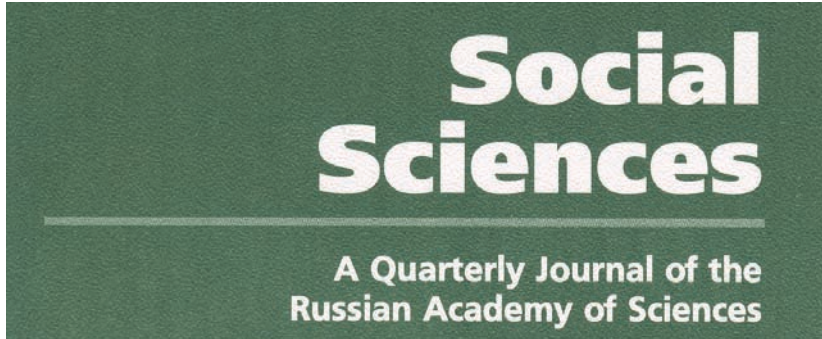


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DESECRATING ONE'S OWN DESPAIR
TATYANA BEK INTERVIEWS ALEXANDER MELIKHOV

T.B. The writer Alexander Zhitinsky called you a “Berdichev Cossack of Russian literature”. Is the stress on “Berdichev” or “Cossack”? Maybe he meant not “Cossack” but “Kazakh”? As far as I know, you grew up in Kazakhstan, moving to St. Petersburg at the age of 16, is that right?

A.M. I think genetics is irrelevant here. I mean biological genetics. But cultural genetics is relevant, indeed. I can't say which is more important in my case, just as you can't say who is more important in your life, father or mother. There cannot be an integrity if it can be divided into parts. If I were not a Jew (half-Jewish, to be precise) I would have a successful academic career, although I would probably be writing anyway. This malady would reveal itself sooner or later. I think my academic career would have been proceeding normally and by 40 I would probably have been a professor somewhere. But my “Berdichev” roots doomed me to a number of ordeals, which made professor Kirichenko become the writer Melikhov.

T.B. I suppose your family name, Meilakhs, interfered with your career.

A.M. It certainly did, although I was registered as Russian in my passport.

T.B. But they beat you on the face, not your passport, don't they?

A.M. Precisely. I was twice the winner at the All-Siberian Physics Competition; I got only excellent marks at the Mathematics Department of Leningrad University; my graduation paper was recommended for publication, and after graduation everything suddenly got stuck. I used to be a very outgoing person (not too bold, I hope) I made friends easily and laughed louder than the others. But then, at this Research Institute I became an outsider. I realized that I would do better to keep my mouth shut, that anything I said could be turned against me. In my novel *The Whole World is a Foreign Land to Us*, published recently in *Novy Mir*, I summed up those experiences.

T.B. Let me interrupt you for a moment. Reading your *Confessions of a Jew*, I noted that you are attracted to the words “alien”, “foreign”, maybe not you yourself but your hero. It occurred to me that this is an allusion to Camus. In your new novel you speak about “foreign lands”. Could you tell me what is the new novel about.

A.M. In general terms, it's about the relationship between illusions and reality. The central hero is a man who decides always to face the truth. He has indulged in illusions and fantasies long enough, dreaming of incompatible things: he wanted to become a major scientist, captain on a pirate ship, and also "one of the lads", a darling of the dancing rinks. At the same time harsh reality constantly demanded of him to devote himself to serious work. At some point he has to discard either illusions or work. He keeps making his choice in favor of work. Only recently he was so proud and brilliant, but then he lands in some office where his position is very modest. He must either bang the door and leave, thus abandoning all hope for an academic career, or swallow his pride and forget about the image of himself as a "dare-devil" who would always speak out and keep his head high. However, reality teaches him submission. Each time he is presented with a choice he chooses to cut off more branches from the tree of his life, that would interfere with normal living. In his mature age, already a successful and respectable man, he suddenly realizes that the cut off branches were in fact his roots. Those fantasies and illusions that interfered with his normal living were in fact the source of his life. They were what makes a man a human being. He suddenly realizes that he turned into an insensitive log while humankind have been living by illusions, fantasies and phantoms that are, in fact, the driving force of history. If the whole of humankind face the truth it will perish. It's impossible to live by truth alone.

T.B. I wonder if this way is reversible. If a person realizes he has become a log, is it possible for him to become a tree again? Can he become a crazy dreamer again and grow new branches?

A.M. A very good question. I think you can't regenerate like that, but you can release the remains of these qualities in yourself. My hero still has fantasies and dreams, but he suppresses them with an iron hand. Yes, one should let go of what's left of one's feelings.

T.B. Or give the due to your past and share your negative experiences with the young.

A.M. Yes, share your experiences with the young, and also give the due to those dreamers who live by all sorts of silly things rather than business. Perhaps they are the main people, after all, people who create useless fantasies-embellishments, preventing us from seeing life as it is.

T.B. When you took this pseudonym, I suppose you knew what you were doing and what associations this name would inspire. Was it to spite Sholokhov or to express solidarity with his hero Grigory Melekhov? Was it irony?

A.M. No. It was simply that this wise editor of Zvezda magazine, Mr. Smolyan, told me: "With a name like this they will never publish you. They will regard it as an anti-Russian act." I was genuinely surprised that you could write in the name of Russian literature and thus commit an anti-Russian act. It was then that I decided to take a pen name, reminiscent of my family name. My father told me once that Meilakhs derives from "melikh", meaning "king" in Hebrew. I decided to become Melikhov. It is almost like Melekhov from Sholokhov's Quiet Flows the Don which I adored at that time (it does contain quite a few weak passages, but the best passages are really great). As to Grigory Melekhov, I adore him to this day. By the way he is MelEkhov and I am MelIkhov. My pseudonym was repeatedly mixed up with Sholokhov's character. And one day I read in Zvezda magazine about Sholokhov's hero: Grigory Melikhov. So I got

the upper hand of him. My name is somewhat allusive to Melikhovo, Chekhov's estate near Moscow ...

