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### THE GROTESQUE IN YURI DRUZHNIKOV'S *SUPERWOMAN*

Who then art thou?  
Part of that power which still produceth good, whilst  
ever scheming ill.

Goethe's *Faust*

Yuri Druzhnikov once said that Russia was better seen from afar. A writer, a critic, and a publicist, he became an emigrant of the third wave (1972–1991), thrown out from the USSR after ten years of total oblivion to become a professor at The University of California. His purpose to leave the USSR was not only to condemn dictatorship, totalitarian myths, and the lack of freedom, but also to have an opportunity to work in a “civilized psychological climate.”<sup>1</sup> However, there is a paradox in every Russian emigrant writer's situation: his readers remain in Russia, and Druzhnikov was a Russian writer from the first to the last of his colorful and witty words. In the times of Stalin and other general party secretaries, Russian emigrant literature was completely isolated from its land, but today it can actively participate in Russian literature phenomenon, what is well exemplified by Druzhnikov's books.

Druzhnikov's satiric art is closely connected with the Slavic satirical tradition, mainly with Gogol, Saltikov-Shchedrin, Bulgakov, Ilf and Petrov, Zoshchenko, and Babel. Druzhnikov's satire includes exaggeration and grotesque, a complex literary structure which has been studied by numerous academics all over the world. The German grotesque researcher, Wolfgang Kayser noted: “Its nature could be summed up in a phrase that has repeatedly suggested itself to us: The GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGLLED (sic!) WORLD.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> В. Свирский: *Проза Юрия Дружникова*. Вашингтон: Challenge 1994, p.121.

<sup>2</sup> W. Kayser: *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1957, p. 185.

It is well known that in the contemporary conditional or modernistic literature, our world is often shown as filled with poignant or ominous tensions. The various forms of grotesque in Druzhnikov's writings are used to show these contradictions. However the critic Vladimir Svirsky admits that there is no grotesque in Druzhnikov's books,<sup>3</sup> we believe that the most consistently distinguished characteristics of grotesque have been the fundamental elements of disharmony, conflict, and clash of heterogeneous elements in Druzhnikov's writing. Philip Thompson states that "It is important that this disharmony has been seen, not merely in the work of art as such, but also in the rationale it produces and (speculatively) in the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist."<sup>4</sup>

In modern Russian literature (both emigrant and native), the grotesque mode in art tends to be prevalent in times marked by strife, radical changes, and disorientation as an approximate expression of the problematic nature of existence. Structurally, grotesque presupposes that the categories which apply to our worldview become inapplicable along with suddenness and surprise, which remain its essential elements. Druzhnikov's laughter is often edged with pessimism and negativity. The writer represents the demise of classic "characters of self-hood". This suggests irony of presentation, which frequently deconstructs preferred ethical values, relates to the writer's alertness, and sharpens his interest in recent history. This is to say the author clearly worked hard to reconstruct the historical milieu of soviet<sup>5</sup> existence and its absurdity.

Druzhnikov is satirizing the world which has existed and still exists in his vivid artistic imagination, representing it as a form of a comic and burlesque evil. Almost all characters in his prose are presented in a grotesque, carnivalesque, or absurd manner to the point that sometimes they resemble caricatures. The antithesis of two cultures: soviet (Russian speaking, but multinational) and American (also multinational), drawn with sharp irony, is full of the sublime grotesque. The portrait descriptions, characters' speech and behavior, even sympathetic to the writer, balance on the thin edge of absurdity. The irony of his first books for children gradually turned into bitter satire in his later works. Druzhnikov proves that it is not necessary to turn a character into an insect, or to make the nose wander the streets, as the grotesque in modern literature is something simpler and simultaneously more complicated, and includes estranged worlds, caricatures, as well as disharmonic and chaotic representations of reality. All these are found in

<sup>3</sup> В. Сvirский: *Проза Юрия Дружникова* ..., p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ph. Thomson: *The Grotesque*. London: Methuen Press 1972, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Note: the author of the article purposely gives all soviet relics without capitalizing.

the satiric thrust of Druzhnikov's art, presented either in a burlesque mode or as grotesque hyperbole.

