

Vassily Aksyonov's Parody of *V.*

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Not a line by Pynchon has been published in the USSR/Russia. But his novels have been in the major libraries and—on rare occasions—in the bookstores dealing in foreign books. Unfortunately, even many Soviet literary critics who have written about Pynchon have failed to read his books.¹ However, Pynchon has influenced Russian literature since the beginning of the 1970s. The most evident example of this influence is the parody of *V.* in Vassily Aksyonov's novel *Our Golden Ironburg*.

Aksyonov was one of the most popular young Russian writers of the 1960s. Critics have traced the influences of Hemingway and Salinger on his early novels and tales. His prose turned to satire, the grotesque and the postmodern toward the end of the sixties, in the novel *Surplussed Barrelware* and a few short stories written under the influence of Vladimir Nabokov ("Victory") and Roald Dahl ("The Snacks, '43"). During the seventies, he found it much harder to get his work published, and had to write "for the drawer" until he was finally expelled from the Soviet Literary Fund and forced to emigrate. By then he had written two of his most important novels, *The Burn* and *The Island of Crimea*, which were published only in the USA, just like his novel *Our Golden Ironburg*, which he finished in Moscow in 1972.² In this small novel, Aksyonov continued the experiments with language³ and narrative devices he began in *Surplussed Barrelware*, and American literary critics appreciated it as Aksyonov's "contribution to the literature of the absurd."

Ironburg is a semifantastic town built in Siberia by young Soviet nuclear physicists for their scientific researches. The aim of their investigations is the discovery of a mysterious particle named Double-Few. In Russian this name corresponds phonetically to the twenty-third letter of the English alphabet. Graphically, "W" is a double "V," leading to the suspicion that Aksyonov intends some parody (in the Russian formalist sense) of Herbert Stencil's quest-object, the mysterious woman V., in Pynchon's novel *V.* Further study of the images and themes in Aksyonov's text corroborates this conjecture.

Like V., "elusive Double-Few" (147) is presented in a wide range of woman-like images, from the alluring to the repellent:

"And if blue mesons eat orange ones, then what color will our girl Double-Few be? Who knows?" . . .

"She's a blond, like Brigitte Bardot, but her eyes are Mesopotamian."
(97)

"The Odessa African" Ufwa Bwali dreamed on Double-Few, imagining her as the black beauty:

Oh beloved, burning homeland, how much tender coolness, freshness, peacefulness, freedom Double-Few promises you! This black, of course black, like Jesus, beauty with her firm and uplifted mammaries, with her maidenly curve inward above her smooth belly, like the roof of a Citroën, the long bounties of her hips! (193)

The anti-hero of the novel, the writer Memozov, describes Double-Few as a cheap whore: "Now, say good-bye to Double-Few, to your harlot under the fence! Say farewell, don't make humanity laugh!" (244). In this image, Double-Few resembles a mythological figure like Lilith:

Oh, Double-Few!

And even earlier there was Lilith, born at the moonlight!

And so, I saw all this so that I could say good-bye. Good-bye, station harlot, with your dirty little bumps of iliac bones sticking out, with the bruises on your hips and on your sickly breasts, crumpled by the riff-raff in gateways. Good-bye! Farewell, my Lilith, born of the moonlight! (245)

Double-Few is associated with Ironburg the way V. is with Vheissu in Pynchon's novel: "Oh, Double-Few in Mother Ironburg's nipples!" (184). "Ironburg! Double-Few! Silvery heron! The farewell vibration of the beloved metal" (243).⁴

The main discussion of the nature of Double-Few occurs in the contrast between Russian physicist and founder of Ironburg Veliky-Salazkin and old Icelandic scientist Gromson:

The accursed Icelfander Gromson has gotten on my nerves with his foreign gold, his fashionable obscurantism, and his insane hypotheses about the Double-Few. The old cabbage stump, blessed maître, he's already changed his second hundred, how does he manage to do everything? He dashes off lectures at three universities (he hops from Copenhagen to Cambridge, from there to Padua) and boils tinctures in crucibles (he has a new hobby, you know, alchemy) and keeps his theory

up to the mark, and he even got married to a movie star again; evidently he saw the imperceptible image of the Double-Few in her. (41-42)

Gromson prefers mystic and psychedelic methods reminiscent of the style of *V*. He says to Veliky-Salazkin:

"Who is she, this little one that all our crowd has been hunting for so many years? At times, Veliky-Salazkin, when I embrace this young being (a gnarled, age-old finger turns to the TV lady, rolled up in a fluffy, fox-like ball on the sofa), it seems to me that she's the one we want, slipping along like the mirage Double-Few. Sometimes, on dusky, narcotic, Zealand nights, Veliky-Salazkin, I catch Double-Few's whistle in the old holes of Elsinore. What's left for me, Veliky-Salazkin? I take a dose of Mauritanian poison, wrap myself up in some ancient Norman banner and hallucinate. I see her, she's with me, I know!