T.B. Well, if we mention Chekhov's name ... I wonder if you are a sentimental person in your private life (my intuition tells me that you are) but in your prose you are not at all sentimental, even downright unsentimental. How can you comment on that?

A.M. I'm a well-meaning person and always ready to help. However, for me to relax to the point of sentimentality is only possible if I trust a person completely. On the whole, I'm benevolent towards real people and ruthless towards literary characters. The latter feel no pain.

T.B. But their prototypes do. Is this perhaps because you are a mathematician? What does mathematics have in common with art? And how do these two worlds struggle or co-exist inside your mind?

A.M. Mathematics and art both work with imaginary objects – this is what they have in common. Triangles, circles...

T.B. Are these metaphors?

A.M. They are. There are no perfect circles in nature as there are no straight lines. A mathematical object is created in the following way: you take an object from nature and idealize it. Classical aesthetics assert that art creates ideals. The same as mathematics. This quality makes them close. As to beauty... From all pleasures of life mathematics is second only to music and love. A perfect solution of a problem makes you so happy.

T.B. And where is your happiness more acute: in mathematics as you solve an unsolvable problem or in writing as you hit on a good ending for a chapter?

A.M. In mathematics. There I was always confident that I'd done the right thing. In writing you are never sure whether it's good or not. Moreover, you have ten different versions in your head and you have to discard nine of them, and then you see that the discarded ones are just as good. You are forever torn by doubts whether you've chosen the best version — why have I lost the other ones. In literature you know that whatever you do the reaction will be different from the desired one. In mathematics, if I solve a problem my colleagues will be applauding me, and I will be applauding myself, too. In art, you never know whether you have coped or not. As to whether these two spheres can co-exist... Of course they are opponents. Mathematical demonstration and selfless art both oppose and complement each other.

T.B. Could you tell me how they oppose each other, and please give me an example, too.

A.M. Supposing, I'm emotionally pregnant with some material. God knows why it accumulates within me but it had to be born. Let's take my Confessions of a Jew. Suddenly I'm aroused by visions of my childhood, a combination of purity and dirt, ugliness and beauty, horror and happiness. Childhood is all about contrasts. I feel the desire to describe it all. I look closer – latrines on a hill, pools of fuel oil, motors covered with mold. I want to depict it all, but I feel that until I have some sort of a rod – a central idea – I have no right to write anything even if I can do it well. I must put it all into a system. I delay writing until I get let's say a person for whom a certain philosophical or moral dilemma becomes the cause of his personal tragedy. When this person feels the desire to test his ideas for resistance to life, to go all the way (I'm not attracted to pathology, but to extremes), when he wants to test them under ten-fold pressure, then his

image takes shape in my mind, the train starts moving and I am ready to feed the locomotive with flesh and form and music. The huge mass gets into motion, come what may, and then art is created. In the absence of development, assertion or repudiation of some idea, nothing can be created. Or rather, I could write something but it's embarrassing to write without a purpose. Usually I start with an assertion, but then I develop my idea and arrive at its negation. This is not my purpose, it happens by itself. For example, in *Confessions of a Jew* my hero asserts that talent and truth can only be born in solitude while crowds can only produce stupidities. He spends a long time trying to prove it, showing off his intelligence and eloquence, but then he confesses that the only happy moments he experienced were in a football crowd shouting together with the others. So there!

T.B. This theme first appears in your earlier work, *Humped Atlantes*, is that right?

A.M. *Humped Atlantes* is not an earlier work, it was written in the late 1980s. It is the first written in the manner I've just described. Two lives get entangled in the novel. One hero is our contemporary, a talented but unrecognized mathematician. He creates beautiful things that are of no interest to anybody (he lives in a little provincial town). In his frustration he decides to spite the world by ceasing to work altogether: "If this is how you treat me I won't try anymore." The other hero is a utopian-minded 19th-century person, reminiscent of Kropotkin, who has always been serving people without any expectations of gratitude. He preaches the need to liberate man from any superstructures such as the state and religion. Everything should be for people's wellbeing. This man of outstanding organizational talent and big heart is creating a paradise in some God-forsaken settlement at the back of beyond, amid dirt, drunkenness and thievery. Where there were only dilapidated huts, new clean houses arise, children start going to school, write interesting compositions – it seems that paradise will be achieved soon. But suddenly amidst all this success multiple suicides begin. They used to have murders and all sorts of other crime but never suicides. Finally, the prophet's favorite pupil also commits suicide, the same pupil who seemed to him to be "a man of the Communist future". This pupil was a talented, intelligent and handsome young man. Shortly before his death, the pupil tells his teacher: "I don't have a purpose in life. I know that everything is relative in this world: I know that in some places stealing is shameful and in other places working is shameful; somewhere aquiline noses are believed to be beautiful and somewhere else they like snub noses. I've learnt to respect other people's opinions but I came to disregard my own. I envy my parents: they lived in poverty but they were not aware of it. Yet they had a very clear idea about good and evil. To be rich then meant to have a couple of logs more than your neighbor; to be brave meant to beat the daylight out of some thug at a village club; to be clever meant to steal from the factory. As to me I'm not sure of anything. This is why I no longer know what to live for." "To serve people, naturally." The prophet was rather at a loss for words. "And what have they done to deserve my service? I think you yourself serve some God you are hiding from us, not people, those pitiful, worthless creatures. You left us only commandments: wash your hands before meals, work hard, respect one another, be polite..." When the pupil commits suicide the prophet is horrified. But being a positivist and a believer in science and diagrams, he spreads a map of Europe before him and shades the zones with maximum number of suicides. The darkest gangrene-like spots mark the scientific and cultural centers. He begins to investigate what happens there, who are the suicides. He discovers

that they are people who live by their own brains. Mostly businessmen and creative professionals. So he realizes with horror that as he taught the people of the town cleanliness and politeness, he made them wealthy, but he had interfered with the stereotypes of their lives.

T.B. How's that? Can you explain?