*Superwoman*, a tragicomic farcical micro-novel consists of three independent novelettes: "Seedy Love Sail", "Tango with the President", and "Marriage in an American Way." The author links all of them with one character of antagonist — Lilia Burbon, a "superwoman", a "super-poet", designed as a soviet model of 'creative' homo sapiens. The name Lilia is not accidental but obviously linked with the name of Lilia Brik, who is adversely known in the 20<sup>th</sup> century soviet literary history, and was connected to the tragic life and death of Vladimir Mayakovsky, who committed suicide at the age of thirty.

Mrs. Burbon is certainly a grotesque type. All her characteristics imply a certain moral disorder, seen in each micro-novel through the medium of an individual nature. They are more than verisimilar and they exceed normal plausibility even of a "carnival chronotope" (51). The shocking aspect of the grotesque allows the author the most effective way to reach his readers both in Russia and in the US, comparing these two realities from the point of view of a former soviet citizen, now an emigrant living in America. Lilia as portrayed in *Superwoman* is an anti-heroine, the product of a damned and decayed system, which has given birth to skillful professional liars-hypocrites and has thoroughly and skillfully brought them up to perform the functions of ideological teachers for the brainwashed population. Moral order in *Superwoman* is seen through the medium of a perverse individual nature.

Let us have a closer look at this villain in a skirt. There is nothing of genius in her; the lady is a mediocrity, overestimating her role in society and art. Druzhnikov presents this character not as a true artist but as a common hack, oddball, and adventuress. She is certainly a person who has imprinted in her mind the grotesque socio-cultural reality of the former Soviet structure and has profited from it in the best possible way. Mrs. Burbon, born Shapiro, is 97 years old. The writer purposely simplifies her character. She is a typical Moscow socialite. Druzhnikov mentions in the book that he has been acquainted with her and remembers this lady as one of the communist party elite members, who had always carried herself with an abundance of self respect and had turned up her nose at all inferiors. She composed verses, in which the name of Stalin and that of Pushkin gradually substituted the name of Lenin. The party has given everything to this flippant woman: huge editions of her books, a spacious and comfortable flat in the capital, a country house, and prosperity. Thus communism has been provided for one definite "creative" personality, in return for her carnal and 'artistic' services.

The glorious way from a common prostitute to a Stalin prizewinner in literature, as it was routine and typical in those days, has included many nights spent in many famous and infamous beds. As she is now very old, Lilia does not remember all of her lovers but only the most famous ones: Lenin, Esenin, Mayakovsky, Commander Berdichevsky (she, of course, means a famous general Tuchachevsky, who perished during Stalin's repressions), executioner Yagoda, etc. The author purposely mixes real and invented names to create a pseudo-documental aesthetic reality and widely uses the principle of character deterioration. He calculatedly deflates his characters, the majority of whom are eccentrics, showing their weaknesses and pathological dependence on the environment, along with describing the anti-dialectics of their souls.

Having gone through fire and water, comrade Burbon has gained a perfect standing and reputation in the communist empire by betraying and discrediting her politically 'malevolent' literary colleagues, for instance, a dissident poet, Alexander Galich. To all those living under Red rule, the persecution of Achmatova, Tsvetaeva, Zoshchenko, Solzhenitzin, Galich, Druzhnikov himself, and a number of other unbefitting to the power creators, was an everyday reality. Lilia's husband of aristocratic origins, Andrey Burbon, an author of children's books, committed a grave mistake by composing and creating a new revolutionary biography for his inferior wife. Lilia even used to publish his poems under her name. She abandoned Andrey as soon as the editions of her 'masterpieces' exceeded her husband's, and she found a new flame for her passion from whom she could profit more.

The author portrays his anti-heroine and 'superwoman' in the following way:

Several generations have known Lilia Burbon since our childhood.

Books of verses for children ran in million publications along all Great Russia, and even further — along all pro-soviet camp. I had met her many times, mainly on TV screen, and even in person. Of course, we met but I had never been introduced to her. Lilia Burbon belonged to secretary elite, to its top, and she walked, never noticing anyone but party leaders. She was not even walking but skimming along (29).<sup>6</sup>

Druzhnikov describes comrade Lilia's career comparing it to a game of cards when aces are continually dealt; he provides ever new and fresh details both of her intimate and 'creative' activities. Some of them are given as grotesque, the others — as absurdly carnivalesque. Thus the author makes us laugh bitterly at the existence of such perverse individuals in soviet literary

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<sup>6</sup> Ю. Дружников: *Суперженщина*. Москва: Парад 2003 (the numbers of pages cited are given in the text of the article).

life and feel deeply sorry for their occurrence in the Great Russian culture known throughout the world.

