

RESEARCH PAPER

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M. BULGAKOV, A. AKHMATOVA AND  
N. GUMILEV AS LITERARY CHARACTERS  
IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN FANTASTIC  
FICTION

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This paper discusses a new tendency in contemporary Russian fantastic fiction: the transformation of the personalities of Russian writers and poets into literary characters. The analysis shows similar patterns of fantastic transformation in Bulgakov, Akhmatova and Gumilev. These patterns include the use of the biographic and auto-biographic myths about them, the transformation of their writings into storages of compositional devices, plots, motifs and characters, which are freely manipulated and projected onto their authors' lives. Becoming literary characters, they often continue to write fiction or poetry. The newly created texts may enter into discussions with the texts-prototypes, confirming, contesting and/or recreating them.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: MATERIAL AND TERMINOLOGY

In the Soviet period Russian fantastic fiction consisted mostly of two genres: *nauchnaia fantastika* (science fiction) for the adolescents and adults, and *literaturnye skazki* (literary tales) for children. The post-Soviet period is characterized by the rise of other genres, for example, speculative fiction from *fentezi* (fantasy) to postmodernist literature, which uses fantastic devices. Russian scholars as well as their colleagues from other Slavic countries address various subgenres and use specific terms for each, but the

general terms *fantastika*, *fantasticheskaia prosa* (fantastic prose),<sup>1</sup> *fantasticheskoe* (the fantastic) and *fantasticheskaia literatura* (fantastic literature or fantastic fiction) also exist. These encompass all types of so-called non-mimetic genres (Golovacheva 2013: 11–26; Zgorzelski 1984: 302–303). In recent years the use of Russian term *fantastika* in this general sense has become popular in Western research as well. As it transpired for me at “The Fantastic Now” conference in Münster in 2016, its emergence is mistakenly attributed to the public lecture delivered by John Clute in Prague:

Each of the three main modes of written fantastika in the twenty-first century – Fantasy; Science Fiction; and Horror – is badly named, in English at least, which is part of the reason I’ve begun to prefer the term fantastika [...]. (Clute 2007)

However, Clute was preceded in his use of *fantastika*, excluding horror, by Birgit Menzel:

Fantasy literature, both Russian *fentezi* and Western ‘fantasy’, first appeared in Russia only in the late 1980s. The general term *fantastika* for all popular fantastic genres – NF (nauchnaia fantastika – L.F.), SF (science fiction – L.F.) and fantasy alike – seems to be preferred by now. (Menzel 2005: 122)

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Nevertheless, in her actual writing Menzel uses the terms *fantastika*, fantastic fiction and fantastic literature interchangeably (Menzel 2005: 124, 128). I will keep to this pattern, while adding one more term: fantastic prose.

In this paper I will discuss the transformation of personalities of Russian writers into literary characters in the texts, which are perceived by the implied reader as fantastic, in both the so-called formula (trivial, popular or mass) literature (Cawelti 1976: 5–7; Menzel 1999: 392) and the high (elite, serious) literature. This task requires introducing such terms as *alternative history*, *crypto history* and *alternative biography*. While the last is mine, the two former terms to the best of my knowledge were introduced into post-Soviet *fantastika* scholarship by Andrei Valentinov, although according to him the term *crypto history* was invented by H.L. Oldie in 1997:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In 1985 I defended my Ph.D. thesis on the prose of Russian symbolists. The title approved by my supervisor Prof. Yuri Lotman was *Gogolevskaia traditsia v russkoi fantasticheskoi proze nachala XX veka* (*Gogol’s Tradition in Russian Fantastic Prose at the Beginning of the 20th Century*).

<sup>2</sup> Andrei Valentinov is the pen-name of a *fantastika* writer and historian Andrei Valentinovich Shmal’ko. Henry Lion Oldie is the pen name of *fantastika* writers Dmitrii

В историческом романе возможны отдельные вольности, но канва исторических событий должна быть сохранена. В альтернативной истории автор сознательно меняет ход и результаты исторического процесса. Автору не нужно извиняться перед читателями за нарушения, потому что в этом и состоит его метод. Криптоистория занимает нишу между этими двумя жанрами. [...] Отличие его (криптоисторического жанра. – Л.Ф.) от прочих жанров исторической фантастики заключалось в верности описания нашей “большой истории”, однако причины и особенности ее событий излагались не в общепринято-историческом, а в фантастическом духе.

In a historical novel some imprecision is possible, but the course of historical events must be preserved. In alternative history an author consciously changes the course and the outcome of the historical process. The author has no need to apologize for infringements as this is the heart of his method. Crypto history occupies the gap between these genres. [...] Its difference from the other genres of historical *fantastika* is in its consistency with the description our “big history”. However causes and events were narrated not in the accepted historical mode, but in the fantastic mode. (Valentinov 1999, trans. mine)

Although both terms correspond to the notions of pseudo history (Nazarenko 2012: 437) and fictive history (Maund 2012: 153), I prefer not to use them so as not to mingle fantastic literature with historical forgery as such, nor with non-earthly history. I introduced the term alternative biography in my paper in the field of Folklore Studies (Fialkova 2011). It defines a biography of a historical person reconstructed by a folklorist from various legends. Naturally, this reconstruction differs from the person’s actual biography. In this paper, by alternative biography I mean events, traits and creative production in the life of a fictional character associated/identified in the plot with a historical person and acting in an alternative/crypto historical reality. Unlike folklore, where elements of alternative biographies are scattered across various legends, in *fantastika* such biographies are overtly constructed by the authors. The historical person becomes persona with *a convenient and concentrated code reference to an elaborate set of associations in the reader’s and/or writer’s mind* (Jacobs 1987: 231). The reasons for these constructions and their various techniques will be discussed below.

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Gromov and Oleg Ladyzhenskii. All the three are Russian-language Ukrainian writers. In the West the term alternative history originated in the late 1970s and is used together with another, alternate history, coined in the 1950s (Prucher 2007: 4–6).

Contemporary Russian *fantastika* is in continuous dialogue with the antecedent fiction in general and Russian fiction in particular. This dialogue has diverse manifestations, including direct quotations, allusions, sequels, pastiches, as well as alternative biographies. Although this literature centrality has already been addressed by the scholars and some alternative biographies, have been mentioned (Kaigorodova 2002; Kharitonova 2009: 10–13; Menzel 2005: 128) they were not the focus of research. This paper is based on fantastic prose about Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940), Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) and Nikolai Gumilev (Gumilyov) (1886–1921). The choice of alternative biographies of these particular personalities among available others was triggered by several factors. First, they are interconnected; second, all of them were involved in the conscious life-creation (*zbiznetvotchestvo*), third, the patterns of transformations evince distinct similarity; fourth, they appeal to similar reading audiences. For clarity, when possible I will discuss their alternative biographies separately. However, in some cases addressing two of them together is unavoidable.

## 2. MIKHAIL BULGAKOV AS A *FANTASTIKA* CHARACTER

The history of Bulgakov's transformation into a *fantastika* character began at the end of the 1970s, a decade after the first publication of *The Master and Margarita*.<sup>3</sup> For Ludwig this novel is a fairy tale for adults, which continues traditions of Anglo-Irish fantasy writing (Ludwig 2002: 153). For Kaigorodova this novel is one of two precursors of contemporary Russian *fentezi* in general and of mythological writers' biographies in the genre in particular. She finds her second starting point for the emergence of writers as characters in Lev Gumilev's<sup>4</sup> theory of *passionarity* (Kaigorodova 2002: 137–138, 145–146). The leading role of *The Master and Margarita* in this process is indubitable as Bulgakov almost miraculously reappeared posthumously on the USSR literary scene with religious and demonic topics, which were absolutely unthinkable from the 1930s. The perception

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<sup>3</sup> A censored version in the magazine *Moskva* was published in No. 11, 1966, and No. 1, 1967, while the first publication in full appeared in 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Lev Gumilev (1912–1992), Anna Akhmatova's and Nikolai Gumilev's son, was a famous historian and formulator of the theory of ethnogenesis, which greatly influenced contemporary fantastic fiction.

of writers and poets, including Bulgakov, as *passionarii* (Beliakov 2001) could also become a trigger of their mythicization. However, I would like to add a third and most important factor, which Kaigorodova, who does not address Bulgakov’s alternative biography at all, ignored completely. I mean the publication in 1978<sup>5</sup> of Valentin Kataev’s *Almaznyi moi venets* (*My Diamond’s Crown*). Although Kataev (1897–1986) was personally acquainted with all the people he wrote about, he defiantly refused to call his book memoirs and preferred to avoid its strict generic definition:

Вообще в этом сочинении я не ручаюсь за детали. Умоляю читателей не воспринимать мою работу как мемуары. Терпеть не могу мемуаров. Повторяю. Это свободный полет моей фантазии, основанный на истинных происшествиях, быть может, и не совсем точно сохранившихся в моей памяти. В силу этого я избегаю подлинных имен, избегаю даже выдуманных фамилий. Стихи, приведенные мною, я цитирую исключительно по памяти, считая, что это гораздо жизненнее, чем проверять их точность по книгам, хотя бы эти цитаты были неточны. *Магический кристалл памяти более подходит для того жанра, который я выбрал, даже — могу сказать — изобрел. Не роман, не рассказ, не повесть, не поэма, не воспоминания, не мемуары, не лирический дневник... Но что же? Не знаю! Недаром же сказано, что мысль изреченная есть ложь. Да, это ложь. Но ложь еще более правдивая, чем сама правда.* Правда, рожденная в таинственных извилинах механизма моего воображения. А что такое воображение с научной точки зрения, еще никто не знает.