A.M. Previously they lived without any doubting. Freedom is a cancer. If you allow people to have two opinions about something, the next day there will be four opinions on the same matter, and the next day eight. Opinions begin to multiply like cancer cells. If people want to protect themselves from this disaster they ought to liquidate an independent-minded thinker more resolutely than a murderer — the latter does not really threaten the establishment. In other words, man strives to be an automaton that is manipulated from without. Then he feels strong, confident, and patient. The history of mankind is all about fleeing from doubts. On this note the hero departs from life. Our contemporary, the one who stopped working in the name of the people unable to appreciate his service to them, also tries to commit suicide because he has nothing to live for. Man's business is to serve a cause. There is one line in the novel which asserts that the dog's happiness is not in running around the garbage heaps but in being chained to a kennel and bark at passers-by; and the cow's happiness is not in wandering around the fields but in staying in its shed and giving milk. Man's happiness is serving people. The most important in us is not ours. It has been given to us so that we give it to others. It can't be avoided in any way.

T.B. Is this your idea or...

A.M. It's mine, but it has been presented in a condensed form in the novel. There are several heroes in the novel who are all arguing with one another.

T.B. Look, this novel is devoted to suicide. In your Romance with Prostatitis you expound a whole theory of suicide. This theme is rather rare in Russian prose today. You seem to be concerned with it both as a writer and as a theoretician (to the interested readers I recommend your comprehensive essay on suicide in Neva magazine No. 2 for 2000). In other words, you are a rare sample of existentialist in today's Russia. Is that right?

A.M. Suicide is an extreme situation in human life, concentrating in itself the problems of freedom, service to people, meaning of life, and also the problem of renovation, as in Romance with Prostatitis. Its hero first preaches freedom: he is insulted by anything that interferes with his inner life, be it physiology, police, or discipline. Then he sees the fruit of this freedom when his daughter ends up in a lunatic asylum. And thus he comes to the conclusion that there is no need to renovate anything. All the trails have already been blazed in this world while suicide is a disease of renovation. When you try to make a shortcut you may fall into a pit.

T.B. May I ask a tactless question: have you ever thought about suicide yourself?

A.M. But of course. In Humped Atlantes Saburov's elder son asks his father: "Have you ever thought about suicide?" And to this Saburov answers: "It's constantly on my mind." Since I'm still alive I somehow manage to cope with such thoughts. To keep your finger on "the exit pass" works as a psychotherapeutic remedy. You think you can always postpone it till the next day.

T.B. Why have you given such a straightforward and at the same time enigmatic title: Provincial to your first book?

A.M. If you look at the best Russian authors almost all of them come from the provinces: Gogol, Chekhov, Bunin, Tolstoy. Naturally, there is a measure of sarcasm in my title “Provincial”. In this collection there is a short story, or maybe it’s a short novel, called “Provincial”. It’s about a young man who is intelligent but a bit naive. He knows about himself that he is basically a good person, but not without shortcomings, and he has his own skeletons in the cupboard. He is constantly checking himself: does his coat suit him, are his trouser-legs in place? At the same time he observes completely free people around him, who wear what they like, who speak what they think, who are not obsessed with any one thing. He believes that this freedom means a noble spirit, that such people can rise above life’s trifles, poisoning his own life.

T.B. And they have some secret.

A.M. Precisely. He thinks that these people are some sort of extra-terrestrials. They come from a world where people don’t have to be ashamed of anything because nothing ugly is happening there. He falls in love with one of these free girls. She does not flirt with him and neither is she shy, she is dignified and calm. When she invites him for a date he goes to her as if to a temple. But he is not the only guest, there is also another free young man, a fop with whom they chatter in their own jargon, forgetting about our hero’s presence altogether. He is terribly embarrassed and hurt; for nothing better to do he starts drinking and imperceptibly gets very drunk. Alcohol makes him impudent but finally he realizes with horror what he has done. He jumps from the balcony – but that’s only the first floor. And then he understands that their freedom is nothing but impudence and presumption while shyness and “provincialism” come from heightened conscience, a wish to be better, and a fear to be a burden to people. One who is always self-assured and believes himself to be welcome anywhere is simply an arrogant fop. In this context, the word “provincial” has a polemical and even sarcastic meaning. At that time I was so much in love with Chekhov that I did not need any other example. I had no taste for mannerisms or exaggerations. I gave simple titles to my stories: “The Cat”, “Provincial”.

T.B. But later you gave fancy names to your works, and more detailed ones, too.

A.M. Yes. At a certain stage Chekhov became an obstacle. He is a heavenly writer, of course, but the trouble is that for a long time I believed that literature ended with him, that there was no longer any need for large-scale colorful figures and extraordinary plots like in Shakespeare, that it was time for mundane concerns and understatements (some people are sitting at the table drinking tea while someone’s life is being shattered to pieces but nobody is aware of it); that there was no place any more for extraordinary actions, that everything must be life-like.

T.B. However, later you managed to overcome Chekhov’s influence and even went further than that...

A.M. Maybe. But in my opinion I’m not completely free of his influence. Oh well...

T.B. Where is the borderline between philosophical and artistic prose, and to which domain do you belong? Who is your forerunner in this borderline area?

A.M. Such is my nature. I was influenced by Tolstoy’s philosophical works, such as Confession and Kreutzer Sonata. But especially Confession, which is a philosophical work but it is thoroughly permeated with his personal passions, making it a work of art. Then, of course, it’s Dostoyevsky whose heroes are always possessed with a certain idea, taking it to complete realization. Raskolnikov contemplates murder, first he just thinks

about it but then he goes and kills. Raskolnikov's nature represents the development of an idea: from assertion to defeat. In the 19th century they loved to provide a detailed background with many minor characters portrayed in the real time scale. If a policeman appears on the scene, he is described in detail, down to his uniform, manner of speaking, complete with a long dialogue. In my opinion, the distinction between philosophical and artistic prose is determined by the degree of passion with which the idea is presented rather than the originality of the plot or the depiction of details. If an idea is causing a personal drama, a human tragedy, if a person is possessed with this idea, then for me it is a work of art.

T.B. I see. Such is your much-talked-about Confessions of a Jew: a certain idea presented in sharp relief, causing a personal drama and thus turning a philosophical treatise into a work of art. What is anti-Semitism if you try to define it without anger and personal involvement (which is not easy)?