In *Superwoman* Druzhnikov portrays the character of a swindler, an ‘artistic’ crook, capable of adjusting to any social system and situation, absolutely sure of her genuine impeccability and infallibility. There are no conflicts in her soul; her egocentrism is antagonistically demonstrated by the author through direct dictums, through her crooked behavior and even through the title of this micro-novel. Thus we understand the satiric pathos, depicted by Druzhnikov via unacceptable to him qualities and characteristics. Such targeted portrayal seems fair, predetermined and thoughtful.

When Lilia arrives to America the information how she got there is omitted. Even in her far advanced years, she, with the skill of a former society lioness, makes unsuspecting 79-year-old American, Ken crazy about her. He falls in love with “the greatest of Russian poets”, decides to marry her, and is conscientiously studying Russian language and poetry at the university, where the storyteller of *Superwoman* is a teaching professor. The author, being personally fond of Silver Age poetry, cannot but mention famous names and even cites them in the micro-novel text as fair antithesis to Lilia’s humble and primitive opuses. Unfortunately for Ken, this romance and ‘marriage in an American way’ turn into a fiasco. The couple has been married for only several hours, when the groom waves a farewell to this world, dutifully leaving his money to his bride. The only condition states that the inheritance should be spent to support proletarian struggle for a better socialist future, under which his wife had prospered so well. Disillusioned with the miserly sum left to her by this unfortunate husband of nine hours and the conditions stipulated in the marriage contract, Lilia again undertakes the thorny path of shady conjugal swindles, portrayed by the repulsive eroticism and vulgar descriptions of her decaying body, evoking disgust and loathing.

Druzhnikov was a master of satire who represented in a grotesque way not only his former compatriots and country, but also America, the nation, which gave the writer the asylum and freedom to express his critical and literary ideas. The comparison between the USSR and the USA very often resembles slapstick. While making plans to settle comfortably in her new motherland, Lilia Burbon has high hopes for a tango with the President at her wedding. However she only finds in her bed a Mexican pimp, Rodrigo, who at first extorts money for his bedding services from ‘the greatest of soviet poets’ and then generously proposes to Lilia a highly profitable place as madam in his brothel, equipped with skillful Russian girls.

Thus Madam Burbon successfully adapts to her new environment and does not let her optimism and hopes for a better future down. According to the topic and the plot of this micro-novel, Lilia is immortal and inimitable;

she is an eternal adventuress and does not want to die even when the ghost of her last romantic husband, Ken calls her to join him in promises of everlasting happiness and bliss.

Druzhnikov makes us believe that Lilia will never surrender because this type of an 'artist' is inexhaustible and certainly ineradicable, despite social order, society, and a continent. For this purpose the author introduces elements of fantasy in the disastrous finale of *Superwoman*. However all the spirits and ghosts in the book turn to possess much purer souls than our battered lady-poet.

Lilia gets a unique chance to become the queen of a socialist island, an invention of the writer's vivid imagination, placed on a piece of land that periodically occurs within the banks of Rio Grande River on the border between the USA and Mexico. Another former Soviet citizen, Hariton Lapidar, called simply Harya (it is a 'speaking' name in Gogol's tradition, which means in Russian slang "the face of a pig") becomes Lilia's companion in achieving a dream of grandeur and a royal title. He is a former Professor from Odessa (this city on the Black Sea is known to have given birth to many crooks, thieves and adventurers as well as to the majority of humorists), who has specialized in teaching Scientific Communism and has been married four times. Harya is an unlucky persona, whether in the Soviet Union or in America. He is absolutely lazy, incapable of action, not used to any work, and lives from hand to mouth on Jewish do-gooder donations, though he looks fat and overfed at sixty.

Although Hariton had been a typical soviet dreamer who dreamed of a perfect communist society in the USSR, while teaching the basis of its 'theoretical' background, now in America he dreams about property and prosperity, but does not provide any efforts needed to be applied. Sitting at home without a Green card and watching TV, he finds out about the birth of an island between two borders, grasps the essence that it belongs to nobody, and his phantasmagoric mind finds a perfect solution to his money problems. He immediately decides to claim this island property for himself and at last to become rich in an American way.

