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THE GROTESQUE IN TATYANA TOLSTAYA’S THE SLYNX

by

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The Grotesque in Tatyana Tolstaya’s *The Slynx*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Laura Olson Osterman

The following paper examines several different manifestations of the grotesque in Tatyana Tolstaya’s novel *The Slynx*. Tolstaya experiments with the grotesque in several realms, by setting the town Fyodor Kuzmichsk with mutated people, creating for them a peculiar language and wrapping the whole story into an original style of narration which embodies divergent discourses. The grotesque can be flexibly defined and applied to a variety of aspects of a literary text. The thesis discusses the most traditional one, related to distortions of the human body, but also explores how the grotesque manifests itself through postmodern language and narration. In particular, the narration is dominated by postmodern language and a polyphony of discourses; the language in the novel is not directly or coherently attached to the past. Thus, *The Slynx* signifies a break with the previous forms of the grotesque. In comparison with Romantic and Realist grotesques, a contrast with the norm no longer defines the grotesque; instead, unbound to the past, the postmodern grotesque exists within the absence of any norm.
The first and only novel of Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, was long-waited and rife with rumors and expectations several years prior to its final publication in 2000. Not surprisingly, the expectations were either successfully fulfilled or, on the contrary, collapsed. Indeed, the novel received a spectrum of reviews beginning with the appraisals proclaiming it to be an encyclopedia or model of Russian life (see Paramonov’s review), only updated and polished in accordance with important historical cataclysms, and ending with a criticism regarding its dystopian post-apocalyptic setting, which one author deemed to be no longer relevant and interesting in a new millennium (see Eliseev’s review). For a popular post-modernist author of skillfully mastered short stories, *The Slynx* was indeed a big experiment, primarily, a linguistic one, as Lev Danilkin puts it: ““Кысь” - даже не стилизация под допушкинский язык; этот сказ - вполне оригинальная разработка ненавистного писательнице деградировавшего, туземного, не тронутого ни одной культурной инвестицией языка” (“Kys’ is not even a stylization of pre-Pushkin language; this skaz is a quite original modeling of a degraded, indigenous language, detested by the author, and untouched by any cultural investment”). Language, in general, has been Tolstaya’s main weapon and method in creating her deep and distinctive worlds in short stories — “Fakir,” “Okkervil River,” or “On the Golden Porch” are among the most known and cited of them. Extraordinary metaphors, careful and scrupulous attention to detail, grotesque oscillation between high and low tones, vibrant humor that ranges from “robust, rollicking hilarity to sardonic debunking and gentle irony” all create Tolstaya’s


3 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted
unique style, which distinguishes her from other prominent authors of post-Stalinist fiction, Petrushevskaya, Narbikova or Sadur (Goscilo 7). However, if Tolstaya’s short stories delve into the familiar prosaic realm of *byt*, then *The Slynx* seems to be a blurred ‘bear bladders’ window into a future that ironically recalls a very dark and distant past.

In the novel, the Blast has rolled the wheel of history back, having transformed Soviet Moscow into the medieval town Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. No one escaped the Consequences from the Blast — people and animals have mutated dramatically and irrevocably. Society mainly consists of a general population, called *golubchiki*, and their rulers — Big and Small Murzas. The mouse has become a foundation of life, being a source of food and light, and a means of exchange. “Мышь — наша опора!” (Tolstaya 225). Fyodor Kuzmich is the Greatest Murza, who is also considered the author of all inventions and books. The main character, a copyist Benedikt, lives an ordinary life until he marries a daughter of the Head Saniturion. Some people are believed to suffer from an Illness caused by old printed books, and Saniturions have to seize the books and “cure” the sick ones. After Benedikt finds out that the old printed books do not harm, he becomes a Saniturion himself, obsessed with looking for more old books. Meanwhile, a mysterious creature slynx is living somewhere in the forest. Invisible, it sits on the branches and waits to take another victim’s life, mournfully howling *sly-y-ynx*. Benedikt is afraid of the slynx and constantly feels its presence until he learns that he is the slynx himself.

On the one hand, the novel represents a typical dystopian post-apocalyptic plot when the society is thrown several centuries backwards after a global catastrophe. Heather Hicks characterizes the post-apocalyptic world as featuring “demolished urban environments surrounded by

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4 “Mice are our mainstay!” (Tolstaya 160).
depleted countryside, defunct technologies; desperate scavenging; poignant yearning for a lost civilization, often signified by the written word; and extreme violence, including cannibalism, enacted by roving gangs of outlaws” (6). To a certain extent, all of it is present in The Slynx: the countryside has replaced urban life, the wheel is a recent innovation in technology, the intelligentsia is grieving for their lost past, and violence, performed both by golubchiki (games such as “udushilochka”) and by power groups (Saniturions), is a significant aspect of the society. According to Galina Nefagina, The Slynx, while possessing the characteristics of classical dystopia, has evolved into a new type — “natsional’naia antiutopiia v postmodernistkom kliuche” (“national dystopia in a postmodern way”) (200). This dystopia is based on logocentrism and on postmodern parameters — the incorporation of various styles (mythological, folklore, bookish). Nefagina points out all the traditional dystopian features maintained in the novel such as narration from the perspective of a participant of events, an intelligent main character or the uniformity of population; however, most of them are mocked and satirized by Tolstaya. For instance, despite his passion for books Benedikt is hardly intelligent — he is not able to understand what he reads, which makes the whole process worthless. The population is hardly unified and homogeneous because they speak different languages, although Nefagina considers the absence of morality and thought (“bezmyslie”) a major manifestation of the common conformity (192).

On the other hand, The Slynx does not completely fall into the dimension of dystopia or science-fiction. In contrast to Nefagina, Natalya Ivanova writes that the novel is a parody of dystopia due to the combination of diametrically opposite genres: intellectual dystopia and folk tale, science fiction and satirical article, popular literature and lofty prose. Mark Lipovetskii notes that Tolstaya’s Blast is a method of clearing away further layers of history from the
“Russian World.” Thus, past and present culture and history coexist together (Lipovetskii 381). The Blast does not likely speak of nuclear threat, rather it is a metaphor for a tremendous historical crisis such as the Revolution or Tatar-Mongol invasion that tries to extirpate the older culture and traditions. Therefore, the conflict in Tolstaya’s novel is not based on the confrontation between the power structures and truth-seeking dissidents, who are willing to prevent degradation and change the future as in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1920), *A Canticle for Leibovitz* (1960) by Walter Miller Jr, or John Wyndham’s *Chrysalids* (1956). In *The Slynx*, the surviving intelligentsia are too weak, divided and individualistic; only Nikita Ivanich attempts to reconstruct the topography of former Moscow by placing pillars with the old street names and Pushkin’s monument, per se meaningless and superfluous. Overall, this is a nostalgia for the past, rather than a step into the future. Though Benedikt is the central character, he does not inspire the reader with confidence or sympathy, being a man of the system who does not want to transgress the existing order. Soon he himself becomes a part of this order by taking the position of Saniturion, while his so-called searching for truth is, in fact, an egotistical and futile action. In a sense, the absence of key social conflict removes the novel from the dystopian field. According to Elena Rabinovich, although *The Slynx* demonstrates overt similarities with popular dystopias (Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* or George Orwell’s *1984*), it is not focused on one central social idea and does not forecast the future as classical dystopias do, and for that reason “Kys’ slishkom literaturna” (“*The Slynx* is too literary”).