A.M. A vulgar anti-Semite hates all Jews and slanders them, attributing to them all sorts of nonsense. That is not really of any interest. However, an ideological anti-Semite may even treat well a concrete Jew, even rendering some assistance to him, but he would still have a most negative attitude to the Jewry as a social phenomenon. That is real anti-Semitism. In Confessions of a Jew my hero rather sarcastically expounds the following theory: a social organism has to get rid of alien elements, it has to be conservative for the sake of self-preservation in order not to collapse. Similarly, the human organism rejects alien elements, be it a splinter or surgical thread. That is how an organism manages to preserve its wholeness. So is the national identity of a people – he reasons further — to keep whole it must stick to its symbols of unity (under rational analysis they lose their attraction, naturally), to national myths, to idealized notions about themselves, and so on and so forth. According to the hero, nations are sustained by a common reserve of inspiring falsehood. In other words, what is necessary for the survival of a nation runs counter to the interests of a creating, thinking individual, who is outstanding or simply different. It creates a tragic conflict between the social whole and the individual in which both sides are in the right and in which neither side should win. If you put human rights above all else, then all nations would simply fall apart and culture as such will disappear, because the national structure, which has created and protected culture, will disappear.

T.B. You are so detached and calm about it.

A.M. I take a tragic view of life. I believe that all the sacred things of life are in irreconcilable contradiction with one another. You can't assert one of them without destroying another, equally precious. Life can only go on in the form of an eternal struggle of equally important values while the victory of any one of them means death for the others. The victory of liberalism is just as fatal as the victory of totalitarianism. This applies to anti-Semitism as well: it is a logical continuation of national solidarity. National solidarity means that there must be national alienation, in other words, national strife. Jews are simply the most widespread targets of national hatred: the most popular figures of aliens, moreover, cosmopolitan aliens. I repeat, anti-Semitism is simply a continuation of national conservatism. You can even say that anti-Semitism derives from the people's preservation instinct, primitive and indiscriminating as all the primitive instincts.

T.B. In my opinion, anti-Semitism is a sign and a symptom of national weakness and immaturity, deriving from 1) envy and 2) impotence that is always on the lookout for the guilty party. Moreover, I cannot understand how is it compatible with Christianity of which the Russian Orthodox Church considers itself to be the main branch.

A.M. I'm no theologian but I think that Christianity which says that there is neither Hellene nor Jew is incompatible with anti-Semitism. However, all nations adapt their religion to their national traditions. In Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, Stavrogin expounds the idea that a nation remains great as long as it believes its God to be the greatest and the only in the world.

T.B. Is Stavrogin a moral authority for you, or you portray your own hero after this character?

A.M. No. Stavrogin is only interesting in that he formulates his ideas very clearly. If you apply this idea to Russian Christianity, you will see that Orthodoxy is not a secondary characteristic of Russian people but its central idea, that they have to put their Christ above all others uncompromisingly (the same as a Black tribe worship their tribal idol, trying to impose it on all the other tribal idols). This idea probably derives from Paganism, but any nation, combining Christianity with self-love transgresses Christian commandments.

T.B. It seems to be the case. How unfortunate.

A.M. The most unfortunate thing is that there is nothing in the world that you can amputate. This is really very unfortunate. If you examine the roots and functions of the most disgusting and hateful phenomena you will see that the worst thing about them is not the phenomenon itself but the dose. For the simple mind all substances are divided into poisonous and health-giving while for the physiologist there are no such criteria, it's just a matter of doses. This applies to everything else.

T.B. OK, let's forget about insoluble questions for the time being and pass on to your profession. How do you write? Do you follow a set plan or your heroes and heroines surprise you with all sorts of tricks?

A.M. I spend a long time thinking over the future characters, creating many variants and discarding them, but when a character has formed he/she begins to affect the events. I don't follow any plan but the driving force is the main character, whom I invariably take through a series of ordeals. Suppose he is a romantic, as in *Romance with Prostatitis*, he hates all that is associated with the flesh, curbing his free spirit. Predictably, I make him experience the humiliations of the flesh. I don't know beforehand what kind of humiliations. But life itself suggests a great variety of humiliations to choose from, it prompts me readily. A stay in a hospital provides you with an abundance of such material.

T.B. Sometimes it so happens that when you are focussed on a theme, real life readily offers relevant material. Mystical, isn't it? Has it ever happened to you?

A.M. This is always the case.

T.B. Which authors influenced you most of all at an earlier stage?

A.M. My main teachers were Tolstoy, Herzen and Chekhov.

T.B. I can't help asking you about any common points with Nabokov. In the first place you are a winner of the Nabokov Prize in St. Petersburg (to mention the formal aspect of it) and, moreover, critics constantly draw parallels between you and Nabokov, especially your *Romance with Prostatitis* and Nabokov's *Lolita* (and sometimes with

Invitation to the Beheading). Have you learnt from him intentionally or you developed independently your tragic “cynicism” – an exaggerated naturalism of voluptuousness – deriving from the same psychological-existential sources?

A.M. I read Nabokov at the age of thirty, it was *The Luzhin Defense* that shattered me. Its mastery and the powerful idea made a strong impression on me. As for *Lolita*'s indecency combined with coldness, I forgot them the next day. In my *Romance with Prostatitis* I wanted to convey something else – a passionate protest against our physiological humiliation. The baroque style is also supposed to express a protest against the “lowly material”. You'll be surprised but I mainly learnt from Paustovsky.

T.B. I don't see Paustovsky in your works at all. He seems to be too “sugary”, too sentimental for your prose.

A.M. I used to admire his *Novel about a Life*. In my opinion, it's beautiful prose (I still think so). It's an injection of love for the world, an injection of sentimental love for little things. This is much better for a young writer than a dose of iron categorization and lifeless designing devoid of real feelings. Sentimentality is the soul of art if you like. Well, to avoid sounding too sentimental, I would say that love is the soul of art. Even hatred is a product of love, being insulted love.

T.B. I also used to admire Paustovsky in my youth, but today I see serious shortcomings in him. He lived in a terrible world and could not have been ignorant of its nature (of course he knew), but he made a choice in favor of sentimentality, as if he drew only on his organic nature. I would say that Paustovsky's organic nature was craftily put to the service of Soviet ideology.