Во всяком случае, ручаюсь, что все здесь написанное чистейшая правда и в то же время чистейшая фантазия.

In general I don’t vouch for the details. I beg readers not to perceive my work as memoirs. I hate memoirs. I repeat that it is a free flight of fantasy, based on real events that may be imprecisely preserved in my memory. This is the reason why I avoid real names and even avoid fictional family names. I quote the poems just as I remember them as I deem it much more natural than to check their precision from books, even if my quotes are inexact. *Better suited to the genre is the magical crystal of memory, which I chose or even – may I say – invented myself. It is not a novel, not a novella, not a poem, not recollections, not memoirs and not a lyrical diary... What is this? I don’t know! No wonder that it is said that a thought once uttered is untrue.* Yes, it’s a lie. But this lie is more true than the truth itself. This truth originated in mysterious twists of my

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<sup>5</sup> The dates of the first publications, which I note for the works mentioned, often differ from the editions which I actually use and cite in parentheses.

imagination. And so far, nobody knows the nature of imagination from the scientific point of view.

Anyway, I swear that everything written here is unadulterated truth and at the same time unadulterated fantasy. (Kataev 1994: 222, trans. and emphasis mine)

Kataev partially reduced the real people whom had been personally acquainted with – writers, poets, painters – to the role of literary characters, deprived of genuine names and perceived through their writings. Readers took Kataev's book to be some kind of a crossword puzzle or a riddle, as decoding the nicknames became a part of its reading. The more famous the prototype and the more knowledgeable the reader, the better the results. The only person with a genuine name was Kataev himself. In the 1970s most people depicted in *Almaznyi moi venets* were dead; some committed suicide or became victims of Stalin's terror. One of those who were still alive, Viktor Shklovskii (Shklovsky) (1893–1984), encoded as "*posbliak, sravnivshii kliuchika s Betkhovenym*" (a vulgar person, who compared *the key*<sup>6</sup> with Beethoven) replied with the epigram calling Kataev *genii novyi. Zavistnik staryi i podlets* (qtd. in Lekmanov and Kotova 2004: 130), a new genius and an old envious scoundrel (trans. mine). Some critics attacked Kataev for distortions; others praised him for his vivid depiction of the past. And only one of them pinpointed the chief result of Kataev's literary strategy: *perekhod fakta v obraz* (Zatonskii 1988: 163), the transformation of a fact into an image (trans. mine).

Bulgakov's nickname in Kataev's book is in adjectival form: *sineglazyi* – blue-eyed. Events described are quite trivial: their collaboration in the newspaper *Gudok*, tasty dinners served by Tatiana Nikolaevna<sup>7</sup> to bachelor writers, lyrical recollections about *sineglazka* – a blue-eyed sister of *sineglazyi*, visits to the casino, and more. Still, the mode of *sineglazyi*'s description is demonic, for example:

Синева его глаз казалась несколько выцветшей, и лишь изредка в ней вспыхивали дьявольские огоньки горячей серы, что придавало его умному лицу нечто сатанинское. [...] Синеглазый вообще был склонен к общению со злыми духами, порождениями ада.

<sup>6</sup> *Kliuchik* (key) was the code for writer Yurii Olesha (1899–1960).

<sup>7</sup> Tatiana Nikolaevna Lappa (1892–1982) was Bulgakov's wife from 1913 to 1924.

The azure of his eyes seemed a bit dull. And only rarely did the diabolical lights of burning sulfur flash in them, imparting something satanic to his face. [...] Blue-eyed was generally inclined to communicate with the evil spirits emanating from hell. (Kataev 1994: 221–222, trans. mine)

Even portraying the imaginary monument to *sineglazyi* in the Parc Monceau in Paris, Kataev presents him in an embrace with Mephistopheles (Kataev 1994: 346). Among *sineglazyi*'s writings Kataev focused on *№13 Elpit Rabcommune*, *The Diaboliad* and *The Master and Margarita*, while *The White Guard* and *The Days of the Turbins*, which add nothing to this demonic image, are mentioned in passing. However the status of witness set limits to Kataev's imagination, whose boundaries are clearly defined by Zatonskii:

Сюжетные ходы жизни нарушить (по крайней мере, сознательно) нельзя, можно, однако, их особым образом ощутить и истолковать; *реальной личности нельзя исправить биографию, но внутри ее контуров можно накладывать краски своего, художнического к ней отношения.*

The plot of life's moves cannot be violated (at least not consciously); however they can be experienced and interpreted in a special way. *One cannot improve the biography of a real person, but it is possible to insert the shades of one's own poetical imagination within its contours.* (Zatonskii 1988: 162, trans. and emphasis mine)

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Kataev's literary interpretation of Bulgakov preceded his appropriation by the mass culture. This latter trend soon became manifest, for example, by pilgrimages to Bulgakov's apartment at 10, Bol'shaia Sadovaia Street in Moscow, graffiti with the illustrations to *The Master and Margarita* and quotations from it in this building's stairwell. The fact that fans easily recognized Woland's fictional address *Sadovaia № 302-bis* (Bulgakov 1990: 93)<sup>8</sup> with one of Bulgakov's real addresses above, testifies to mingling of biographical fact and fiction in the lay public's perception. The graffiti indicate a fascination with Woland and his retinue rather than with Yeshua and Pilate, and point to the characters' comic interpretation. Bulgakov's famous expression “manuscripts don't burn” was of course among the quotations (Bulgakov 1988: 326; Bushnell 1988: 507). The only inscription

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<sup>8</sup> In English translations it is renamed either No. 302A, Sadovaya street (Bulgakov 1988: 112) or No. 302-b Sadovaya Street (Bulgakov 1967: 105). The change of *bis* to A or b is problematic as *bis* carries at least two important connotations: first, it makes an address fictional from the outset as there are no buildings with this word in their number. An impossible number suits very well a street whose real name Bol'shaia Sadovaia is changed to the non-existent Sadovaia (Sadovaya). Secondly, *bis* is Ukrainian for devil (Levshin 1988: 165).

that did not originate in the novel is *Da zdravstvuet Bulgakov!* (*Long live Bulgakov!*) (Tan 1987: 29, trans. mine). By emphasizing the comic motifs of the Moscow chapters the fans *adapted* the novel to their own needs. After a while Bulgakov's biography merged with that of Master. Soon the address 10, Bol'shaia Sadovaia found itself on the map of Moscow's folk places. Lovers believe that any wish they inscribe on the walls of this stairwell will be granted by the supernatural spirits (Petrov 2015: 74). The merging of Bulgakov's biography with the Master's was also influenced by his widow Elena Sergeevna Bulgakova (1893–1970). Presenting Bulgakov as the Master, she presented herself as Margarita, as a witch (Chudakova 1988a: 483–484; Lakshin 1988: 413; Vulis 1987: 150). At the intersection of Bulgakov's novel, Kataev's book and urban folklore started Bulgakov's distancing from himself, which later developed into his transformation into the literary character. The writers, who unlike Kataev and Elena Sergeevna were not limited by the status of witnesses, created his alternative biographies.

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In brothers Strugatskii's novel *Khromaia Sud'ba* (*Limping Fate*, first published in 1986) Bulgakov is simultaneously present and absent. His family name is not mentioned and he is simply called Mikhail Afanasievich, a specialist at the Institute of Linguistic Research responsible for checking the manuscripts of Moscow writers for entropy by means of a special machine called *Izpital*, an abbreviation for *izmeritel' pisatel'skogo talanta* (the measurer of writers' talent). The protagonist, Felix Sorokin,<sup>9</sup> immediately recognizes him as Bulgakov, which he himself strongly denies:

Меня действительно зовут Михаил Афанасьевич, и говорят, что я действительно похож, но посудите сами: как я могу быть им? Мертвые умирают навсегда, Феликс Александрович. *Это так же верно, как и то, что рукописи сгорают дотла.* Сколько бы ОН ни утверждал обратное.

My name really is Mikhail Afanasievich and they say that I really do resemble him – but think about it yourself: how can I be him? The dead die forever, Feliks Aleksandrovich. *It is just as true as that the manuscripts are burned to ashes.* Never mind how many times He insists on the opposite. (Strugatskii and Strugatskii 1990: 278, trans. and emphasis mine)

<sup>9</sup> F. Sorokin is the main character of *Khromaia sud'ba* and author of the inserted novel from the Blue Document Case. Entitled *Gadkie lebedi* (*The Ugly Swans*) it was published in 1987 in the magazine *Daugava* and later inserted into the text of *Khromaia sud'ba*.