On the whole, the diversity of layers with which Tolstaya builds her novel is both fascinating and confusing. For instance, Andrey Nemzer⁵ calls this stylistic mixture a cocktail of

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long-known ingredients, and thus an uninspiring one. Many literary critics mention the grotesque and hyperbole with which Tolstaya like a magician mingles together mythological, folkloric, official and intertextual elements, while encompassing two epochs, Gorbachev’s and Yeltsin’s. In addition, Tolstaya’s short stories have always been grotesque in different respects due to the fluctuation between high and low aspects and styles (the distance between high art and low byt in “Fakir” or “Okkervil River” illustrates this quite vividly). Nonetheless, the function of the grotesque in either the short stories or in the The Slynx has not been deeply analyzed; it is often taken as given, a fact that everyone knows and understands. After I first read The Slynx, I was captivated by the accessible outer form of the novel integrated into this seemingly dystopian and post-apocalyptic frame. However, later my attention was drawn towards the grotesque images and elements, the way they coexisted and acquired meaning. Apart from the vivid manifestations of the grotesque such as grotesque bodies, I found the grotesque to function on a more implicit level — in language and the narration. In the beginning, it seems that the narrator is Benedikt, but, in fact, his narration is quite hard to recognize. Instead, Tolstaya, by implementing free indirect discourse, complicates and tangles different discourses. Subsequently, this polyphony produces the very grotesque effect of the unknown and the uncertainty of everything. The reader’s trust of the narrator is diminished, and the reader doubts what is described. This specific narration without the strong presence of Tolstaya as author herself corresponds to the crisis of the Word or logos, on which her novel is centered. Language is no longer a stable system, but a subjective and random collection of signs. Rather than labeling the grotesque as a feature of content, this thesis proposes to establish that the grotesque in The Slynx functions through the ambivalence of the body, as well as deconstructed language and multi-voiced narration,
enhancing the fluctuation between what is real and what is imagined, and challenging the reader’s reliance on the power of the Word. This paper will begin with the definition of the term grotesque, its interpretation and significance in the Russian scene and in criticism. Then, it will proceed to a closer analysis of grotesque elements in *The Slynx* — the grotesque bodies on the explicit level, and more implicitly language and the puzzling structure of the narration.

**About the Grotesque**

The term grotesque is distinguished by its elusive and flexible nature. Undoubtedly, as with any definition, it underwent various transformations throughout its long history, first being a mode of visual expression in art and then gradually permeating the realm of literature. Both in literature and art, the elusiveness of the grotesque can be observed through the multiplicity of associations it evokes — horror, disgust, comedy, deformity, absurdity, darkness, illusion and estrangement are some of the many. As a result, it is not easy to place the grotesque within the limits of one concrete universal definition. Nonetheless, the grotesque has not perished or lost its significance because of that. Instead, with the fluidity of water it passes within the main literary genres and goes through continuous metamorphosis, preserving a certain recognizable grotesqueness. Before beginning my analysis of *The Slynx* in the light of grotesque, I will try to identify the possible context and form of the grotesque that I will be able to apply to Tolstaya’s novel.

Overall, despite its lengthy and profound history the grotesque was mainly acknowledged in the romantic period of the nineteenth century and then became popular in the second half of the twentieth century. I find this ‘revival’ of the grotesque in Russian literature of the 1970s and
1980s to be a remarkable sign of the grotesque being a reactionary genre of historical events. Especially, in the context of the Soviet Union and its subsequent dissolution, Tolstaya’s usage of the grotesque seems to be extremely relevant and indicative of the contemporary period.

The Russian tradition of the grotesque goes back to Gogol, whose works manifest the realistic dimension of the genre. Subsequently, Gogol’s grotesque substantially influenced Saltykov-Shchedrin and Dostoyevsky, and in the Soviet period, Mayakovsky, Bulgakov and Zoshchenko. One can trace Gogol’s style, particularly, his ironic playfulness with words, in Tolstaya’s works as well. In his book *O groteske v literature*, Yuri Mann shows that one of the most peculiar Gogol stories, “The Nose,” was written in the grotesque manner. In particular, Mann emphasizes that “The Nose” is not a fantastic story or a fable, as contemporary critics used to consider it, rather it is one of the examples of the realistic grotesque. The fantastic element of Kovalev’s escaped nose is just a starting point (*fantasticheskoe predpolozhenie*) as Gogol does not emphasize the phantasmagoria of the action. On the contrary, everything has the shade of a daily routine, and no one in the story behaves in a strange way, even though Kovalev’s nose is independently walking around the city. “В своем гротеске Гоголь и утверждал естественность в невероятном и правду — в самой смелой игре воображения” (“In his grotesque Gogol asserted naturalness in the incredible and truth in the boldest form of imagination”) (Mann 44). Kayser calls “The Nose” a “genuine grotesque” that alongside the motif of the body envelopes the whole story and leads to a final happy resolution of the problem, where “the grotesque elements are treated in a humorous and innocuous manner” (125).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the grotesque, fantasy and hyperbole became essential non-conformist practices among dissident writers. Fantastic and estranged stories by
Sinyavsky or Daniel’ went beyond the socialist realist framework, ventilating questions that previously were not asked. The grotesque of the 1970s still retained realistic characteristics of Gogol’s tradition, but it also voiced popular concerns and dissatisfaction. Leiderman and Lipovetskii accentuate the philosophical function of the grotesque and its tendency to define the limits:

Гротеск в философском смысле выражает болезненное ощущение пределов познания, мучительно суженной перспективы, отсутствия трансценденции. Чувство предела находит воплощение в мотивах смерти, насилия, а также неадекватности знака, слова, языка, человеческого сознания в целом по отношению к страшному и таинственному. (137)

In a philosophical sense, the grotesque expresses the painful realization of the limits of cognition, a painfully narrowed perspective and an absence of transcendence. A sense of a limit or boundary is embodied in the motifs of death, violence and also in the inadequacy of sign, word, language and human consciousness as a whole regarding the uncanny and the mysterious.