A.M. I agree. But even in the most terrible situations someone has to preserve a radiant image of the world, if only for the sake of the children. If they don't get an injection of trust in the world they will grow up as animals. Paustovsky demonstrated that you could write a production novel featuring unusual people (*Kara-Bugaz*). Thanks to him you understand that exotic journeys are possible not only in Africa but right in your own area as well.

T.B. A kind of a Soviet Jack London, isn't he?

A.M. In my teens, Jack London was an idol for me. And later Remarque. But they had less influence on me than Paustovsky who showed me that in everyday life one could find diamonds of poetry. A railway track woman can turn out to be a fairy princess and a drunkard may be a poet.

T.B. Under Soviet rule such ideas were almost heresy. Wasn't Thomas Mann an influence on you as well? I definitely feel his stamp on your prose.

A.M. Regarding Thomas Mann, when I had a chance to read him I was already a mature person to say the least (or the most). What did he give me? A feeling of greater freedom. It was the time when I started offering my stories to editors.

T.B. What age were you when you started making the rounds of editorial offices?

A.M. About thirty. I remember defending my thesis and simultaneously thinking over a plot for my first short novel *Scales for the Good*. I was carried away with this novel and so naive as to think that it will be hailed by everybody, or at least received warmly. But the first reaction was that I “talk too much”. I thought that my prose was not at all difficult, but the editors told me it was too elitist, that I should delete my long discourses. I thought at the time that perhaps they were right after all. I tried to write simpler, to introduce more dialogues. I tried to pretend that I'm an ordinary “real” writer,

like everybody else. I wrote, for example: “The bell rang and Sidorov came in.” In fact, I should have written: “The bell rang, Avdotya slowly got off the sofa. It took her ages to find her slippers. She shuffled towards the door, grumbling...” And so on for two pages. I also started employing this boring even-paced tonality. And then I read Thomas Mann and thought: “He devotes much more space to discourses, and he does not need any Avdotyas. If he can do it why can’t I?” It gave me strength to see that I’m not alone like that. However, sometimes I thought that I was probably the last one of the species. Moreover, Thomas Mann had never lived in Russia.

T.B. It’s true that this direction in Russian prose has never been developed. Maybe in Trifonov one can find traces of it. Incidentally, you single out Trifonov (and so do I): in your list of important events of the century you write: “Trifonov was born and died.” What does this writer mean to you?

A.M. In my “creative life” (sorry for this cliché) he played the same role as Thomas Mann: he demonstrated to me that even in those times one could write well and honestly, write about simple people. Critics referred to his manner as “infatuation with small themes”. I admired him very much. In my youth, I even over-rated him (at times I believed him to be equal to Faulkner), but today I probably underestimate him as often happens after you’ve loved somebody too much. The thing is that I could borrow nothing from Trifonov. There was nothing I could take from him. I’ve taken something from Chekhov, and from Hemingway...

T.B. There is much you could have taken from Trifonov (not less than from Paustovsky) but he is not your cup of tea, it seems.

A.M. Perhaps. In any case, I’ve had a terrible feeling of loneliness for a long time. I was writing alternative prose. As I wrote in *Humped Atlantes*: “Anyone who is different should be exterminated.”

T.B. Or humiliated.

A.M. Better exterminated. But as long as you cannot exterminate him physically you can do it morally by killing his faith in himself.

T.B. Thank God they humiliated you but have not exterminated you. They tempered your character. As one wise man said: “What fails to kill us makes us stronger.” In *Confessions of a Jew* you speak in the first person singular, either putting on a mask of a grotesque self-lampoon or maybe really confessing. Could you disclose the essence of this unusual game between the author and the main character?

A.M. I confess: it is my confession in a way. But it is a hypertrophied confession. I have exaggerated everything to make the hero triply Russian — in appearance, in his manners, so that only one stamp remained: he is still a Jew. These are real-life feelings but exaggerated, deprived of the necessary explanations that I have given above when we discussed anti-Semitism. Moreover, it’s a confession with defensive self-irony and constant joking. This is desecrating one’s own despair. One can say serious things in humorous form so that at any moment you can pretend that you have been joking all along. Such is my hero. In today’s literature, the same as in today’s life, bombast is unacceptable – no one is going to believe you. There is no point in creating a romantic hero in the manner of Schiller – no one is going to believe that.

Besides, in the Jewish character two principles are forever struggling. On the one hand, he really wishes to be “one of the boys”, but on the other hand, he understands how

silly and primitive his wish is, and so he laughs at his petty passions. Hence the defensive masks.

T.B. This is a strange, even unheard-of case in Russian literature. You are sentimental, I insist again. In *Confessions of a Jew* you are sincerely suffering for your hero, but at the same time you actually betray him by exaggerating and deriding his faults.

A.M. You are very right although I feel hurt. Yes, that is so. Such is my frame of mind. On the other hand, if I put aside my irony and give my pure compassion to the hero, would the novel be better?

T.B. It would not.

A.M. There you are!

T.B. I wonder what you think about the writer Vladimir Sorokin.

A.M. I've read his *Norm* only recently. I admired it very much. Such a great variety of situations to carry across the same idea. Now it's a design bureau, now it's an exhibition... In short, it's a great wealth of parodies. Then I started reading his other things and became bored rather quickly because he employs one and the same device again and again, he does it very skillfully but there is a limit to everything. A little was plenty for me. I'm glad there is such literature, but it would be awful if it became the dominant trend. In my opinion, the function of art is to arouse strong feelings in us, feelings that are not directly related to our lives. And also to create powerful collective phantoms. Without collective mesmerizing phantoms a society cannot survive.

T.B. What does it have to do with contemporary literature?