But Mikhail Afanasievich is presented as Bulgakov not just by his name and appearance, but also by supernatural abilities reminiscent of Woland's. For example, three witnesses describe him differently, which recalls Woland's portrait made by various people in *The Master and Margarita* (Bulgakov 1990: 10).<sup>10</sup> And here are three portraits made by two writers who visited him earlier, and the third made by Sorokin himself:

По словам Гарика, «сидит тунеядец в черном халате, берет у тебя рукопись и по листочку сует ее в приемную щель. На дисплее загораются цифры, а засим можешь спокойно идти домой. Жора [...] возразил, что никакой машины там не было, а были там какие-то серые шкафы, тунеядец был не в черном халате, а в белом, и пахло там печеной картошкой.

According to Garik, “a loafer in the black robe, who sits there, takes your manuscript from you and slides it page by page into the narrow gap. Then the figures are lit up on the display, and then you can calmly go home. Zhora [...] objected that *there was no machine at all, but there were some grey cabinets; the loafer was not in the black but in a white robe* and there was the smell of baked potato. (Strugatskii and Strugatskii 1990: 71, trans. and emphasis mine)<sup>11</sup>

Sorokin was much less impressed with machines with displays and clock faces than with the man who was sitting at the table:

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Был он, похоже, в моих годах, худощавый, с русыми, легко рассыпающимися волосами, с чертами лица в общем обыкновенными и в то же время чем-то неуловимо значительными. Что-то настораживало в этом лице, что-то в нем такое было, что ощущалась потребность внутренне подтянуться и говорить кратко, литературно и без всякого ерничества. *Был он в синем лабораторном халате поверх серого костюма, сорочка на нем была белоснежная, а галстук неброский, старомодный и старомодно повязанный.*

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<sup>10</sup> As this paragraph is omitted from Glenny's translation, here I provide it from that of Mirra Ginsburg:

Afterword, when – frankly speaking – it was already too late, various official institutions filed reports describing this man. A comparison of these reports can only cause astonishment. Thus, the first says that the man was short, had gold teeth, and limped on his right foot. The second, that the man was of enormous height, had platinum crowns, and limped on the left foot. The third states laconically that the man had no special distinguishing characteristics. (Bulgakov 1967: 6–7)

<sup>11</sup> The literal translation of the Russian word *tuneiadets* is not loafer but social parasite. After Joseph Brodsky was charged with social parasitism in a trial in 1964 it acquired ambivalent connotations. Negative for Garik and Zhora, here it might define *tvoret* – a creator, whom they cannot understand.

He was approximately of my age, spare, with fair, loosely tumbling hair, with facial features simultaneously ordinary and yet intangibly significant. There was something in his face that triggered alertness, something that needed gathering up and speaking laconically, correctly and without cracking wicked. *He was dressed in a blue lab coat over a grey suit; his shirt was snow-white and his old-fashioned nondescript tie was knotted in the old old-fashion way.* (Strugatskii and Strugatskii 1990: 199, trans. and emphasis mine)

Some scholars perceived these discrepancies as the authors' deliberate obfuscation of the fantastic plot. According to them, without confirmation from other characters Sorokin's meeting with Bulgakov remains in the sphere of the assumed (Gomel 1995: 98; Neronova 2011: 105). However the intangibility of supernatural beings for the uninitiated laity is a typical trait of fantastic fiction. Importantly, Mikhail Afanasievich immediately recognized the score of the pipes of Doomsday, which Sorokin had bought from the Fallen Angel, and cautioned the writer not to carry it with him (Strugatskii and Strugatskii 1990: 200, 209). Like Woland, who read aloud the excerpt from Master's burned manuscript (Bulgakov 1988: 26), Mikhail Afanasievich read aloud a still unwritten excerpt from Sorokin's novel (Strugatskii and Strugatskii 1990: 282). Like the Master, who alone among all the Moscow denizens understood the nature of Woland, Sorokin was the only writer who realized who he was dealing with and that his favorite manuscript was going through the ordeal. The similarity is strengthened through the composition of the novel within the novel. It is during this doomsday scene that Mikhail Afanasievich suddenly distances himself from Bulgakov and becomes *demon neba* (the demon of sky), who smashes the protagonist's horns of pride (Strugatskii and Strugatskii 1990: 278–282). The judgment declared without checking on *Izpital* targets not just Sorokin's novel but Bulgakov's as well. Accordingly, the manuscripts are burnt to ashes, and the new master is deprived of both light and repose. His only prize is the torment of creativity and the right to finish the novel. Unlike Miloslavskaja, who regards Bulgakov's inclusion as a character as more important for Bulgakov's myth in *Kbromaia sud'ba* than quotations and reminiscences (Miloslavskaja 2014: 167), I do not support the hierarchy of differences.

Aleksander Zhitinsky's novel *Poteriannyi dom ili razgovory s milordom* (*The Flying House, or Conversations with Milord*, first published in 1987) is clearly placed in Laurence Stern's tradition. Bulgakov appears in it as an episodic character together with eleven other immortals, among whom the reader with the protagonist's help can easily recognize Homer, Vergil, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, Pushkin, Hoffman, Gogol, Dostoevskii

and Pasternak. All are judges in the Supreme Court, which is at the same time a selection committee. They must check the completed manuscripts of the contemporary Russian writers and poets who claim their right to immortality. The court hearing takes place on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of a nine-story building. The list of the Writers Union's members is in Stern's hands. The applicants climb the scaffold one by one and give their manuscripts to the witch-like priestess, who throws them into the sacrificial bowl with fire. If they burn, the authors fall into the garbage chute. If at least one line or even one metaphor resists the fire, the letters acquire the color of gold and the authors are granted a definite number of years of additional life, usually from fifteen to fifty. The only writer whose name Zhitinskii mentions in full is Laurence Stern; two others are called by their given name and patronymic, but without a family name: Fedor Mikhailovich and Aleksandr Sergeevich. All the others are simply described by the protagonist, who undoubtedly recognizes them. The descriptions are clear enough: the aim is not to perplex the readers, as we can see from Bulgakov's portrait, for example:

Человек из четвертого ряда, сидевший в крайнем кресле у бокового прохода, не отличался здоровым видом. С жалостью и восторгом смотрел сочинитель на своего вдохновителя, на его прямые непокорные волосы, падавшие на лоб, на заостренный подбородок и тонкие губы. Он был моложе других, но именно его формулу использовал синклит бессмертных для испытания соискателей.

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The person who was sitting in the fourth row near the side passage looked rather unhealthy. The protagonist was looking at the person who inspired him, at his straight unruly hair, at his pointed chin and thin lips. He was younger than the others, *but it was his formula that the court of the immortals used for checking the applicants.* (Zhitinskii 2001: 577, trans. and emphasis mine)

By his description of the immortals Zhitinskii clearly ridicules Kataev's book. To my mind, through one of the anonymous applicants he depicts Kataev himself as *prozaika i sekretaria*, a prose writer and a secretary,

[...] который плюхнулся в бархатное кресло для бессмертных и стал наблюдать, как горит его роман. Мистеру Стерну стоило большого труда убедить его взойти на эшафот, и он провалился в мусоропровод с удивленным лицом, потрясенный вопиющей несправедливостью

[...] who plopped down into a velvet armchair meant for immortals and from there watched the burning of his novel. It took great effort by Mr. Stern to convince him to mount the scaffold; and he fell down through the garbage

chute with an expression on his face of surprise and shock at the blatant injustice. (Zhitinskii 2001: 583)

My assumption is based on the concluding lines of Kataev's book describing his own transformation into the monument in the Parc Monceau (Kataev 1994: 350). Unlike the impostor, the protagonist of Zhitinskii's novel sits on the adjacent broken stool with no inclination to change it for the empty armchair beside him. His novel is still unfinished, which means that his court hearing will take place later. Contrary to the Strugatskii brothers, who denied Bulgakov's formula, Zhitinsky accepted it – albeit with a reservation: the manuscripts do not burn only if they deserve immortality.

As mentioned earlier, my decision to write about Bulgakov, Akhmatova and Gumilev separately was taken for the sake of clarity only and can be applied only with some unavoidable violations. The first case in point is Andrei Lazarchuk's and Mikhail Uspenskii's novel *Posmotri v glaza chudovishch* (*Look into the Monsters' Eyes*, 1997), which is mainly about Nikolai Gumilev, with Bulgakov appearing only as an episodic character. Here I discuss these episodes only, reserving the rest of discussion for the subsections on Akhmatova, and more especially Gumilev. In this novel Gumilev was not executed by the Cheka on 26 August 1921 but he continues his journeys, adventures and writings till our time. Two meetings with Bulgakov, held after the date of Gumilev's execution, are among these adventures. For the first time, Gumilev sees Bulgakov from afar in September 1921 while strolling with Iakov Vilimovich Brius, known in the West as Jacob or James Daniel Bruce (1669–1735), one of fellow campaigners of Peter the Great. Brius has the reputation of a sorcerer, who has hidden his magic book in Sukharev Tower (Petrov 2015: 72–73):

Зато о другом молодом человеке, с которым мы разминулись перед отъездом из Москвы в кривых привокзальных улочках, блондине с робким пронзительным взглядом, в очень старом коричневом пиджаке и с фанерным чемоданом на ремне, Яков Вилимович, помнится, сказал:

— *Вот идет Мастер. Он еще не знает, что он Мастер* — и, полагаю, никогда не узнает...