Also in the 1970s, Petrushevskaya’s plays and short stories were prohibited from being published exactly due to their ‘uncomfortable,’ too grotesque, annoyingly undisguised and dark descriptions. Tolstaya belonged to a slightly younger generation, thus was able to publish her first collection during the perestroika period. In her analysis of the grotesque in Petrushevskaya and Tolstaya, Ivanova, using Bakhtin’s theory, emphasizes that “The grotesque in Petrushevskaya’s and Tolstaya’s fiction destroys the solemnly pompous, bombastic depiction of the world. And destruction begins with alienation, with the ability to look at this world, as Gogol
put it, “with fresh eyes” (26). The solemnly pompous world is undoubtedly the Soviet world, the way it was presented in the officially approved literature. Both Petrushevskaya and Tolstaya diversely exploited the grotesque through the depiction of the body, language, tone and overall state of ambiguity between the uncanny and the comic. If one perceives Tolstaya and Petrushevskaya as female writers, their disposition towards carnivalisation is another resistance, only not to the state ideology, but to its established literary canon. Alexandra Smith argues, “Petrushevskaia, Tolstaia, Narbikova and Sadur are fully engaged together with their male counterparts in the deconstruction of the meaningful discourse of the past to the point of demonstrating its absurd nature” (55). Once again, the grotesque tends to unleash certain truths and functions as a driver for change, being a non-conformist and reactionist genre. The eccentric and liberal nature of the grotesque took root deep in its origins, which I am going to examine in the next section.

The word ‘grotesque’ originates from the name of ornaments (ornament in Italian is called grottesco) found in Roman caves (le grotte) in the late fifteenth century (Kayser 19). These ornaments were extraordinary and weird in comparison with classical art as they combined human, animal and plant elements together in a fantastic and unrealistic fashion. From this come two vivid manifestations of the grotesque as a) something drastically opposite to classical art and as b) a depiction of the deformed human body. The contemporaries of early grotesque art were puzzled with this new genre: “All these motifs taken from reality are now rejected by an unreasonable fashion. For our contemporary artists decorate the wall with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world” (Kayser 20). The negative reaction of conservative artists was mainly caused by the monstrosity of the depicted
world, which they did not wish to recognize and accept. Importantly, later in the sixteenth
century, despite playful and fantastic plots grotesque paintings also portrayed “something
ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one — a world in
which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals and
human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer
valid” (Kayser 21). A dichotomy of fearful/horrible/sinister and playful/comical/joking was
further considered the primary feature of the literary grotesque. During the Renaissance, the
grotesque successfully transitioned into the literature of Villon, Rabelais, Cervantes and
Shakespeare. Then after almost a century-long span of negative perceptions, the popularity and
attractiveness of the grotesque returned in the age of Romanticism, along with the Gothic,
through the works of Hugo and Hoffmann.

Wolfgang Kayser, in his book *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, defines the grotesque
as “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world,” where “in spite of all the
helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have
power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation” (Kayser 188). Accord-
ing to Kayser, the grotesque is sinister by reason of its estrangement, which is not completely
foreign to us (as in the fairy-tale or fantasy) (184). Rather it is a transformed version of our own
world. The reaction to such an ambivalent grotesque reality, which “is — and is not — our own
world,” induces anxiety and discomfort (Kayser 37). Therefore, due to the alienness of the famil-
iar environment, a person might become frightened more by life than by death (Kayser 185).
Nonetheless, following the oxymoronic nature of the grotesque, since it reveals the horrors of the
world in an estranged manner, it also brings a sense of awareness which is able to disarm the initial fear.

The Russian researcher of Rabelais and Dostoyevsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, provides a perspective of the modern grotesque that is nearly opposite to Kayser’s. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, he states that Kayser overlooked significant characteristics such as the carnivalesque and comic origin of the term. Bakhtin disagrees with Kayser’s ominous vision of the grotesque because it provides a distorted perception of the grotesque as a dark genre, when it is, in fact, an ancient form of folk humor (*smekhovaia kul’tura*). Moreover, the estranged world cannot be our own world; rather, it is a projection of the golden age, the age of carnivals, in other words, our ancient past, when carnivals temporarily turned the existing order upside-down and brought liberation and gaiety. Bakhtin identifies the genre of grotesque realism, which he applies to Rabelais’s works. He mythologizes the term by defining it as degradation from the higher realm towards the lower one: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World* 19-20). Degradation to the level of earth does not mean simply a death, but an ambiguity instead where the earth is “an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 21). In this respect, Bakhtin explores a whole concept of the body as one of the fundamental ancient grotesque images.

Another distinguished scholar, Philip Thomson, in *The Grotesque* analyzed the grotesque by comparing it with closely related genres such as the absurd, the bizarre, the macabre, caricature, parody, satire, irony and the comic. With the majority of these genres, the grotesque is in-
volved in advantageous mutual exchange. For example, a satirical text may intentionally exaggerate the character by making him look grotesque, or, a grotesque work, in its turn, may use “satirical side-effect or score satirical points,” emphasizing the non-conformist, therefore sometimes ‘malevolent’ effect of the grotesque (Thomson 41). Agata Krzychylkiewicz, in her article “Towards the Understanding of the Modern Grotesque,” summarizes Thomson and demarcates four key concepts of his definition: “disharmony, a mixture of both the comic and the terrifying being responsible for the unresolved nature of the grotesque, abnormality, and extravagance and exaggeration” (208). Notably, for Thomson, the grotesque does not only demonstrate a world that is completely inharmonious in itself, but also one which invokes an emotional reaction of discomfort and disharmony among the audience. Therefore, Thomson defines the grotesque as “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response” and as “the ambivalently abnormal” (Thomson 27). Ambivalent abnormality means that the grotesque’s alienation causes a polar dichotomy of effects: laughter and horror, disgust and admiration.

As we can see from the existing definitions, the grotesque has evolved into a genre that creates a disharmonious and discrepant world in contrast to the norms and standards of our own world. The grotesque is distinguished by its ambivalent nature, blending together incompatible elements. Born out of the form of folk humor following Bakhtin’s theory and demonstrating a contradiction to the natural order, it has gradually emerged into a more complicated and multi-layered phenomenon that is more oriented towards the real, its vices and imperfections. Currently, in the postmodern era, the traditional notion of the grotesque as a contradiction to the norm has become even more challenged and reconsidered. The Slynx retains both the traditional
grotesque image of the deformed body and also, more implicitly, manifestations of the grotesque in language and narration, which I will analyze in the next sections.

Grotesque Body

The concept of the deformed body is one of the vivid manifestations of the grotesque. For instance, Bakhtin delineates a whole section on the grotesque image of the body and its origins in *Rabelais and His World*. He emphasizes that the grotesque body, even though hyperbolized and exaggerated, should not be perceived solely in negative terms. As with the whole notion of the grotesque, the grotesque body is similarly ambiguous, both inducing death and birth. “The essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 317). Bakhtin’s interpretation of the body is dual because it is not complete and it continues through the other bodies. He understands the body as a collective, uniting and overcoming death in this continuity. On top of that, the “abnormality” of the grotesque body and the physical actions it commits (such as defecation or urination) signified a break with a hierarchy of the canon and a transgression of what was conceived as normal.