Harya has no doubts that this country of free opportunities can be a heaven for realizing his personal American dream, which turns into a chimera literally and figuratively. The only obstacle to achieving this goal is lack of an American wife. Who suits this purpose better than 'the greatest of the poets'? A hundred year old 'superwoman' and now a widow of a born American, Ken the last romantic in the world, madam Burbon. Besides, Lilia, at the end of the book, finds herself in full agreement with Harya's thirst for money and power, though he is very much younger than his prospective and much sought-after bride. Lilia is overexcited with new swindle prospects and

undertakes them with girlish enthusiasm, building castles in the air: “This island may become an independent state... And, of course it would demand a leader...” (183). Lilia dreams that as a queen with the future king Harya (Pig’s Face), who would change his name to an American one, Harry, she will present new titles to their inferiors, however the island soon disappears under water before their own eyes, as has been predicted and determined by Mother Nature.

How awkward it is for Lilia the First, “the mother of the first Kingdom of the Rio-Grande” (192), to realize her definite and final failure! True to her nature she has already imagined herself the second Catherine the Great. When ‘sandy rock was collapsing, becoming narrower and narrower. At last, small waves licked it off. A flag — the board with Harya’s bed-sheet — came down into the water, and like a balloon began to swim as the last commemoration of the kingdom of the Rio-Grande’ (198) Druzhnikov leads the readers to the idea that everything in the life of ‘the greatest poet’ has been false. Bijouterie for children — a gilt crown floats away along the river forever as a tragi-comical symbol of this fiasco. Thus the existential essence of this anti-heroine is realized in both countries (the USSR and the USA) practically in the same way. Banality is eternal and ineradicable according to the author of *Superwoman*. The clown figure of Lilia Burbon remains in our memory as the embodiment of a futile life, which has not ended and may bring new swindles and adventures with the most prosaic purpose — money.

Druzhnikov is a born polemist by the nature of his talent. He firmly formulates his ideological and artistic standing. All his creations call for a discussion. Having renounced all ‘Russian myths’ and soviet stereotypes, he provokes a discussion on everything he has written and especially on *Superwoman*, in which he openly declares his thoughts on deformation of human consciousness and loss of morality caused by a hypocritical System, which has mutilated and crippled the lives of several generations. We should bear in mind that Druzhnikov’s books are likely to be treated differently in various places and languages. In the West, they would be accepted calmly as purely literary phenomena, but in contemporary Russia, his writings are furiously discussed from a political perspective. Many readers and critics find him a person searching for the truth. They believe that his ideas are congenial to their own, but there are more than several who attack his bitter satire on the idols who are paradoxically dead and still alive.

*Sevinc Ucgul*

GROTESKA W POWIEŚCI  
JURIIA DRUŻNIKOWA *POSTRZĘPIONY ŻAGIEL MIŁOŚCI*

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera analizę twórczości pisarza, który w niewielkim utworze przedstawił szeroką panoramę życia Rosjan i Amerykanów. Autorka artykułu omawia specyfikę twórczości pisarza znanego w kręgach rosyjskiej emigracji literackiej jako mistrz groteski, ironii, burleski. Analiza utworu pokazuje związek powieści z faktami biografii Jurija Drużnikowa oraz odwołuje się do związków najnowszej literatury z klasyczną rosyjską groteską i burleską. Przedmiotem zainteresowania autorki jest także funkcja rosyjskiej literatury emigracyjnej jako ogniwa łączącego rodziną kulturę pisarza i kulturę kraju, w którym tworzy swoje dzieła — szczególnie rola przypada tu wykorzystaniu chwytu groteski do porównawczego opisu życia w Związku Radzieckim i współczesnej Ameryce.

*Севинч Учгюль*

ГРОТЕСК В РОМАНЕ ЮРИЯ ДРУЖНИКОВА *СУПЕРЖЕНЩИНА*

Резюме

Статья содержит анализ мастерства писателя, сумевшего в небольшом по объему произведении дать широкую картину жизни как российского, так и американского обывателя. Автор подробно раскрывает основные особенности художественной манеры писателя, известного как непревзойденный в современной эмигрантской литературе мастер гротеска, иронии, бурлеска. В статье приводятся также некоторые факты из жизни и творчества самого писателя, и проводится полемика по таким художественным приемам, как гротеск и бурлеск в современной и классической русской литературе.

Роль русскоязычной эмигрантской литературы как моста, связывающего две культуры: родной культуры писателя и культуры страны, приютившей его, также попала в поле зрения автора статьи. Она показывает, как писатель, мастер сатиры, использует прием гротеска в сравнительном описании жизни в Советском Союзе и в современной ему Америке.