A.M. When the intellectual elite loses the ability to create enchanting phantoms, making one shed tears over fictions, admire the fruits of imagination, the mirages, when this elite surrenders to the enemy, that is, to reality and its boring games, the people step on the path of partisan war and turn to pulp fiction. Pop culture is a weapon of a people's war. In pop culture there is a place for heroism and great love overcoming death, great hatred and beauty. Pop culture is primitive but it produces primitive forms of romanticism and eternal art, creating ideals. Art condenses them so much that they acquire lasting power over people's minds, more lasting than the power of a real person. Here are some powerful samples: Prometheus, Hamlet, Pechorin. They became generally accepted symbols, they penetrated our consciousness through exaggeration, hypertrophy and simplification. If art stops creating such figures and will only produce brilliant and witty schemes instead – such as those of Pelevin – or just limits itself to fine parodies, humankind will perish. However, it will probably be saved by pop culture. Hairdressers will read about great love in women's novels. They won't read *Romeo and Juliet* but they will see a film based on the drama. They will watch *The Titanic* to make sure that love is stronger than death, stronger than social inequality. Common people will absorb great illusions from pop culture. They will do without us, while we'll be stagnating, pining and amusing ourselves. Meanwhile the Slavic scholars will be studying our works and tear our devices to pieces.

T.B. Speaking about Slavic scholars, has anybody ever translated you into foreign languages, and how successfully?

A.M. There is something translated into German, Hungarian, and Italian. It must be difficult for them to convey nuances, probably impossible. I talked to the Italian translator, who has done *Confessions of a Jew*. He is a nice person, but he keeps talking

about the tragedy of the novel. I asked him whether he noticed how much irony and mockery of one's own despair there is in the novel. No, he was not aware of it. Or take the Hungarian translator, who did *Eros and Thanatos* and is now working over *Confessions of a Jew*. Obviously, he loves and understands literature, I can see that from his detailed and precise questions. But we always have so many connotations. I think that three quarters of meaning is lost in translation. But ideas are probably preserved.

T.B. True, often one sentence requires a whole explanatory essay. You have to be your own critic and commentator. Have it ever happened that a critic discovered something in your texts that was a revelation for you?

A.M. Yes, once. It was an article about me in the *World Biographical Encyclopedia*. It said: "The main thrust of his work is iconoclasm." I had not been aware of it but when I read that I saw it was true. I liked Evgeny Shklovsky's review of *Confessions of a Jew*. He observed that my main device is to take everything to its extreme.

T.B. You are strangely ambivalent: your every assertion is counterbalanced by a negation. Sometimes you overdo it, in my view (but I'm a well-known conservative and "just so" person). For instance, in *Confessions of a Jew* you (or your hero) say ironically: "Jews are poorly suited to understand Russian poets with such arch-Russian names as Blok." Can you explain your irony? You know, Blok is my favorite 20th century Russian poet.

A.M. *Confessions of a Jew* contains many allusions to what was in the air at that time. Then everybody quoted some Communist who said that the opponents of the Communist party are mostly Jews who can't even pronounce "Russia" with a good "r".

T.B. I see.

A.M. The irony of my remark is in the fact that "Blok" has no "r", and also in the fact that Russian culture has been largely created by non-Russians. In other words, my irony has nothing to do with Blok himself.

T.B. What prevails in you: sadism or masochism? And which of them is more conducive to creativity?

A.M. I would say that my sadism is a form of masochism (if you insist on using these terms). If you love something (or someone) and you see it humiliated you suffer, and then you begin scratching at the sores. Your own sores, always your own.

T.B. Do you consider yourself a postmodernist? What is your definition of this cultural and in particular literary phenomenon?

A.M. I've been encountering this term in criticism for some time but did not know its meaning. From the context I gathered that this is a self-appellation of well-read but untalented people, intelligent but without soul. Later critic Elena Ivanitskaya called me a "tragic postmodernist" and explained to me that a postmodernist is one who does not believe in the absolute. Then I decided that perhaps I am a postmodernist after all, if that does not mean the lack of passion.

T.B. I think that those who call themselves postmodernists are certainly lacking passion. This is their main characteristic. Passion is not *comme il faut* in their midst.

A.M. Then according to your understanding of the term, I'm not a postmodernist. My son, who is a student of sociology, explained to me that in sociology all the theories, rejecting total description of human society, are considered to be postmodernist. Compared to Kafka who aimed to create a model of the world, or Tolstoy whose aim in

War and Peace was to present a model of a nation, I set myself more modest tasks. I don't strive to construct any models of the world or of universal absurdity. My task is always more focused. This comes from my postmodernism in the sociological sense.

And yet, I think that the main function of art is to create fictional worlds, arousing in the reader strong feelings such as love, hatred, anger and delight.

T.B. You often embellish your prose with quotations, a favorite device of primitive Soviet postmodernists (sorry!). Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Or is it a parody on a parody?

A.M. Exactly: a parody on a parody.

T.B. Ambivalence again: you are at the same time a postmodernist and his opponent. In her later years, when a new person came to see her, Akhmatova tested them in her own way: dog or cat? – tea or coffee? – Pasternak or Mandelstam? Depending on the person's preferences she made exhaustive conclusions about the person (I read about it in some memoirs). Let us test you with Akhmatova's test. I can even make a guess: you will probably choose "dog, tea, Pasternak", right?

A.M. Your hunch is correct if Pasternak is personified with a creative impulse, inspiring art. His awkward language is not close to me. I tried to love him once, even succeeded in this, but a year later nothing remained in my head. There is no beauty in his verse. He is tongue-tied and over-emotional – I did not manage to accept these qualities in him. But this is my fault, not Pasternak's. However, choosing a dominant image according to Akhmatova's method I'd still choose Pasternak.

T.B. According to Akhmatova, it means that you are a psychologically normal individual with a dominant of optimism and mental health.

A.M. I would certainly want to be like this.

T.B. Do you believe that literature can save the world, change people's minds, wake them up, etc.? Why do you write? Are you a moralist?

A.M. Literature alone cannot save the world. But without those phantoms created by literature (in a broad sense, including primitive gossip) no society would survive even three years.

We, writers creating literature, seem to be exceptional. But if you take the most primitive person, seemingly living by bread alone, after a few drinks he relaxes and starts speaking about the beautiful, as he understands it, he would start a song about something quite useless, about something sublime. In *Confessions of a Jew*, I quote some silly anecdotes about Pushkin, his enterprising mind and his indecent tricks. For some reason people want such an image of Pushkin.