In the meantime, in modern and postmodern literature, the alienation of the grotesque body no longer seems so distantly ugly, disgusting and abnormal as it was in the Romantic period or earlier. If in the beginning the grotesque body functioned purely as an element of fantasy or play, then in the twentieth century with the creation of nuclear weapons and overall advantages in science and technology, the concept of the human body and its limits has been reevaluated. Harpham argues that due to the rapid development of technology, the grotesque, which formerly
signified the boundary between realistic and unrealistic, and between the conventional and extraordinary, “is now faced with a situation where nothing is incompatible with anything else; and where the marginal is indistinguishable from the typical” (Harpham in Csicsery-Ronay 73). The borderlines of reality have been blurred because reality itself is a “construct which is not fixed or definite” (Crews 646). On top of that, postmodernity deconstructs the standard notion of “what it means to be human,” and human can no longer be perceived in purely physical terms. Genetic engineering, growing digitization and gender versatility are some of the drivers for the changes in the perceptions of the human body (Csicsery-Ronay 74).

In *The Slynx*, the strange deformed bodies of the *golubchiki* are indeed visually grotesque — ambivalently repulsive and amusing. From Bakhtin’s carnivalisation, being grotesquely different implies a violation of the existing order, which the grotesque generally tends to undermine — those in power are also not physically perfect. In the novel, since some of the elite (Saniturions) keep their deformities secret, visually they look as if they were ‘more normal.’ However, in fact, they are not that different or superior, while the Greatest Murza, Fyodor Kuzmich, is literally a little man, “едва-едва Бенедикту по колено” (Tolstaia 75).6 The grotesque, in this case, equalizes the society at least on the physical level, making everyone imperfect and out of the norm. However, physical “equality” does not presume the absence of order; Tolstaya explores another dimension of otherness in her depiction of gaps of communication between people.

The so-called Blast (a result of the “games with arms”) reversed Russian history, having wiped out Soviet Moscow and instead created a medieval town Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. Apart from

6 “…he barely reached Benedikt’s knee” (Tolstaia 52).
the significant throwback in time, people obtained various Consequences from the Blast. There are at least four social groups divided by the appearance and language: those who were born after the Blast (with or without Consequences); Oldeners (Prezhnie) — representatives of the survived Soviet intelligentsia, non-aging but mortal; Degenerators (Pererozhdentsy) — creatures with a human body covered with hair, functioning as horses (according to Tolstaya, these are the embodiments of taxi drivers), and a marginalized group called Cockynorks (Kokhinortsy). The grotesqueness of the Consequences is expressed through the integration of animalistic features into the human bodies, or through the absurd combinations of some parts of the body. Following Bakhtin’s theory, the grotesque bodies in *The Slynx* are not ‘complete’ but extend into the world through protruding parts (ears or cockscombs) and continuous transformations:

А кто после Взрыва родился, у тех Последствия другие, — всякие. У кого руки словно зелёной мукой обметаны, будто он в хлебеде рылся, у кого жабры; у иного гребень петушиный али еще что. А бывает, что никаких Последствий нет, разве к старости прыщи из глаз попрут, а не то в укромном месте борода расти учнет до самых до колен. Или на коленях ноздри вскочат.7 (Tolstaia 18)

These grotesque images of distorted human bodies are ambiguously repulsive and comic, and the comic effect is likely to dominate. Some Consequences are not simply physical deformities but functional devices. For instance, Vasiuk the Earful is all covered with ears, so that it is almost natural and justified for him to eavesdrop:

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7 Whoever was born after the Blast, they have other Consequences — all kinds. Some have got hands that look like they broke out in green flour, like they’d been rolling in greencorn, some have gills, another might have a cockscomb or something else. And sometimes there aren’t any Consequences, except when they get old a pimple will sprout from the eye, or their private parts will grow a beard down to the shins. Or nostrils will open up on their knees (Tolstaya 10-11).
Everyone knows that he eavesdrops. That’s the way it is. He’s got so many ears you can’t count them: on his head, and under his head, and on his knees, and behind his knees, and even in his boots. All kinds: big, little, round, long, and just plain holes, and pink pipes, and something like smooth slits, with hair — all kinds … But the main ears, the ones he eavesdrops with, grow under his arms. When he’s at work, he spreads his elbows wide so it’s easier to listen (Tolstaya 26).
on the reader, oscillating between a sense of uneasiness and laughter. Despite the vividly
grotesque body of Vasiuk the Earful, his shocking and visually repulsive image is extenuated by
soft alliteration of the narration and the narrator’s everyday intonation in his meticulous descrip-
tion of Vasiuk’s ears.

Another explicitly grotesque portrayal is the Consequence of the Degenerators: “Страш-
ные они, и не поймешь, то ли они люди, то ли нет: лицо вроде как у человека, туловище
шерстью покрыто и на четвереньках бегают. И на каждой ноге по валенку” (Tolstaia 6).9
Here, the narrator is confused and frightened with this Consequence, in this way indicating that
even the norms in the world of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk are violated. On top of that, the Degenerators
are excluded from society and are not treated as people since they substitute for horses. Thus, the
fact that they are not people and at the same time have human faces and can speak freely
generates a grotesque-like reaction to the unknown as frightening. But Tolstaya again mixes the
effects by adding a singular detail, valenki (felt boots), the absurdity of which immediately
transforms the narrator’s fear into the reader’s laughter. Similarly, Cockynorks are marginalized
from the whole society based on their appearance and different language. Cockynorks, in
contrast to the population of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, have only one Consequence: “Носы у них до
полу — право, смех один” (Tolstaia 58).10 This unites them into a particular ethnic group, a
repressed minority that the majority tends to constantly humiliate. Interestingly, the narrator finds
their Consequence ridiculous, even though the whole society is doomed with the Blast’s

9 “They’re strange ones, and you can’t figure out if they’re people or not. Their faces look human, but their bodies
are all furry and they run on all fours. With a felt boot on each leg” (Tolstaya 2).
10 “Their noses practically touch the ground — it’s really funny” (Tolstaya 39).
repercussions. It seems that one common trait was arbitrarily chosen to be a ground for indignity and hatred.

As shown above, in the oblivious Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, certain Consequences contradict the norms of “what it means to be human,” segregating several groups from society. And judgement of one’s looks is likely to be arbitrary, rather than defined by the degree of mutilation. In fact, the grotesqueness of the Consequences has a vast gradation. If the ears of Vasiuk the Earful seem comic, then the appearance of another of Benedikt’s colleagues, Varvara Lukinishna, is terrifyingly grotesque: “голова голая, без волоса, и по всей голове петушинны гребни так и кольшутся. И из одного глаза тоже лезет гребень” (Tolstaya 39).11 Benedikt calls it simply “беда,” which must not be considered a Sickness, “а бахрома — это не Болезнь, боже упаси, боже упаси. И санитарам приезжать не надо, нет, нет, нет” (Tolstaya 40).12 Although the Consequence is not a Sickness, it is still a suffering and a flaw that goes against the norm. Also, here, Tolstaya implements another rhetoric device called *apophasis*, when a new subject is brought into light by denying itself. In this way, slightly and through negation, the narrator uncovers one of the most important aspects of the novel — the existence of a secret and powerful group seeking the mysterious non-physical Sickness. Ironically, Varvara Lukinishna, a truly conscious personage, eventually dies from her “non-Sickness,” leaving Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, and Benedikt in particular, in more darkness and hopelessness.

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11 “Only one eye, not a hair on her head, and cockscombs growing all over it, waving back and forth. There’s one growing from her eye too” (Tolstaya 26).