И я тогда запомнил его. Встреча наша состоялась много позже.

About another young man – we missed each other before our departure from Moscow in the winding streets near a train station, a blond with timid and yet gimlet eyes wearing a very old brown coat and carrying a plywood suitcase on a belt, Iakov Vilimovich said:

*"Here's the Master. He still doesn't know he's the Master and I believe he'll never know..."*

And then I remembered him. Our meeting took place much later. (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 106–107, trans. and emphasis mine)

Their second meeting was in August 1928 in Moscow, where Gumilev secretly arrived under the name Fridrikh Maria von Wielland, a consultant in ancient languages with the task of selling the red magicians a slightly defective translation of *Necronomicon*. For secrecy the color of his eyes was changed by means of contact lenses, one of which he accidentally broke. As Gumilev limped heavily, Brius gave him a walking-stick with a knob in the shape of dog’s head. The planned liquidation of the consultant did not take place, because the GPU agent who was supposed to shove him under the tram fell down himself under the weird hallucination of standing on ice on that hot August day. And Gumilev calmly headed toward the bench.<sup>12</sup>

На скамейке под липами сидел, уложив ногу на ногу, худошавый, очень усталый человек в безукоризненном светлом костюме. В нынешней России так одевались либо знатные иностранцы вроде меня, либо очень известные артисты. У власть имущих стиль был совершенно иной.

On the bench under the lime trees a skinny and a very tired man dressed to perfection in a light-colored suit, sat with his legs crossed. In contemporary Russia it was the style of either noble foreigners like me or very famous actors. Those in power had a different style. (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 108, trans. mine)

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It was Gumilev who told Bulgakov about the killing of a person by a female tram-driver Komsomol member, it was he who asked Bulgakov to help himself to any cigarette he liked from Gumilev’s Abyssinian port cigar, and even invited him to go with him to Berlin. Bulgakov did not recognize the guest from the other world and even mistook him for a German from Riga. In fact, we are presented with a new version of the events on the Patriarch’s Ponds, familiar to readers from the opening pages of Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. Readers can easily guess that the template for Berlioz’s and Bezdomny’s meeting with Woland was in fact Bulgakov’s meeting with Gumilev (Kaigorodova 2002: 138). The remaining changes for Bulgakov were minor. He replaced Gumilev by Satan, specified the breed of the dog whose head topped Gumilev’s stick, swapped the August ice with Annushka’s spilt sunflower oil; and, of course, placed on the bench Bezdomnyi and

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<sup>12</sup> Tram motifs connected to Bulgakov, Akhmatova and Gumilev are addressed in my previous paper (Fialkova 2016: 227–228).

Berlioz instead of himself. Although the word Master is applied to Bulgakov, the structural changes by Lazarchuk and Uspenskii in fact led to the fusion of Bulgakov with of his another character, Ivan Bezdomny.

The second example of the plexus of alternative biographies, namely that of Bulgakov and Akhmatova, is in the ongoing fantastic book series *Kievskie ved'my* (*Kiev's Witches*).<sup>13</sup> It started in 2005 with the novel *Kievskie ved'my. Mech i krest* (*Kiev's Witches. The Sword and the Cross*) by Lada Lusina (pen-name of Vladislava Kucherova).<sup>14</sup>

Three young Kiev wenches Daria (Dasha) Chub, Katerina (Katia) Dobrozhanskaia and Maria (Masha) Kovaleva arrived – each for a different reason – at the *Tsentr Starokievskogo koldovstva na Podole* (Centre of Old Kiev's magic on Podol), situated on Andreevsky Descent. There they meet a young man who is reading Bulgakov's book. As with Woland in *The Master and Margarita* and Mikhail Afanasievich in the Strugatskiis' *Khromaia sud'ba*, each woman sees him differently, namely as a red-haired man, a blond and dark-haired respectively. The stranger happened to be Kiev's Demon, while the women are forcibly transformed into Kievitsy (singular Kievitsa), the guardians of the City, who are hierarchically above the witches but below the angels (Fialkova 2012: 213–216). In accordance with the formula of continuity and open-endedness, which is the foundation of any series (Maund 2012: 147–148), the Kievitsy, the Demon and Kiev itself are constants while the plots of the books enjoy relative autonomy. The Kievitsy are powerful enough to go to the past, to communicate with people there and to change history.<sup>15</sup> To provide some credibility Lusina uses wide range of sources, including maps, guidebooks and scholarly publications in folklore, literature, regional studies and history, as well

<sup>13</sup> Nikolai Gumilev is talked about, his poems are quoted, but currently he has not become literary character.

<sup>14</sup> The choice of the pen-name was triggered by two factors, one of which was explained by Lusina herself. Lada is the diminutive form of her full name – Vladislava, while Lusina (or Luzina) is her mother's maiden name, which she perceives as more impressive. Another factor becomes obvious after reading the book *Kievskie ved'my. Vystrel v opere* (*Kiev's Witches. The Shot in the Opera*, first published in 2007). The epigraph to its first chapter is taken from Bulgakov's story *Spiriticheskii seance* (*A Séance*), which mentions a certain Madame Lusina (Bulgakov 1989: 219). This coincidence is elevated to the level of foresight and stimulates Bulgakov's transformation into a literary character. As Bulgakov wrote about Lusina, it gives Lusina the right to write about Bulgakov.

<sup>15</sup> There are alternative biographies in the series as well. The level of their centrality to the plot as well as of their alternativity varies. To date there are eight books in the series.

as photos of people, pictures and places mentioned. Commentaries, real and fictional, often serve as part of the narration in contemporary Russian prose<sup>16</sup> when concerned with literature and/or history (Fialkova 2010: 334; Skoropanova 2002: 135–142). In keeping with this trend, Lusina’s series is a fantastic extension of these commentaries.

Bulgakov’s influence on the series stems mostly from *The White Guard* and *The Master and Margarita* with their mythicizing Kiev and Moscow through transformation of the mundane into the fantastic. The continuity of the fantastic hints in the former and their rampant manifestation in the latter is explained by Miron Petrovskii in his scholarly book, heavily quoted, alluded to and even contested by Lusina (e.g. Lusina 2009a: 233, 2009b: 404; Petrovskii 2001: 92, 260). Bulgakov-centricity is multi-level and permeates the entire fabric of the texts, from the minor details to the plots. This is seen in numerous allusions, for example, Behemoth, the name of the magic cat, the knob of the Demon’s stick in the form of a hand instead of poodle’s head, the decapitating tram, and so on. Being a devotee of Bulgakov, Kievitsa Masha is always ready to supply information about him. Her dream to meet the living Bulgakov, who for her was akin to God (Lusina 2009a: 254) unexpectedly materializes during an attempt to decipher the formula in the magic book of the erstwhile Kievitsa Klyna. It contains the initials of both Bulgakov and Akhmatova and intimates a strange connection between Anna Akhmatova and the notorious Annushka from *The Master and Margarita* with her spilt oil (Lusina 2009b: 37, 76, 167, 194). On her journey into the past Masha encounters Ania Gorenko (Akhmatova’s maiden name) and witnesses her meeting with high-school pupil Misha Bulgakov on Vladimir Hill, one of Kiev’s Bald Mountains with a history of witches’ covens (Lusina 2009b: 138–139). While the hypothetical possibility of an encounter between these two teenagers in Kiev was suggested by Ol’shanskaia – abundantly quoted by Lusina (e.g. Ol’shanskaia 1994) the actual meeting takes place in the series with grave implication for alternative biographies of both of them. The brooch in the form of a lyre, which Ania holds in her hand, irradiates Bulgakov with literary creativity and changes his predestined path from great achievements in medicine to literature. As a punishment he dies of the very illness which he was supposed to learn to cure (Lusina 2009b: 169–170).

Deciphering the formula led to understanding Akhmatova’s chance involvement in Stolypin’s assassination by Dmitrii Bogrov, that triggered the

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<sup>16</sup> Lusina presents herself as a Russian-language Ukrainian and not Russian writer.

revolution. The latter led to fifty million victims. Seeking to avoid bloodshed, the Kievitsy eliminate Anna's random remark to Bogrov, on which History slipped like Berlioz on Annushka's spilt oil, and consequently undid the assassination and the revolution itself.<sup>17</sup> Still, without the revolution and the Civil War Bulgakov could not have created *The White Guard* and become a writer. This idea, which first appeared in Petrovskii's book (2001: 33),<sup>18</sup> materializes in Lusina's series. He became a great physician and did not recognize his own novels, delivered to him at Kievitsa Masha's request by Mir, a ghost character:

Он назвал их фантастическими, — покорно повторил Мир в тринадцатый раз. — Он сказал, что их действие происходит в какой-то непонятной стране. И он не понимает, почему эту страну называют Россией. Он сказал, такого не может быть [...] Ведь и "Мастер и Маргарита", и "Белая гвардия" написаны о том, чего не было. Это фантастика. И даже не научная. Фэнтези...