T.B. Anecdotes aside, have you ever written poetry (maybe you're still writing it "on the margins of your prose")? Are you aware that your prose has meter, verging on *vers libre*, a quality that is dear to my heart, and your prose abounds in alliterations? Is it a conscious device or it happens by itself?

A.M. I certainly see to it that a sentence does not stumble, that in emotional passages it flows smoothly. I try to remove unpleasant dissonances. I see to it that my prose is free from any ugliness – no more than that. You are the first to notice this *vers libre* quality of my prose. Thank you.

T.B. I hope to draw your attention to some other qualities of your prose. Let's see. What is irony for you (my favorite Blok hated it)? What is more harmful: irony or romanticism, between which you seem to be torn apart?

A.M. Irony comes from desecrating what you love. As to what is more harmful, I think literature is unthinkable without pathos. It's an excess of it that is bad. Irony counterbalances an excess of pathos. But at the same time, it disposes the reader towards the author. It's quite possible that one day a new great poet will appear, a new Schiller who will overwhelm everyone with wonderful thundering verse which will turn the tables again. But I won't dare use only pathos in my work.

T.B. You have a rare combination of both while your irony is not a tribute to current fashion but a defensive reaction from pathos. A relevant question: what have you learnt from the poetics of the folk tale as a literary genre? And from folk ditties?

A.M. I use these genres as ethnographic material for speech characteristics. If I find a good ditty I can use it. But I don't think it has had any influence on my writing. The same is true about the poetics of the folk tale – it did not give me anything. I lack innocence for that. In this sense, Chekhov put me in place right away – one should describe everyday life as it is. Folk tale is certainly a great genre. We (not just me) lost a taste for it, for reading folk tales as well as creating them. This is one of the symptoms of our emotional impoverishment.

T.B. I don't agree. I often come across evidence of regeneration of the folk tale in contemporary prose (not as imitation or a fashion). For example, Irina Povolotskaya who develops the tradition of the folk tale in the manner of Remizov. I don't want to give you any advice, but why don't you have a dose of a deeper study of folklore? I can feel how much your prose needs the vitamin yeast that folklore can give you.

A.M. God knows, you may be right. I feel kind of ossified – I've cut off many branches and the wounds have healed. Let's take Sergei Dovlatov. What is the secret of his success among intellectuals and simple people alike? In the first place, in his world light-mindedness is not punished as severely as in real life. His hero is a typical Ivan the Fool. He goes on a business trip, gets drunk, and nothing happens. We know that you can be sacked for that or get cirrhosis of the liver from drinking. But in his light-hearted world anything goes. This is a precious quality for thousands of readers. Dovlatov has practically created a modern fairy tale. Dovlatov's other folk tale quality is the fact that he is not concerned with his heroes' inner life. He portrays them with delightfully precise and funny strokes, but if he looked deeper he would see that they, too, feel anguish, hurt, fear. You are amused as long as you see the heroes from outside. But as soon as you realize that the hero is just like you, inevitably you feel sad. Folk tale does not imply psychology. This is why I'm not interested in the folk tale at the moment. I always look into the character's inner world and immediately I'm not amused and stop laughing but feel sad and tragic.

T.B. There are no fast-moving plots in your prose (I would even say your plots are weak). Have you ever wished to write a thriller or an adventure novel with some intricate intrigue?

A.M. In this connection, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy immediately come to mind. In Tolstoy, the world is an interaction of subconscious elements: life goes on as it will, you cannot control it. In Dostoyevsky, life is a struggle of conscious will powers. A struggle of the elements is best expressed through epic while a struggle of conscious will powers is best expressed through intrigue. As for me, I don't have a sense of the world as a conscious struggle, this is why my prose cannot have a clear-cut plot. I don't see in life

any pre-planned construction of the world, this is why a plot would be a false addition to my writings.

T.B. In your *Confessions of a Jew* there is an argument about Russians and Ingushes, which almost predicted the current war in Chechnya. What are your thoughts today about the Russian-Caucasian conflicts?

A.M. My thoughts derive from the same tragic worldview. There are conflicts in which all the participants are in their right and each has to fight for what he is duty bound to protect. In the current conflict both parties are right and I can't take any sides. However, I still think that the sooner we'll let them go the less we'll lose, it will be easier to deal with them when Chechnya becomes a foreign state. This is what I think.

T.B. I read recently in Anatoly Mariengof's memoir (incidentally, what is your opinion of this unjustly underestimated author?): "Excessive pessimism is just as disgusting as excessive optimism. Both are fools but of different colors – one black and the other is pink." Very well said, don't you think? Which fool causes more harm, in your opinion?

A.M. Mariengof's *Cynics* is an excellent novel. As to which fool causes more harm... Tragic worldview does not accept either pessimism or optimism. It says that man is not destined to foresee the consequences of his actions. Obvious evil may produce some good and vice versa. Tragic world perception does not require either faith or faithlessness. At times we believe that we've thought of everything but then you break a leg, or get down with cancer, or your best friend betrays you... On the other hand, in your blackest moment you suddenly win in a lottery. This is why our ignorance of the world should not cause any despair.

T.B. Why do you speak about yourself as a representative of tragic worldview? Are you really so tragic and pessimistic?

A.M. According to ancient Greeks, tragic worldview consists of two components: the first is a contradictory nature of all values (best expressed in *Antigone* where every character is right in his/her own way and every character has to fulfil their own duties); and the second is life's unpredictability (*Oedipus the King*). Contradiction and unpredictability. As to what is more dangerous: pessimism or optimism, I can answer as follows: pessimists spoil people's moods while optimists cause catastrophes.

T.B. That is, also through gossip, right? In the much-mentioned *Confessions of a Jew* you reiterate the idea that gossip is much more than simply spreading rumors, it is a "dwelling for the national spirit". Could you explain your philosophy of the phenomenon of gossip.