12 “And fringe isn’t Illness, God forbid, God forbid. And the Saniturions don’t need to come, no, no, no” (Tolstaya 26).
Benedikt, in his turn, considers himself physically normal and good-looking: “Всю жизнь Бенедикт прожил, гордясь: вот он какой гладкий да ладный; и сам знал, и люди говорили” (Tolstaia 163). This is until Nikita Ivanich finds out that Benedikt has a little tail, which Benedikt has been proud of and has never thought of as a Consequence. As soon as Nikita Ivanich explains that a normal human being does not have a little tail and that all the evil comes from this appendage, Benedikt submits to the idea of the norm. Having a little tail becomes a shame: “Да и нету в рожках да ушках секрету никакого, все на виду, люди и привыкли … А хвостик — он вроде как секрет, тайный такой, али сказать интимный. Кабы он у всех был, хвостик, так оно бы и хорошо. А коли он у одного тебя — это стыд” (Tolstaia 165).

The amputation of the little tail is an attempt to standardize and humanize Benedikt’s appearance, to get rid of something that was a part of his self and was never questioned before. One must not have secrets from the others. Also, as we see later, a little tail is an allusion to Benedikt's intimate connection with the mystical slynx.

As we have seen, grotesque bodies, despite their customary appearance in the internal world of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, still depend on a certain norm, while the idea of the norm stays quite ambivalent. If for Benedikt, a little tail is a natural beautiful feature of a man’s body, then for Oldeners, like Nikita Ivanich, it is an inhuman appendage one must not possess. This shows an abyss between two radically different generations that the Blast has divided. Then, the questions arise, if one time is forgotten, then is there any sense in restoring its culture? Can a new tra-

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13 “Benedikt had lived his whole life proudly: fine and fit as a fiddle he was. He knew it himself, and people said so” (Tolstaya 115).

14 “There’s no secret to horn or ears, everything’s in plain view, people are used to it … But a tail — it’s kind of a secret — all hidden, private. If everyone had one that would be all right. But if you’re the only one — it’s shameful” (Tolstaya 116-117).
dition of beauty be built again on the Consequences from the Blast? And more importantly, how
the generations of ‘before’ and ‘after’ coexist? So, on the one hand, grotesque bodies equal-
ize the society by revealing everyone’s physical deviance (from pre-Blast norms); but, on the
other hand, they strengthen the social hierarchy, allowing one group (keeping their Consequences
hidden) to marginalize the others (whose Consequences are visible). In addition, the appearances
sometimes work as embodiments of emotional attitudes of hatred or dislike — groups of Degen-
erators and Cockynorks are visually “the other.” Their grotesque bodies exaggerate and justify
these feelings, giving them physical and tangible shapes. Using grotesque caricature, Tolstaya
exemplifies the primary foundations for perceiving someone as ‘the other,’ whether this is ‘the
other’ among the locals, or ‘the other’ meaning ‘not human.’ Nonetheless, Tolstaya does not
make the bodies look extremely grotesquely dark and monstrous in Kayser’s terms, rather one
can see Bakhtin’s ambivalent concept of the grotesque body. Bodies in The Slynx are not alienat-
ed, inasmuch as everyone is liable to have a Consequence; thus, the bodies do not generally cul-
tivate fear or horror from fellow citizens, but a mixed sense of indulgence (Cockynorks), irony
(Vasiuk the Earful) and sympathy (Varvara Lukinishna).

**Grotesque Language**

Nevertheless, the grotesque body is not the main factor of “otherness.” The Blast has not
mutated only bodies, but, most importantly — language. If we look at the language of Fyodor-
Kuzmichsk, we will see a mixture of various speaking layers, hardly crossing each other:
Oldeners speak the language of the past, emphasizing their intellectual and moral superiority;
Degenerators’ speech consists of cliché and phrases taken out of context; while the language of
the majority (golubchiki) is in a vacuum, a condition in which the present exists in isolation from the past. Tolstaya creates a whole vocabulary of golubchiki’s everyday words, some of which represent disrupted forms of “normal” words (червыри, клель, хлебеда, грибыши, каклета, калидор, козляк, мараль, фелософия etc) or archaic words (туеса, мурза, желвак). Altogether, the mutation of language, in the form of strangely deformed words and discontinuity with the past, is grotesque. Even though golubchiki generally adhere to an old-Russian style of living, this does not carry any connection with the past, but it is their present. The consecutive thread of history is interrupted, creating a new language, the isolation of which shapes a grotesquely ambiguous world. In this world, language is a watershed between social groups, a display of people's deafness and lack of understanding, which is also a grotesque quality — when language becomes obscure and no longer carries meaning. Thomson gives an example of the grotesque writer Christian Morgenstern, who claimed that:

man’s basically unsatisfactory relationship to his fellows, his society and the world in general stems from his being imprisoned by language, which is a most unreliable, false and dangerous thing, and that one must ‘smash language,’ destroy man’s naïve trust in this most familiar and unquestioned part of his life, before he can learn to think properly.

(Morgenstern, in Thomson 65)

Such “smashing” of language happens mostly due to the fact that the inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk are alienated from any sources of culture. Despite nearly 200 years from the Blast, golubchiki have not accumulated their own cultural heritage, but only birch-bark booklets, which are, in fact, the copies of texts from the past. And because that past is forgotten and does not exist for golubchiki, turning pre-Blast time into a legend or a fairy-tale, even the remnants of
‘literature,’ taken out of historical context, are obsolete and superfluous. As a consequence of such cultural crisis, language ceases to be a solid foundation for the cognition of the world. Indeed, to a certain extent, the population of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk is no longer “imprisoned by language,” however that freedom brings moral degradation and the disintegration of society.

Communication in society is complicated by the fact that social groups hardly understand each other. Moreover, no one wishes to learn another group’s language, so that language fails to provide its basic function, leading to “otherness.” For instance, the Cockynorks are mostly despised and humiliated due to their speech, which the majority of the population cannot understand: “Если кохинорец высунется, кинешь в него камнем для потехи, вроде согреешься, и дальше бежать. А почему кинешь, потому как кохинорцы эти не по-нашему говорят. Бал-бал-бал, да бал-бал-бал — да и все тут, да и ничего не разберешь” (Tolstaya 58).15 By the same token, each social group is distinguished predominantly by spoken language. The locals, golubchiki, disdain Degenerators for their rude and unceremonious manners and language that mimic Soviet street jargon and criminal speech. One of the peculiarities of Degenerators is that they speak too much, and their speech represents a chaotic stream of words:

Хуже собаки эти перерождены, собаку обматеришь — ей и ответить нечего. Гав, гав — и весь ответ; стерпеть можно. Эти же говорят без умолку, пристают к людям. Сядешь в сани — сразу начинается: и дорога ему не такая, и переулок паршивый, и перекресток перегорожен, и государство неправильно управляется, и мурзы не с теми рылами, что бы он с кем сделал вот ужо погоди дай ему волю, и кто виноват, и

15 “If a Cockynork sticks his head out you throw a rock at him to warm yourself up, and keep running. You throw the rock because the Cockynorks, they don’t talk like us: all they say is blah-blah-blah and blah-blah-blah — you can’t understand a thing” (Tolstaya 39).
Since Degenerators are treated like horses, they are not expected to speak and, more than that, to respond to what *golubchiki* do or say. Daria Kabanova notes that the limits of language cause Degenerators’ inhuman treatment: “As language fails its speakers, they turn to performative aspects of the identities of the subjects they seek to classify and therefore ‘domesticate’” (224). *Golubchiki* do not believe Degenerators’ stories about the past, this is why their speech for them is nonsense. Degenerators’ language stays detached from reality and context, as if the Blast never happened.