He called them fantastic, Mir repeated resignedly for the thirteenth time. – He said that their plots take place in some vague country. And he doesn't understand why this country is called Russia. He said it can't be like that [...] After all, both *The Master and Margarita* and *The White Guard* are written about something that has never happened. It's fantastika. And it's not even science fiction. It's fantasy... (Lusina 2009b: 402–403, trans. mine)

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One change influences the succession of others. Stolypin who was saved in Kiev from Bogrov's bullet dies in Saratov. He was accidentally wounded by Tatiana Lappa and then suffered a heart attack, which he did not survive. Left by her fiancé Mikhail Bulgakov, Lappa tried to commit suicide, but was prevented by Stolypin's interference which resulted in his own death. Bulgakov's life without literature was not happy. He was a patient in the psychiatric hospital suffering from strange dreams, which he shared with another patient, Anna Akhmatova, who did not become a poet:

<sup>17</sup> The Prime Minister P.A. Stolypin was shot in the Kiev Opera House on 14 September 1911 by Dmitrii Bogrov and died four days later. Bogrov was executed on 25 September 1911 in the fortress on Lysaia Gora (Bald Mountain). The fact of Akhmatova's presence in Kiev on the day of assassination, mentioned by Ol'shanskaia, is quoted by Lusina as an epigraph to the chapter (Lusina 2009b: 168).

<sup>18</sup> I am greatly indebted to Miron Petrovskii and late Evdokia Ol'shanskaia (1929–2003), both of whom became my informal teachers and influenced me deeply in my Kiev youth. The use of their works in the series initially drew my attention to Lusina.

Ему тоже снились странные сны. Или не сны... не помню... Про Понтия Пилата, который должен спасти Иисуса Христа, но не спасет, потому что он трус.

He has also dreamed strange dreams. May be they were not dreams... I don't remember... They were about Pontius Pilates who had to save Jesus Christ, but wouldn't because he was a coward. (Lusina 2011: 66, trans. mine)

To restore Bulgakov's involvement in literature Masha submitted to the way approved by God and agreed to the revolution and the Civil War. Being balanced with fifty million victims Bulgakov's creative activity is elevated to sacred status. Unlike the priest Aleksander and the poet Rusakov from *The White Guard*, who sought answers in the Bible, the Kievitsy read about fate in Bulgakov's novels (Bulgakov 1971: 12–13, 282–284; Lusina 2009b: 230), thus contributing to the existing tradition (Snitko 2004). The perception of Bulgakov as a God-like figure accords with the sanctification of his texts. Akhmatova's transformations by Lusina, mentioned above, will be discussed in the next section.

Like Lada Lusina, Viktor Rogozinskii also manipulated the Kiev events in Bulgakov's life. But in contrast to Lusina, who together with the revolution revoked Bulgakov's first marriage to Tatiana Lappa, Rogozinskii focuses on the time of the couple's honeymoon, as is directly stated in the title: *Medovyi mesiats Mikhaïla Bulgakova: Kievskaiia feeria (Mikhail Bulgakov's Honeymoon: Kiev's Extravaganza, 2009)*. The book's back cover has a picture of the couple against the background of the house at 25, Reitarskaia Street, where Mikhail and Tatiana spent their first month together. Among their alternative neighbors readers find characters reminiscent of those from the *Heart of a Dog* and *Master and Margarita*: Prof. Perebrozhenskii (instead of Preobrazhenskii), a fake limping magician and astrologer from Nurnberg with eyes of indeterminate color, the gendarmerie head Pilatov (drawn from Pontius Pilate), beautiful Margarita Lvovna, the unhappy wife of colonel Shipshinskii (the new Margarita), and more. Like the brothers Strugatskii, Rogozinskii adopts the structure of the novel within the novel. But he presents his own version of Biblical events, focusing on the roles of the two women, Claudia Procula, a merciful wife of Pontius Pilates,<sup>19</sup> and Faustina, a devoted nanny of Emperor Tiberius.<sup>20</sup> Faustina has resolved to beg the

<sup>19</sup> The attempts of Pilate's wife to save Jesus are known from the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

<sup>20</sup> Rogozinskii's version about Faustina recalls Selma Lagerlöf's story *Saint Veronica's Kerchief*.

prophet for mercy and to cure Tiberius of his leprosy. Despite being late she succeeds in her mission, wiping the blood and sweat from Jesus' face on his way to Golgotha. With this kerchief now miraculously bearing the image of Jesus, she cleans Tiberius' skin, and the signs of leprosy disappear. Bulgakov's biography undergoes serious transformations. He is devoid of any literary talent. The Jerusalem events become known to him from the manuscript of the student Khmel'nikov, reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, if not Jesus himself. It is he who is adored by Margarita Lvovna, who, in order to save Khmelnikov sacrifices herself, becoming the queen of criminals; this leaves no room for any association with Bulgakov and Elena Sergeevna.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Bulgakov can be understood as the epigone of Rogozinskii himself.

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The last fictional transformation of Bulgakov's biography, as far as I know, occurs in Vladimir Kolganov's novel *Pokaiannye sny Mikhaïla Afanasievicha* (*Repenting Dreams of Mikhail Afanasievich*, 2014). This was preceded by his books (Kolganov 2012a, 2012b) that belong to the notorious "popular" literary studies, the genre analyzed by Natalia Ivanova in the context of anti-biographies (Ivanova 2008). In his attacks on literary scholars, Kolganov gives references only selectively. In other cases he invites readers to identify them on their own with the help of the internet. This tactics of riddles recalls Kataev's *Almaznyi moi venets*, which Kolganov actually quotes (Kolganov 2012b: 9, 206). The novel tells of an invented love affair between Mikhail Bulgakov and a princess, one Kira Kozlovskaja, whose cross-eyed aunt's name is Margarita. The novel is heavily based on the compilations from Bulgakov's oeuvres such as *Morphine*, *Theatrical Novel* and *The Master and Margarita*. The plot relates movements in space and time. Transferred to Moscow at the time of the August putsch of 1991, Bulgakov finds himself in his own museum, without realizing it. As in Lusina's version, he does not recognize his own writings, but suddenly feels a need for literary work (Kolganov 2014: 74–79). The episode from *The Master and Margarita* of Berlioz's death under the tram is re-written as a near-death event in Bulgakov's own alternative biography. Presumably he is almost killed by Kira's husband, his rival for her love (Kolganov 2014: 70–73). Trying to get his novel about Kira published, Kolganov's Bulgakov, like Bulgakov's fictional characters, Maksudov, Dymogatskii and the Master, endures the ordeal of publishing houses and theatres. A new

<sup>21</sup> Ironically, it is Bulgakov's first wife and not the third, who has been provided with alternative biographies.

leap in space carries him to Paris, where he experiences a love affair with Kira’s great-granddaughter Marina. They meet in Parc Monceau, the place where Kataev places Bulgakov’s (*blue-eyed*) statue in his fictional memoirs (Kolganov 2014: 213). The new move brings Bulgakov to the interrogation in 1931. It is the interrogator who speaks almost the same words – familiar to readers – as those of Woland:

Там прочитали ваш роман. — Глазами указывает на потолок. — Роман понравился.

Your novel has been read there. He pointed with his eyes to the ceiling. The novel was liked. (Kolganov 2014: 323–324, trans. mine. Cf. Bulgakov 1990: 369; Bulgakov 1988: 428)

But unlike Woland, who intimates Yeshua Ha-Notsri, the interrogator means the political authorities and is trying to recruit Bulgakov as an agent. However, this attempt is interrupted by the new turn of the plot: Bulgakov’s meeting with Kira on a train.

### 3. ANNA AKHMATOVA AS A *FANTASTIKA* CHARACTER

Being a cult figure, Akhmatova has been perceived as *koroleva russkoi poezii* (a queen of Russian poetry), as a person of tremendous personal courage and will, comparable to religious ascetics, and even as God’s viceroy on earth. An example of this adulation is found in Vladimir Kornilov’s verses:

There was no God, but Akhmatova  
Was on the earth in those days (qtd. in Ivanova 2008: 86)

Having lived a tragic, but fairly long life, she succeeded in surviving the purges and winning the adoration not only of numerous enthusiastic fans, whose presence was noted even by early memoirists (Zenkevich 1991: 18, 20), but of young poets of the new generation as well. However, in the mid-1990s the Akhmatova cult was questioned (Zholkovskii 1996), whereupon aggressive attacks in the “popular” literary studies genre were unleashed on Akhmatova herself (Kataeva 2007). Material for the onslaught was taken from various sources, namely her poems and memoirs, diaries and letters of people familiar with her. As we know, there is no such thing as objective memoirs; all are subjective and reflect various traits of their authors, including envy and jealousy. In his introduction to Nadezhda Mandel’shtam’s memoirs about

Akhmatova, Pavel Nerler regrets that she did not follow Kataev's pattern of using nicknames or at least abbreviations, which would "spare waste of nerves both to her *personazhi* (characters) and readers and spare feathers to the critics" (Nerler 2008: 70, trans. mine). The memoirists' subjectivity was augmented by the attackers'. Evidence of Akhmatova's so-called guilt was adduced tendentiously and out of context, while that in her favor, which in fact constituted a majority (Bykov 2016a: 5), was ignored. The upshot was the creation of a negative mythological image. Akhmatova was accused of lying, of exploitation, of hypocrisy, narcissism, and totalitarian control of her fans, of glorification of Stalin, of being a bad mother, of untidiness, of propagating legends about herself and others, of producing mediocre poetry disguised by brilliant performances, and even of killing Tsvetaeva's son Georgii Efron (Mur), who in fact perished as a soldier on the front in World War II (Kataeva 2007: 413). Of course, publications in her defense as well as those urging the need to create Akhmatova's formal academic biography instead of pro- or anti-Akhmatova myths have been published (e.g. Bykov 2016a, 2016b; Chernykh 2005; Ivanova 2008; Latynina 2009; Naiman 1997; Nerler 2008, etc.). However, Akhmatova's transformation into fantastic character was influenced by this denigrating trend.