A.M. This is not my philosophy but that of my hero. But there is a grain of truth in his monologue: he is convinced that among simple people gossip plays the role of literary creativity. Gossip carries morals, myths, parody, hyperbole, and grotesque. Its method includes concentrated meaning, exaggeration, simplification. These are the laws of the large-scale romantic prose. Gossip is tending to amaze and shake. Gossip has claims to the role of instructor: children listen to gossip, they treat it with all seriousness, deducting from it that it is bad not to cook for a husband or to be negligent with housekeeping.

T.B. In real life you don't gossip, as far as I know, but in your writings you sing praises to gossip and make it the basis for your heroes' behavior. How can you explain this?

A.M. The world of images (ideal world) and the world of real life are completely different. According to idealist aesthetics, the world of images has almost nothing to do with reality. This is an exaggeration but there is a grain of truth in it. You know only too well that people have always been primarily concerned with everyday matters – money, their daily bread, their relationships with neighbors. But somehow there are no songs about this. There is a saying: a miser won't sing about lost money. As I've mentioned earlier, I'm merciless to my characters but very lenient towards real people. It happens that I take a character trait from a person I love dearly and give it to a negative character in a monstrously exaggerated form. As a seeker for the truth, a creator of ideals, diagnostician and analyst, I have to be merciless. I live in two different worlds. When I write it's a different part of my mind that is at work.

T.B. Poetry is closer to confession, diary, or a mirror reflection. In "lyrical self-expression" the gap between life and image is not so wide. Strange as it may seem, the psychology of prose has more mysticism than poetry. When you portray a person (especially a woman as in *Romance with Prostatitis*) you can't identify yourself with that person. Don't you want to set yourself a task of creating a female character with whom you could identify completely so that you could also say: "Emma Bovary, c'est moi."

A.M. In my first book, *Provincial*, some of the characters, also female characters, are people very unlike myself but I tried to identify with them. And also in *Humped Atlantes*.

T.B. Do you like Vassily Rozanov?

A.M. I rate him highly but don't see a genius in him. Interesting author, that's all.

T.B. I detected his influence on your prose in the abundance of aphorisms. I was tempted to copy some of them into a separate copybook. Here are a few of them from *Romance with Prostatitis*: "You are healthy as long as you have strength to simulate mental health." "Grievance is the offspring of trust." "Nowhere did I have to lie so often and so profusely as in the ranks of the fighters for the truth." And so on. How are they born, and don't their clarity and precision contradict the chaos of the uncontrolled existence that you depict with such power?

A.M. Any fictional structure, any style as such, are opposed to chaos, because any style is a means of organizing material. In general, creative enthusiasm should be combined with discipline. This is like atomic energy: in order to make it produce light without exploding you have to keep it in iron control. The more chaotic the world I depict the stricter discipline I impose on it by means of a plot, style, aphorisms.

T.B. In your novel *Real Man or Eros and Thanatos*, there is a great number of negative stop-signs: dirt... fog... corpse... sewage... What is the purpose of this aggressive negativism?

A.M. *Eros and Thanatos*, the same as *Romance with Prostatitis*, is based on the contrasts of the lofty and the lowly. *Romance with Prostatitis* is more inclined towards the lofty because its hero is a romantic. And yet, the contrast of the lofty and the lowly provides an inner conflict experienced by Iridy Viktorovich – how can love be both poetic and dirty at the same time? I show how difficult it is for an average person, who is not endowed with a romantic soul, who is just an ordinary law-abiding citizen, to discern poetry in real life. This is why I put the lowly in sharp relief.

T.B. When you concentrate on the endless images of lowly human physiology, do you indulge in obscenities or you have to overcome your shame?

A.M. This is again desecrating one's own despair. I think it's dangerous to regard man as a purely spiritual creature independent of any lowly aspects of life. The more idealistic notions you have of people the more painfully you will be hurt by their shortcomings. If a simple worker does not see a Goddess in his woman he will not be shocked by her bodily manifestations. But if a man sees a woman as a Madonna he will be shocked with her physiology. The seamy side of idealism. It's always painful to realize that the ideal has to obey the same general laws of the matter. I put a focus on this problem in *Romance with Prostatitis*.

T.B. But have you managed to overcome your inner pain?

A.M. I don't think that the conflicts between the body and the spirit, between the image and the object, the ideal and the reality should be overcome completely. If you manage to overcome it you get rid of your neuroses, of course, but you will also deprive yourself of poetry.

T.B. No, you won't. What are you going to write after your latest novel, *The Whole World Is a Foreign Land to Us...*?

A.M. I'll be writing its second part, a continuation and conclusion of some lines of the plot. Then, I'll write *The Plague*, a novel about drug addicts. Drug addiction is a logical outcome of masturbation tendencies in European culture. In *The Whole World Is a Foreign Land to Us*, the hero hates soothing illusions. He uses the term "masturbation culture" to denote the self-service art which has no intention of giving.

T.B. That is, when "I" does not need any "you", right?

A.M. Precisely. When a person is told that he is the center of the universe and does not have to serve his clan, the state, science, God, that it is they that have to serve him, he is plunged in hell. Because he still has to serve his family, the state and simply attend to the needs of his everyday life; but previously he was doing it with full understanding of its necessity and now he regards it as an insult: "The higher has to serve the lowly." Thus all the sources of positive emotions become closed to him, because our positive emotions derive from our achievements. You've won a competition, you've built a house, you've won a woman's love, you've won a prize. You've earned something and now it is yours. And suddenly you don't want anything, any action becomes a burden. All you have to do is take an injection of a drug and you get pleasure right away without any trouble. This kind of plague will consume my heroes.

T.B. Is this going to be a treatise or literary fiction?

A.M. An analytical novel. It'll be an utterly cruel work.

T.B. In *Romance with Prostatitis*, you use the word "otsebyatina" (something of one's own devising) as a philosophical term. Can you explain?

A.M. My hero believes that the most interesting things in life are those that are absent in the world until a person creates them. Watching traffic lights reflected in a puddle is not particularly exciting. But when you compare it to a fractured rainbow it triggers off a series of associations, which come into the world only thanks to you. A metaphor makes the world more interesting. The most precious things in life are those that are introduced thanks to the artist's power of observation. Art is actually *otsebyatina*.

But again this is only my hero's opinion.