Another group similarly operating within the language of the past is Oldeners. They maintain manners and language intrinsic to the Soviet intelligentsia, thus according to Benedikt, “прежние наших слов не понимают, а мы ихних” (Tolstaia 31). A remarkably grotesque scene in the novel with Oldeners is, perhaps, the funeral of an old lady, Anna Petrovna. From the small and quiet liturgy the funeral gradually metamorphoses into hypocritical and bombastic speeches (“Кому она нужна, - думали мы, - мелкая, злобная, коммунальная старушонка, только под ногами путается, поганка вредная, прости Господи!..”), and finally into a meeting of dissidents, speaking with a bitter pathos about the “slaughter” of history and its

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16 “Worse than dogs, those Degenerators. You swear at a dog and it can’t talk back. Woof, woof, that’s all: you can put up with it. But Degenerators never shut up, they keep bugging you…As soon as you sit down in the sleigh it starts: he doesn’t like the route, and that’s the wrong lane, and that road is blocked, and the government doesn’t run things right, and he don’t like the way Murzas look, and you better believe he’d do to them you just wait give him his way and you’ll see, and who’s to blame, and how in the Oldener days he drank with his cousins, and what they drank, and how they pigged out, and what he bought, and where he went on vacation …” (Tolstaya 209).

17 “Oldeners don’t understand our words, and we don’t understand theirs” (Tolstaya 20).

18 “Who needs her, we thought, that little old mean-spirited, communal-apartment crone, she just gets underfoot like a poisonous mushroom, God forgive us!” (Tolstaya 110)
cyclicality (Tolstai 157). Oldeners’ attachment to material texts, no matter what kind — including a simple instruction for a kitchen device — in other words, to logos, shows that for them there is an inseparable bond between the Word and identity. In this sense, the identity of people born after the Blast is lost since they are intentionally deprived of logos and can rely only on its distorted and mutated forms. Benedikt’s confusion around his self-identification with the slynx as well as his obsession with the Book illustrate well the crisis of identity. The slynx eventually takes over Benedict, in the sense that when he becomes a Saniturion, he mimics the slynx by tearing a man’s vein with a hook ‘claw’; it is as if he shapes the slynx’s invisible nature with his body, giving the slynx his flesh. Kabanova interprets Benedict’s transformation as “an attempt to structure the protagonist’s subjectivity, as Benedict turns out to be impossible as a subject in the absence of the slynx” (232). Furthermore, since old printed books are officially forbidden, and Russian literature written before the Blast is attributed to Fyodor Kuzmich’s speeches and writings, golubchiki have access only to so called knizhitsy (booklets), poorly made copies of original texts, which constituted the cumulative cultural heritage prior to the Blast. So, after the collapse, there is no reliable source of language and knowledge left except those inaccurate replications. This is why Benedict becomes obsessed with his futile search for one main Book, which should provide answers about who he is and how he should live. Overall, this generates a grotesque effect of a disharmonious and even artificial world, where new language is not able to provide a coherent picture of reality.

For Benedikt, the funeral ceremonies, speeches and behavior of Oldeners are strange and ridiculous: “Слова все такие непонятные, смешные, ужаси” (Tolstai 154).19 Especially,

19 “All these words were so funny, total gibberish” (Tolstaya 108).
Benedikt is confused with the list of documents constituting the typical portrait of an ordinary Soviet citizen, starting with a party-membership card and ending with instructions of how to use electric appliances. In a comic and absurd sense, his reaction to the list of documents may not be different from our own reaction to the list of books that Benedikt later organizes in Kudeyar Kudeyarich’s library. Guided by his own nonstandard principles, Benedikt tries to systematize the library and creates nonsensical classifications: “Красное и черное,” “Голубое и зеленое,” “Голубая чашка”; “Хлебников, Караваева, Коркия…Колбасьев”; “В объятиях вампира,” “В объятиях дракона” etc. (Tolstaia 247).

Lipovetskii notes that Benedikt’s library corresponds to what Foucault calls “глубокое расстройство тех, чей язык нарушен утратой “общности” места и имени” (“the profound distress of those whose language has been destroyed: loss of what is ‘common’ to place and name”), depicting “post-Soviet crisis of language and postmodern collapse of hierarchical relations in culture” (386). Indeed, the world of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk exists in oblivion and breaks with culture and traditions of the past. The repeated motif of listing, which takes the form of disconnected and irrelevant words and titles, portrays the limits of language. Instead of presenting a coherent picture of the world, language is deconstructed into meaningless and random segments. Therefore, the primary role of language as communication is shattered, strengthening the grotesque ambivalent fluctuation between what is meaningful and what is not.

If we return to the definition of the grotesque, we can see that the obscurity of language in The Slynx belongs both to postmodern and grotesque characteristics. The fact that language

20 “The Red and the Black,” “The Blue and the Green,” “The Blue Cup”; “Appleton, Bacon, Belcher, Blinman”; “The Vampire’s Embrace,” “The Dragon’s Embrace” etc. (Tolstaya 176-177)

ceases to be a reliable system due to the absence of firm historical ground (the past is forgotten) can be one of the indicators of postmodernist thematics, which Frederic Jameson refers to as “the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve” (125). And this replacement of one set of values with another one may result in a grotesque consequence, such as Benedikt’s intricate classifications, where he manages to combine hardly compatible books on one shelf, and considers it to be perfect and right. The overall picture of Benedikt’s library illustrates the broader application of the postmodern grotesque in comparison with its predecessors of the Romantic or Realist periods. The Romantic and Realist grotesques tend to estrange the world by confronting the norm with absurdist and unusual aspects, while postmodern grotesque operates within the absence of the norm. In The Slynx, the new grotesque language is not aware of its ties with the past, floating as if above the ground. On the one hand, it is entirely free of any limits and conventions, but on the other hand, it is devoid of depth and meaning.