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As in Bulgakov's case, Akhmatova's alternative biography also started as so-called *belletristicheskie memuary* (fictional memoirs), but their author was different. This was Mikhail Zenkevich, poet and member of the acmeist group founded by Nikolai Gumilev in 1912. Written as early as in 1921–1927, his memoirs reached readers only in 1991, after Kataev's *Almaznyi moi venets*, although many people – including Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandel'shtam – read them in manuscript. Upon reading them Akhmatova exclaimed, "*Kakaia nepravdopodobnaia pravda!*" (What an implausible truth it is!) (Zenkevich 1991: 5). Her words remind us of Kataev's similar self-evaluation quoted at the beginning of the section on Bulgakov above. Another strange similarity is the free and approximate quotations of poems from memory instead of their rigorous checking, as specified in the footnote by the editor (Zenkevich 1991: 19). However, this practice was rather popular in the Silver Age, when both Zenkevich and Kataev grew up as writers – for example, in Andrei Bely's *Peterburg* (*Petersburg*). Unlike Kataev, Zenkevich used real names, but this did not preclude him from a supernatural plot, motivated by a typhoid delirium. Written before Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Akhmatova's *Poem without Hero*, Zenkevich's fictional memoirs, a novel in Bykov's definition (Bykov 2016a: 14), precedes some of their motifs, for example, meetings between the living

and the dead, full-fleshed ghosts, a Hella-like vampire and even mention of the fourth dimension as the place whence appear the dead (Zenkevich 1991: 22, 88–89).<sup>22</sup>

Zenkevich's memoirs entitled *El'ga* (distorted form of Olga)<sup>23</sup> have Akhmatova's portrait on the cover. However, showing the portraits of both Akhmatova and Gumilev would have been more accurate. This is not only because the title itself is borrowed from one of Gumilev's poems (Gumilev 1988: 332–333) but from Gumilev's centrality to the plot, which will be addressed in the next section.

In the first part of the book Akhmatova appears under her own name in the somewhat mundane atmosphere of Petersburg's<sup>24</sup> Agronomic Institute, where being hard up she worked as a librarian. Having divorced Gumilev she was by then married to Vladimir (Voldemar) Shileiko (1891–1930). Dressed in her winter coat and sitting in the big, cold room with a golden pier-glass, she regaled narrator with cocoa served in porcelain cups by an intelligent middle-aged lady, apparently an admirer of Akhmatova's poems. They talked about the tragedy of Gumilev's and Blok's deaths, about a legend concerning her love affair with Blok and about her divorce from Gumilev. Even in that uncomfortable hall she looked the same fine lady as in the villa in Tsarskoe Selo, as a person who can be debased by nobody. It is after this meeting that the author encounters a man at the tram stop, who strangely resembles Gumilev. But it took him a while to realize that he had met a ghost.

As the fantastic atmosphere of the narration intensifies, another female figure is introduced: *El'ga*. While somehow connected to Gumilev, she greatly attracts the author. The latter even envisioned in his raving the disgusting fruit of his only night with *El'ga*, even though he doubted that it really had taken place. A strange dead baby, the result of a miscarriage, emerges from the alcohol-filled glass jar and crawls onto him, calling

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<sup>22</sup> Bulgakov wrote about the fifth dimension, which helped to enlarge an ordinary Moscow flat to an enormous hall for Woland's ball of the full moon (Bulgakov 1988: 286). Although Zenkevich was acquainted with Bulgakov and mentioned in his widow's diary (Bulgakova 1990: 144), I do not know whether Bulgakov read *El'ga* in manuscript or not. The similarity can stem from the Gogol tradition, which was extremely important for both of them, as well as from the typical traits of the fantastic prose of the 1920s.

<sup>23</sup> The poem addresses Princess Olga of Kiev (890–969). Although Olga was venerated as a saint, in the poem she is presented as close to a Valkyrie.

<sup>24</sup> Although Petersburg was at that time officially called Petrograd, Zenkevich retained its old name.

him *papochka* (daddy). There is almost no direct evidence that El’ga is Akhmatova’s extension, although it is absolutely clear to Zenkevich’s widow that she is.<sup>25</sup> However, there is an episode of Gumilev’s reciting his poem to El’ga, the poem which was actually devoted to Akhmatova. And Elga’s reaction resembles that of Akhmatova:

Она слушает молча, но в ее глазах, улыбке, во всей ее позе чувствуется что-то властное, хищное, напоминающее стихи Гумилева:

И тая в глазах злое торжество,  
Женщина в углу слушала его.

She is listening silently, but in her eyes, [her] smile, in all her posture, something powerful and predatory is felt, recalling Gumilev’s verses:

And hiding evil triumph in her eyes

The woman in the corner was listening to him. (Gumilev 1988: 178; Zenkevich 1991: 73, trans. mine)

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The direct projection of Gumilev’s verses onto El’ga shows one of the devices used in later transformations of Akhmatova into a character in both “popular” literary studies and fantastic prose. The poems, hers and Gumilev’s alike, are interpreted literally, not metaphorically. If she wrote: *Struggling, frozen left mitten contriving / On right-hand digits to place* (Akhmatova 1911), it means that this scene could be reproduced in a novel (Lusina 2009b: 182). Similarly, the lines below written about Kiev during Akhmatova’s stay in the city and quoted by Lusina can be developed into the story of her romantic infatuation with Kiev’s Demon:

My sacrificial journey’s path  
Here will come to end,  
With only you, my equal half,  
And my love at hand (Akhmatova 1914)

Машин взгляд вцепился в фигуру Великого князя, под грозным крестом которого Аннушка объяснилась в любви своему Демону.

Masha’s eyes were transfixed on the figure of the Great Prince, under whose formidable cross Annushka confessed to her Demon her love for him. (Lusina 2009b: 174, trans. mine)

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<sup>25</sup> “*Kto El’ga? Konechno, Akhmatova; tochnee, ona stala proobrazom etoi demonicheskoi geroini.*” / “Who is El’ga? Of course, it is Akhmatova; to be more precise she became the prototype of this demonic character.” (Zenkevich 1991: 5, trans. mine)

Another device to transform Akhmatova into a fantastic character is to re-interpret biographical facts familiar to readers from memoirs and papers. For a case in point I return to the story about the lyre-shaped brooch in the section on Bulgakov. In Lusina’s novel it becomes a symbol of literary creativity. But in Akhmatova’s alternative biography this creativity led to real human victims – her sisters, her brother and Gumilev, not to mention the fifty million who perished in the revolution (Lusina 2009b: 74–75, 86–87, 117–118, 132–133, 140, 146–147, 149, 155, 163, 176–177, 191, 194, 208–209 etc.).<sup>26</sup> The idea of Akhmatova’s deadly guilt is based on the quotation from one of her late poems, written in 1963:

...и умирать в сознание горделивом  
Что жертв своих не ведаешь числа.

And to die with a proud mind  
Not knowing the number of your victims. (Akhmatova 2010: 680, trans. mine)

In female hands the Lyre makes a destructive impact on people’s lives, which does not happen when she is owned by a male writer. But at the same time Akhmatova’s Lyre gives women a voice and rights, so good and evil are always connected (Lusina 2009b: 162, 240, 251). By taking the Lyre away from Kiev, Akhmatova steals the City’s literary glory. Therefore Kiev lacks great literature. Bulgakov succeeded in becoming a writer only in Moscow, when Akhmatova, according to Lusina, rendered him the Lyre, after realizing too late the enormous price of benefiting from the talisman herself. Unlike Akhmatova, who sacrificed others, Bulgakov sacrifices himself, paying for his creativity with his untimely death (Lusina 2009b: 50, 334–335, 386, 390):

Лира – не добро и не зло. Она – это вы. Талисман не принимает решений, кому жить, а кому умирать. Она лишь дает своему хозяину силы свершить избранное им.

The Lyre is neither good nor evil. It is you. The talisman does not make decisions – who is meant to live and who to die. It only grants its master the power to implement the decision. (Lusina 2009b: 162, trans. mine)

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<sup>26</sup> Among other Akhmatova’s sins, set forth in the novel, are her dislike of Kiev and the change of her Ukrainian family name Gorenko to Russian Akhmatova, although Lusina as well as her characters knows that the latter measure was taken because of Akhmatova’s father’s dislike of the use of his name for poetry.