"Before I play golf in the morning, I take a look at my notes—it's the same thing again: all those Campbells, Fucatossis, Einsteins, your mind-constructs, my dear V-S, my own constructions—and all that gets mixed up, draws my thoughts to the goal, to our desired Double-Few, and in the end, instead of what we want—we get a whistling little hole, peep-hole into eternity. How beautiful it is, my friend. Intoxication, disappointment, despair, coffee, golf! How magnificent it is!" (45)

Gromson also recognizes that, for himself, the quest for Double-Few is more a sexual than a scientific search: Gromson "had notified *Playboy* magazine that his long-term search for the particle Double-Few was essentially nothing more than the active expression of the male animus" (105).

On the other hand, Veliky-Salazkin prefers pretentious physical and mathematical methods, which, however, Aksyonov describes in a half-poetic, half-parodic style somewhat like Pynchon's treatment of Stencil's historical speculations:

According to the suppositions of Veliky-Salazkin, Uhara, and Bhutan Aga, as well as Ernest Morkovnikov's calculations, the mu-mesons' marching was supposed to run down within a certain time, either in a half-hour or in a half-year, and then with a probability of -1^{72000} in the depths of the sequence, the elusive Double-Few will gleam or at least leave a slipper behind. (147)

Such passages seem to validate the supposition that the image of Double-Few is Aksyonov's parody of Pynchon's first novel. But

Pynchon's influence on Aksyonov is observable not in *Our Golden Ironburg* alone. Aksyonov's most important novel, *The Burn*, contains many scenes of drunken stochastic strolling about the streets and towns, written in the grotesque and satiric style of V.'s American chapters. Like Pynchon, Aksyonov uses collage techniques extensively in *The Burn*. His narrative incorporates flashbacks to the childhood of the heroes, and stages episodes describing synchronous events in different parts of the world and even in different possible worlds.⁵

Like Pynchon, Aksyonov uses many formulas, poems and songs in his prose. For instance, *Our Golden Ironburg* is subtitled "A Novel with Formulas." However, the formulas used were invented by Aksyonov and contain phrases like "Oh, Zevsus!" and "with ears!"⁶ The language of Aksyonov's characters and narrator is full of direct and concealed quotations and references to many classical and modern intertexts. Another similarity between Pynchon and Aksyonov is their carrying characters from work to work, like Pig Bodine in "Low-lands," V. and *Gravity's Rainbow*, and driver Volodya Telescopov in *Surplussed Barrelware* and *Our Golden Ironburg*.⁷

During all his life as a writer, Vassily Aksyonov has been accused of having had numerous literary influences (mostly American ones), as noted above. Now we can add the name of Thomas Pynchon to this list. The parody of V. we have examined proves that Aksyonov himself realized and acknowledged this influence. The author of *The Burn* and *The Island of Crimea* is considered one of the first Russian postmodernists, and some younger writers have come under his influence and, thus, under the influence of Pynchon, unread and unknown to them.⁸

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Notes

¹I am planning to cast light on the problem of Soviet literary critics of Pynchon in a later essay.

²*Zolotaya nasha zelezka. Roman s formulami* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980). All quotations are from *Our Golden Ironburg: A Novel with Formulas*, trans. R. E. Peterson (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1989).

³However, some language experiments have failed in English translation, like a good half novel charm.

⁴"Silvery heron" is one of Aksyonov's main images of the young, defenseless girl. She is the main character in Aksyonov's postmodern play *Heron* (1980). The plot of the play is retold in *The Burn* and *Our Golden Ironburg* also. For details, see Herta Schmid, "Postmodernism in Russian Drama: Vampilov, Amalrik, Aksënov," *Approaching Postmodernism: Papers*

Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism, 21-23 September 1984, University of Utrecht, ed. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1986) 157-84.

⁵On the concept of possible worlds, see the works of Jaakko Hintikka. For an example of this concept in literary criticism, see Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979).

⁶The use of formulas itself may also be a kind of parody of Pynchon.

⁷Like Pynchon in America, Aksyonov is one of the symbols of the sixties in Russia, and also one of the authors of its image. The mixture of analysis and nostalgia for these years is one of the most important motifs in his late novels. A few characters in works Aksyonov wrote long before *Vineland* was published seem like Russian twins of Zoyd.

⁸I want to express my gratitude to Mrs. Inna Kuznetsov for friendly assistance in writing this essay.