**Grotesqueness of the Narration**

In a discussion of the grotesque it is important to pay attention to the role of narrative style. The degree of grotesqueness depends on the individual reception of the text, because the grotesque concerns both the images and how they resonate in a reader. In the novel, the reader’s perception is influenced significantly by the narrative style. The Slynx is quite distinct in this respect as it seems to reproduce the style of *skaz* that Gogol mastered in a lot of his short stories. In
skaz, the narrator, as a rule, introduces a particular manner of speech, so that the narration is impersonated and emotionally charged. Bakhtin defined skaz as the reproduction of a non-literary narrator’s speech (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 191). Given that, there can be a variety of styles, ranging from unsophisticated oral speech to a literate and eloquent one, depending on the narrator. However, even the imitation of a literary style implies a narrator who “commands no specific style but only a socially and individually specific manner of storytelling, one that gravitates towards oral skaz” (Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 191). The narrator in The Slynx tells a story about Benedikt and the byt of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. Apart from narrating Benedikt’s everyday routine, the narrator sometimes complements his speech with his own remarks and comments:


From the excerpt, it becomes clear that the narrator is well familiar with the realities of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. In terms of his speech, it is quite informal, imitating oral monologue. For instance, the narrator addresses the reader informally by using singular imperative mood (“не ходи”). The second sentence represents a stream of utterances, alternating with one another, while the parenthetical word “говорят” (they say) marks rumor-based information. In general, throughout

22 “You can’t go west either. There’s a sort of road that way — invisible, like a little path. You walk and walk, then the town is hidden from your eyes, a sweet breeze blows from the fields, everything’s fine and good, and then all of a sudden, they say, you just stop. And you stand there. And you think: Where was I going anyway? What do I need there? What’s there to see? It’s not like it’s better out there. And you feel so sorry for yourself” (Tolstaya 3).
the text, following the style of skaz, the narrator demonstrates his own attitude towards the characters. For example, he conveys his respect for Fyodor Kuzmich (“Федор Кузьмич, Слава Ему”) or sympathy to Olenka (“Ольенька, душенька,” “Лапушка”).

Boris Eikhenbaum in his famous article “Kak sdelana shinel’ Gogolia,” identifies the concept of comic skaz, where speech is saturated with anecdotes and enables active gesticulation as well as verbal mimics. In addition, for Eikhenbaum, skaz is mainly associated with oral speech, which is why he focuses on the “voice” of Gogol’s story. In The Slynx, Tolstaya creates several peculiar names: Benedikt Karpich, Jackal Demianich or Kudeyar Kudeyarich, where patronymic names have typical archaic suffix “ich” that imitates conversational manner of speech. In addition, the narrator often includes archaic elements associated with oral speech of peasants, such as the conjunction “ali” instead of “ili,” “oposlia” instead of “posle,” “nonecha” instead of “nynche” etc. Nonetheless, The Slynx is not completely dominated by skaz because several voices tend to constantly substitute one another. In contrast to simplistic and colloquial narration characteristic of some forms of skaz (such as that of Zoshchenko, for example), here sometimes the narrator changes his language and tone into more lyrical and eloquent versions or, vice versa, towards vulgar and illiterate speech. Therefore, the entire narration is multi-voiced — an incoherent choir of utterances. Such narrative inconsistency and oscillation between low and high languages and tones illustrates the grotesque quality of the narration.

In addition to different registers, the narration is characterized by fluctuation and opaqueness in terms of identity, as well. The borderline between the figure of the narrator and main character Benedikt is often obscured due to two of Tolstaya’s narrative techniques: free indirect discourse and impersonal sentences. With free indirect discourse, the line dividing the narrator
and character’s voices is unclear since this technique combines direct and indirect speech. For instance, in the following quote, the narrator reports Benedikt’s reaction, however he eliminates the quotation marks, merging the reaction with the whole sentence:

Константину Леонтьичу как раз кляп изо рта вынули, - оклемался маленько; он громче всех закричал "спасибо", тонко так и громко, как козляк, прямо у Бенедикта над ухом: **оглушил, бля.** А Бенедикт не знал что и думать: первый свежий страх вроде отступил, а заместо него в душе - **смурно, что ли.** (Tolstaya 78)\(^{23}\)

Here, separated only by a colon, the narration veers from depiction of events from the point of view of a local resident, to depiction of Benedikt’s emotional state using Benedikt’s own voice. First, he is displeased, using obscene word “blia” to express it; then, the narrator describes what Benedikt feels inside in a very simplistic manner, using vernacular forms “zamesto” (instead “vmesto/vzamen”) and “smurno” in his speech. The absence of quotation marks, inherent in free indirect discourse, intensifies the polyphony of the narration, while fluctuation between low and high registers shows the grotesque of the narration. To be sure, this does not mean that free indirect discourse is synonymous with the grotesque. Rather free indirect discourse can facilitate different purposes. In *The Slynx*, it seems to blur the border between discourses, generating a grotesque effect.

Tolstaya also contributes to the reader’s uncertainty about the identity of the narrator by using impersonal sentences, or sentences in the past tense but without a subject-pronoun. In

\(^{23}\)“He shouted “Thank you” louder than anyone, in a high voice like a goat, very loud and right in Benedikt’s ear, downright deafening, dammit. Benedikt didn’t know what to think: the first fresh fear had receded, and in its place he felt glum” (Tolstaya 54).
Russian, verbs in the past tense can either refer to first person or third person, so that when there is no subject in the sentences, it is impossible to identify the speaker:

Выбрался на крыльцо. Господи! Какая тьма. На север, на юг, на закат, на восход - тьма, тьма без края, без границ, и во тьме, кусками мрака, - чужие избы как колоды, как камни, как черные дыры в черной черноте, как провалы в никуда, в морозное безмолвие, в ночь, в забвение, в смерть, как долгое падение в колодец, вот как во сне бывает, - падаешь и падаешь, и нетути дна, и сердце становится все меньше да меньше, все жальче да туже. Господи!.. (Tolstaya 84) 24

We might think that this is Benedikt speaking, standing alone in the evening twilight and disclosing one of his fears. However, the lyrical undertone of the long sentence, enriched by multiple comparisons, signals that it is a literary narrator, who shares his own vision with the reader.

The style of narration fluctuates, impersonating different discourses, including Benedikt’s parents, Fyodor Kuzmich speaking officially through his decrees, or the slynx itself. The main narrator is apparently not Benedikt, but one of the locals, who even seems to be a member of Benedikt’s family since he addresses Benedikt’s parents as “matushka” and “otets/tiaten’ka.” He also intends to tell a story in a more or less coherent and literate way, moving occasionally towards deeper descriptions of nature or philosophizing. However, in some moments, when, supposedly, Benedikt starts narrating, the speech becomes more emotional and less literate.