Although Lusina borrowed most Akhmatova's biographical facts from Ol'shanskaia's essay (1994), her accusatory tone apparently goes back to Zholkovskii's paper (1996), not mentioned in the novel, or at least to the manifestation it triggered.<sup>27</sup> I find indirect evidence of Lusina's familiarity with Zholkovskii's paper in the letters AAA as Akhmatova's designation in the formula, noted in the previous section (Lusina 2009b: 37, 76). It was the so-called *institut AAA* (AAA institution) that Zholkovskii blamed for the creation and propagation of Akhmatova's myth, meaning her admirers rather than Akhmatova herself. Vladimir Sorokin's use of the same designation of Akhmatova in the novel *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, first published in 1999) was taken by some scholars as a mark of Zholkovskii's impact (Kovalev 2013).

*Goluboe salo* features Anna Akhmatova not in the company of Bulgakov or Gumilev. The plot unfolds at two different periods: Siberia in 2048 and in an alternative history 1954 in Stalin's Moscow and in Hitler's Third Reich. Blue lard is a substance with zero entropy<sup>28</sup> produced by the clones of seven writers: Tolstoi-4, Chekhov-3, Nabokov-7, Pasternak-1, Dostoevskii-2, Akhmatova-2, and Platonov-3. Each clone produces its sample writing, with a predetermined percentage of closeness to the original writing of the writer/poet in question. In Akhmatova's case it is 88 percent of correspondence, which is among the highest, and can be understood as a sign of low original quality (Sorokin 2002: 19, 49–57). Akhmatova is the only author who under the initials AAA takes active part in the plot. A dirty old woman dressed in rags, she grovels before Stalin and licks his boots, which can be understood as intimating her doxological poems written in 1949 in a desperate attempt to save her son from prison (Akhmatova 2010: 397–401). Another nauseating episode is her giving birth to a small egg, signifying her insufficient creative legacy, which should be swallowed by her heir. After unsuccessful attempts to swallow it by Robert, Andrei, Zhenia and Belka, easily identified as the poets Rozhdestvenskii, Voznesenskii, Evtushenko and Akhmadullina, the egg is swallowed very smoothly by Iosif, a plump boy:

AAA положила ему на рыжую голову свою тяжелую грязную руку:  
- Те, кто пытался, будут просто рифмовать. А ты станешь большим поэтом.  
Ступай.

<sup>27</sup> As Lusina's novel *Vystrel v opere* was first published in the same year as Kataeva's *Anti-Akhmatova* (2007), the latter can hardly be its inspiration.

<sup>28</sup> Readers may remember that in the Strugatskii's *Khromaia sud'ba*, discussed in the section on Bulgakov, the manuscripts of Moscow writers had to be checked for entropy.

AAA placed her heavy dirty hand on his red head:

“Those who tried will be able to rhyme. And you will become a great poet.

Now you may go.” (Sorokin 202: 251, trans. mine)

I agree with Kovalev, who saw in Sorokin’s transformation of Akhmatova into *besnovataia iurodivaia* (a possessed holy fool), both the deconstruction and recreation of Akhmatova’s myth: holy fools belong with the sacred. I may add that the plain fact that the egg was swallowed by Iosif, the future Nobel Prize winner Joseph Brodsky, at once establishes a specific system of coordinates. In contrast to Lusina, who forces her Akhmatova to transfer the Lyre to Bulgakov, Sorokin conforms to Akhmatova’s perception of literary continuity.

#### 4. NIKOLAI GUMILEV AS A *FANTASTIKA* CHARACTER

Nikolai Gumilev perceived his life as a kind of a constructed legend. In his letter to the poetess V. E. Arens of 1 July 1908 he openly declares his fascination with the idea of the creation of myths about oneself:

Что есть прекрасная жизнь как не реализация вымыслов, созданных искусством? Разве не хорошо сотворить свою жизнь, как художник творит картину, как поэт создает поэму? Правда, материал очень неподатлив, но разве не из твердого мрамора высекают самые дивные статуи?

What is wonderful life if not the realization of fantasy created by art? Is it not good to create one’s own life as a painter creates a picture, as a poet creates a poem? Sure, the material is unyielding, but isn’t it true that from solid marble the most wonderful statues are carved? (qtd. in Timenchik 1987: 51, trans.mine)

This attitude to life as a work of art found its way in Gumilev’s poems, for example, *Pamiat’* (Memory) (Gumilev 1988: 309–310, 1972: 109–110) and in his actual behavior; it led to the dissolution of the border between his various masks and his face in the perception of his contemporaries. Various autobiographical myths created by Gumilev, including the Magician, the Poet, the Navigator and Shooter (*moreplavatel’ i strelok*), the Warrior (Knight, Conquistador), the Lover, etc., became well known during his lifetime. Gumilev was executed on 26 August 1921 by the Cheka on the charge of participation in the monarchist Tagansky Conspiracy. The exact date of his execution long remained unknown and his grave site is still unknown.

The poet's behavior in prison and during the execution has been highly discussed by memoirists, who see it as a combination of romantic heroism and contempt for the Bolsheviks. But no first-hand evidence is available, and all these stories can be defined as rumor, which later consolidated as legend. However, the tragic death at the age of 35, combined with the heroic image, triggered the subjective inclusion of Gumilev in a succession of great Russian poets, who opposed the power of authorities and perished by violence, be it in a duel or by execution. Thus in the perception of friends and many readers alike, he joins Pushkin and Lermontov. Recently these legends have been analyzed by researchers, who also indicate Gumilev's figure in contemporary *fentesi* (fantasy) as their natural extension (Miroshkin; Samokhvalova 2011; Tadevosian 2008).

As stated earlier, Gumilev's first post-mortem apparition took place in Zenkevich's fictional memoirs *El'ga*. The feeling of meeting Gumilev could be an actual fact, since in the first months after the execution rumors that he was still alive were widespread and in some cases combined with those concerning Akhmatova's death (Chudakova 1988b: 157). Although Gumilev appears to the author in corporeal form and takes him to the meeting at *Apollon* and then to the Tagantsev conspiracy, he is surrounded by the gleam of death. For example, he stands under a lantern like those used in funeral processions. His face looks like a plaster mask; at the conspiracy assembly he signs his name under the number 30, which was his actual number in the list of executed people. And even the newspaper information about the execution is quoted in the text<sup>29</sup> (Zenkevich 1991: 30–31, 68). Seeing the list in the author's hands, *El'ga* bursts into tears, while Gumilev just becomes ashen and his lips tremble. The list is thrown into the fireplace on Gumilev's orders, as if eliminating the fact of his execution (Zenkevich 1991: 72). And the plot continues, including among other events the author's rivalry with Gumilev because of *El'ga*. For a fleeting moment he was even ready to kill Gumilev with a dagger bought especially for this act (Zenkevich 1991: 96). After Zenkevich's death, his widow read the memoirs for the first time and found the dagger in his private desk drawer (Zenkevich 1991: 5).

Zenkevich's approach to Gumilev's representation is developed in Lazarchuk's and Uspenskii's novel *Posmotri v glaza chudovishch* (*Look into the Monsters' Eyes*), mentioned already in the section on Bulgakov. His influence is indubitable, as the non-meeting with Gumilev on the tram addressed by

<sup>29</sup> Zenkevich mentions 24 August as the date of execution.

Zenkevich (1991: 21) is directly mentioned in the novel as Gumilev’s own reminiscences:

В трамвае я действительно ездил, и неоднократно, осваиваясь со своей новой личностью. Документы были безупречны, и опасаться серьезных неприятностей не приходилось. Все знакомые, которым мне случалось попасться на глаза, в страхе отворачивались. Винить их за это не приходилось... Лишь Зенкевич, наивный навсегда, смотрел на меня в трамвае полчаса огромными глазами – даже попытался протолкаться, но не смог.

I really used to go by tram trying to get accustomed to my new personality. The documents were perfect, and there was no reason to be afraid of serious trouble. All my acquaintances who caught sight of me turned away in fear. They couldn’t be blamed for that... And only Zenkevich, who was forever naïve, would gaze at me in the tram with his huge eyes for half an hour, and even tried to make his way through the crowd, but failed. (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 97, trans. mine)

Lazarchuk and Uspenskii erased the very fact of the execution, making fact rumor and rumor fact. In their version, after his heroic comportment on the way to execution, described wholly in accordance with the documented legends (Miroshkin No date), Gumilev was ransomed from the Bolsheviks by the secret order (organization) *Piatyi Rim* (the Fifth Rome) (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 212–215) with the Flamel’s alchemic gold.<sup>30</sup> The order’s interest in Gumilev stemmed from the fact that his poems were at one with the Supreme Mind. Although the list of the executed, with Gumilev’s name appearing under the number 30, was posted all over the city, this did not reflect the actual situation. Being dead in the public mind, Gumilev could not communicate with his family and friends and was forbidden to write poems anywhere except in a special black notebook (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 29–33). Granted invulnerability and exceptionally long life – if not immortality (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 104–105), Gumilev is involved in the ongoing battle with the world’s evil on the side of the world’s good; he continues his life full of adventures in different times and places, among people and monsters, on Earth and in the mysterious

<sup>30</sup> Nicolas Flamel (1330–1418) was a famous alchemist, who according to legends succeeded in turning anything into gold. More than that, according to legends, having discovered the Philosopher’s Stone, Flamel was able to remain alive in the physical form he possessed at the time of his discovery (Merton 1932).

rooms – underground tunnels which afford instant movement in space. The world of dragons, with which he struggles, originates in his own poems, primarily the unfinished *Poema nachala* (*The Poem of the Beginning*) profusely quoted and alluded to in the novel (Gumilev 1988: 466–473; Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 32, 180–185), but not only from it. The title itself is a quotation from Gumilev's poem *Volshebnaia skripka* (*Magic Violin*), with which the book opens (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 7).<sup>31</sup> The use of quotations in titles, typical of contemporary Russian post-modern prose, often signals cultural intertext (Skoropanova 2002: 367–372), which holds in the case discussed here as well.

