions has nothing to do with the matter at hand. It only remains for me to tell you about A. Really, there's little point in keeping her hidden behind an initial – in the manuscript she is referred to by her full name: Adele. This is also the name of the heroine in many of N.'s stories – his polymorphous, capricious, irrepressible, underhanded, tender-hearted, angelic, diabolical heroine. It was through me, a long while ago, that they became acquainted, and for a long while N. (God be his judge!) suspected that she and I had been having an affair that we did not discontinue even when she, a married woman, briefly became his mistress. The episode with N. seemed to be of little significance in her rich and vigorous existence; for him, however, who could hardly be called inexperienced, who had been both popular and successful with women, Adele became nothing less than an obsession, an unceasing passion, an *idée fixe*, a source of joy and unrelenting pain – in short, she became everything that a woman can possibly become for a man in the prime of his life.

The ebb and flow of their relationship, or rather, the brief history of their involvement, invited a variety of interpretations and gave rise to numerous novellas, stories and plays