Gumilev's family life, the real and the alternative, is part of the narration. However, only his alternative third wife Annushka and his alternative son Stepka participate in the plot, while the first Annushka (Akhmatova) is just talked about and the second Annushka (Engelgardt) is only mentioned. Like Lusina, Lazarchuk and Uspenskii rely heavily on memoirs and rumor, some of which they include into Gumilev's speech as indisputable facts. These quotations taken together with minor details and pseudo-real documents and chronicles add certain credibility to the text (Gusarova 2009: 13; Kaigorodova 2002: 147–148). Although derogatory reminiscences about a former wife are natural for a divorced husband, Gumilev takes his revenge on Andrei Zhdanov not only for killing his mother, his second wife and daughter in the besieged Leningrad, all of whom starved to death, but for insulting Akhmatova as well (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 578) confirming his attachment to knightly values.

Although Gumilev is presented as being alive, the signs of death, as in Zenkevich's memoirs, somehow emerge in the novel, for example, the bullet hole in his head (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 50). The mere capacity to recognize him can be seen as a criterion distinguishing talented people from the uninitiated, as was the case in the Strugatskiis' novel, discussed earlier in the section on Bulgakov. Among those who recognized Gumilev besides writers Mikhail Zenkevich, Olga Forsh and Ilia Erenburg, and the singer of poems Elena Kamburova, was a young man, one of our anonymous

<sup>31</sup> The line *posmotri v glaza chudovishch* has been translated differently by various translators, e.g. as "look at twinkling eyes of fear" in Makedon's translation, as "see the abyss in the eyes of beast-like creatures" in Slobodkina's translation, and as "face the monsters others fear" in Vandomskaia's translation. Translations of Gumilev's poem by Makedon, Slobodkina and Vandomskaia are available on the internet. I translated the line as close to the original as possible.

contemporaries, who may be perceived as his possible successor or as the embodiment of glory (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 203, 236–237, 262, 378, 565). Although, as noted earlier, Bulgakov did not recognize Gumilev, his inclusion in the group of initiated is guaranteed by projection of Gumilev's image onto Woland's. The novel presents not only Gumilev's alternative biography in an alternative or rather crypto world history (Valentinov 1999) but also his alternative poems, by which I mean texts created after 26 August 1921, the date of his execution. In fact, they were written by the contemporary writer and poet Dmitrii Bykov (Lazarchuk and Uspenskii 2005: 5, 600–668). Unlike Sorokin's sarcastic stylization of a poem produced by Akhmatova's clone with 88 percent success, the poems from the black notebook are intended to reach the level of Gumilev's genuine poetry. So even his writing becomes fictional, while Bykov is meant to be perceived as the Gumilev of our time. Addressing Bykov's book about Boris Pasternak, Ivanova ironically claims that Boris Leonidovich assisted Bykov on his way to prestigious literary prizes (Ivanova 2008: 84). In the case of alternative poetry, Bykov crowned his own head with Gumilev's laurel wreath.

While both Zenkevich, and Lazarchuk and Uspenskii wrote about post-mortal events in Gumilev's alternative life, Iurii Burnosov preferred to re-write the events of his actual life – that is, to do as Kolganov and Lusina did in their novels that have been addressed earlier. His crypto historical novel *Revolitsia. Iaponskii gorodovoi (Revolution. Japanese Policemen*, first published in 2009), is a part of a voluminous and multi-authored project *Etnogenez (Ethnogenesis)* inspired by the eponymous book by Lev Gumilev. The plot covers events from 1891 to 1913. The author constructs his own version of Gumilev's two journeys to Africa, in 1909–1910 and 1913 (the latter with his relative N. Sverchkov who also found his way into the novel). Besides actual adventures, Gumilev saves a mysterious old man, who gives him a small magic talisman in the form of Scorpio, with the help of which Gumilev overcomes both earthly evildoers and demons and even saves Negus from encroachment. However, Burnosov's Gumilev prefers to hide the information about these victories and, for example, to mask the actual killing of a desert demon by an invented story about the killing of a leopard familiar to the readers from Gumilev's poetry and travel diary (Gumilev 1972: 123, 144–145):

Никаких геройских историй, договорились? Никаких демонов. Был..., скажем, леопард. Набросился, мы стреляли, он ходил кругами, потом, когда его ранили, удрал. Вполне правдоподобная история, не правда ли?

Let’s tell no heroic stories, ok? No demons... Let’s say it was a leopard. He attacked us and we were shooting; he was walking in circles; and then when we hit him, he ran away. It’s rather plausible story, isn’t it? (Burnosov 2010)<sup>32</sup>

Contrary to the narrator being driven to supernatural events through ravings or drunkenness, Burnosov’s explanation leaves room for their assumed reality. Both Gumilev’s poems and actual letters are widely quoted in the novel. Akhmatova is mentioned, but is not given an active part in the plot. Still, the author dislikes her. For example, granting that Gumilev went to Africa leaving her with the baby, he stresses that Akhmatova sent no letters at all to her peripatetic husband, giving no explanation for her behavior. Readers unacquainted with the history of their marital relations may not be aware of the reason for her silence: the love letters of one of Gumilev’s mistresses, which she came across in the drawer (Luknitskii 1991).<sup>33</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

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The causes and results of the fantastic transformations of Bulgakov, Akhmatova and Gumilev have similar patterns. First, all of them address supernatural topics, concerning demons, witches, ghosts, and monsters, and contemplate the creative activity of a writer/poet as a magical, supernatural act. Overall, the combination of their writings with autobiographical and biographical myths, as well as a tragic or dramatic life course, changed them from real historical people into cultural icons, personas with clearly recognizable assumptions. Second, in all three cases the emergence of fantastic transformations is preceded by publications of fictional memoirs, Kataev’s in Bulgakov’s case and Zenkevich’s in the case of Akhmatova and Gumilev, which blend the border between eye-witnessing and fantasy. Third, their alternative biographies are highly influenced by memoirs, scholarly and popular literary studies, which are quoted, alluded to and discussed in the novels. Fourth, Bulgakov’s, Akhmatova’s and Gumilev’s own writings serve as a storehouse of plots, characters, metaphors, and so on, and are often directly projected onto their creators, who became perceived as God-like figures, supreme mentors, judges – or, alternatively

<sup>32</sup> The novel is available online at [http://loveread.ec/read\\_book.php?id=2995&p=43](http://loveread.ec/read_book.php?id=2995&p=43).

<sup>33</sup> Luknitskii recorded this information directly from Akhmatova on 2 and 3 March 1925.

as impostors to be exposed and neutralized by the real masters. In the latter case alternative biography coincides with anti-biography (Rogozinskii's and Kolganov's books about Bulgakov and to a lesser extent Lusina's and Sorokin's books about Akhmatova). Fifth, transformations of writers and poets into fantastic characters lead to the emergence of the topic of literary creativity in their content. The newly created texts should somehow correlate with those of Bulgakov, Akhmatova or Gumilev. They may imitate the structure of the texts, for example, having a novel within the novel as in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (the Strugatskii brothers, Zhitinskii and Rogozinskii) and/or constructing episodes parallel to those in the original masterpieces. Thus the supreme literary court in the Strugatskii's and Zhitinskii's novels reminds us of the final decision by Yeshua on the Master's novel. Furthermore, the correlation may find its way by contesting the worth of their predecessors, competing with them or writing stylizations of their works (Rogozinskii's case with Bulgakov, Sorokin's with Akhmatova and Bykov's with Gumilev's poems in Lazarchuk and Uspenskii's novel). In other words, Bulgakov's, Akhmatova's and Gumilev's texts are somehow incorporated in the fantastic novels and thereby appropriated by their authors. Sixth, the hypothetical reader is supposed to be attracted to the famous persons. If s/he is ignorant of their lives and creative activity, the intertextual effect will not be realized. However, close familiarity with the persons in question, as well as with their writings, may trigger violations of expectations and even give rise to lawsuit for defamation (Kuritsyn 2000: 232; Piskopani 2013). Nevertheless, thanks to clearly fantastic mode this perspective remains intangible and does not preclude further attempts at co-authorship with the immortals.

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