24 “He went out on the porch. Lordy! How dark it was. To the north, to the south, toward the sunset, the sunrise — darkness, darkness without end, without borders, and in that darkness, pieces of gloom — other izbas like logs, like rocks, like black holes in the black blackness, like gaps into nowhere, into the freezing hush, in the night, into oblivion, into death, like a long fall into a well, like what happens to you in dreams — you fall and fall and there’s no bottom and your heart gets smaller and smaller, more pitiful and tighter. Lordy!” (Tolstaya 59)
Benedikt’s speech as a narrator is not marked by colons. In the quote below, his speech is again intercepted with rude words (‘blia,’ ‘ni khrena’) or with substandard grammar constructions:

"Конечно, книжницы разные случаются. Федор Кузьмич, слава ему, трудится беспебебойно. То вот сказки, то стихи, то роман, то детектив, или рассказ, или новелла, или эссе какой, а о прошлом года изволил Федор Кузьмич, слава ему, сочинить шо-пенгаузер, а это вроде рассказа, только ни хrena ни разберешь. Длинное такое, бля, три месяца, почитай, вдесятером перебеливали, притомились. Константин Леонтьич хвастал, что все понял, - ну, это он всегда хвастает: все смеялись. (Tolstaya 97)"

In contrast to that, lyrical digressions are written in a coherent smooth and vibrant literary language echoing the author’s embellished style:

"Закат желтый, страшный, узкий стоял в западной бойнице, и вечерняя звезда Алатырь сверкала в закате. Маленькой черной палочкой в путанице улочек стоял пушкин, тоненькой ниточкой виделась с вышины веревка с белым, петелькой охватившая шею поэта. (Tolstaya 338)"

Given that discrepancy in the narration, the portrait of Benedikt and of everything told is less clear and trustworthy, while the reader’s trust of the narrator is diminished. Nonetheless, though less likely, it also could be that Benedikt narrates the story himself, using third-person narration.

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25 “Of course books are different. Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe, works day and night. Sometimes he writes fairy-tales, or poems, or a novel, or a mystery, or a short story, or a novella, or some kind of essay. Last year Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe, decided to write a shoppinghower, which is kind of like a story, only you can’t make heads not tails of it. A long sucker, they read it for three months, copied in dozen times, wore themselves to the bone. Konstantin Leontich bragged that he understood everything — but he always brags: everyone just laughed” (Tolstaya 67).

26 “A thin strip of horrible yellow sunset filled the western window, and the evening star Alatyr twinkled in the sunset. The pushkin stuck out like a small black stick in the confusion of streets, and from that height the rope looped around the poet’s neck and hung with laundry looked like a fine thread” (Tolstaya 245).
Working as copyist and constantly dealing with literature, Benedikt is still more ‘intelligent’ (experienced) than the majority of golubchiki. So, it is possible that the manuscript is a result of his demonstration of his writing skills. In this case we could view the passages dealing with Benedikt’s own feelings about his family or Olenka as a result of a breakdown of the conventions of narration (i.e., that a narrator should either be someone other than the main character, or should “focalize” the main character). In any case, the narration gives the impression that the narrator, whoever he is, cannot adhere to one style of skaz, constantly merging it with his emotional and lyrical interferences.

As can be seen, the narration itself is grotesque due to the fluctuation of discourses, ranging from primitively low towards literary lofty. Additionally, the narrative style influences the reader’s reception, which, in its turn, is one of the realms of the grotesque. Kayser delineated three dimensions of the grotesque: “the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception” (180). In The Slynx, whether the narrator is Benedikt or somebody else, it is important that they both belong to the realities of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. As a result, any strangeness and grotesqueness is adapted to the realities of the town and its golubchiki. Like a fairy-tale, The Slynx represents a one-dimensional world, where “the folktale hero acts, and he has neither the time nor temperament to be puzzled with mysteries” (Luthi 7). The distance between the reader and the narrated story is defined, causing a minimal effect from the images of the grotesque bodies or mentioning fairy-tale creatures that are believed to live in the countryside of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. Taking into account a new ‘mutated’ vocabulary (грибыши, хлебеда, птица-блядуница, каклета etc), one cannot claim that these words mean something other than “грибы” or “лебеда,” yet, perhaps, they do. Due to this uncertainty of language, particularly, the random
connection between the word and its meaning is underlined. The Slynx exists in the state of unknown. And the mermaids or leshii said to be inhabiting the surrounding lakes and forests are more likely to be legends than reality, especially if golubchiki never leave the town. Thus, even if deformed human bodies or animals are repulsively grotesque, they still do not produce an absolutely terrifying grotesque impression because the novel is placed into a specifically designed setting that the narrator and other characters are part of. The Blast itself could be seen as an explanation for all the mutations, simplifying the perception of the grotesque into a mere constitution of facts. Mundaneness of the narrative style would smooth the grotesque effect on a reader, but we do not have a smooth effect here. Although the grotesque people and animals adjust to the world of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk and help define it, the grotesque still intensifies the social disharmony and chaos. The connection between what is read or imagined and what is meant by it becomes broken.

To conclude, The Slynx does not entirely fall into one category of a genre. Some critics recognize post-apocalyptic dystopia, others see a parody on it, still others admit the multi-dimensionality of the novel, which makes it impossible to classify according to one category. Notwithstanding, there is an interesting parallel between the grotesque and science-fiction oeuvre: namely, both have a tendency to estrange reality. To repeat Kayser, he thought that the grotesque world “is — and is not — our own world,” implying that one can still relate to the depicted strangeness and abnormality (37). Similarly, through estrangement science-fiction provides the reader with a different perspective of the present, “rendering it as a historical process in the making and visualizing ourselves as active historical agents” (Gerhard 4). I believe that apart from
current research, completed by Csicsery-Ronay in “On the Grotesque in Science Fiction,” the exploration of relations between the grotesque and science-fiction can move towards contemporary Russian literature, including Tolstaya’s novel *The Slynx*.

In her non-fiction book *Pushkin’s Children*, Tolstaya has an essay of the same name dated 1992, where she reflects on the destiny of literature in the condition of the “Blast,” leading to absolute oblivion:

Memory and continuity are retained, and even if the new art completely breaks with the old, it still sees and remembers what it broke with, what exactly it was negating. But when everything that had once been is destroyed and trampled, amnesia sets it. Literature directs its senile gaze toward the mirror in the morning and doesn’t recognize itself; it tries to understand who it is, where it came from, and whether yesterday existed or was only a dream.

(Tolstaya, *Pushkin’s Children* 94)

*The Slynx* is exactly the depiction of such “amnesia,” when literature (as one of the sources of connection with the past) and, more broadly, language, are lost, unaware of their origins and roles. The grotesque allows the author to intensify and dramatize the effects of amnesia, functioning on several levels — the body, language and structure of the narration. Appearances and language tend to divide society into clearly distinguished social groups. Images of *golubchiki*, left with various Consequences, follow the traditional grotesque concept of a human body as ambiguous and incomplete. The grotesqueness of the bodies in the novel appears not only through their visible deformities, but also through the fact that everyone has Consequences (sometimes hidden) and is a potential ‘monster.’ Therefore, the idea of a human norm is not stable but quite ambiguous in the context of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk.
Going back to existing criticism of the grotesque, critics mostly explored the essence of grotesque content and images, such as Bakhtin’s analysis of the grotesque body being a significant manifestation of the grotesque’s ambiguity. However, criticism has not focused much on other aspects of the grotesque, for example, on how grotesque writers utilize language (except mentioning Lewis Carroll’s linguistic experimentations in *Alice in Wonderland*). In this regard, I think that *The Slynx* is one of the texts, which can contribute to examination of both the grotesque itself as a technique of estrangement, and the grotesque instruments. In the novel, similarly to the body, language exists without a sense of the ‘norm,’ by which I mean bonds with the former culture. This is what distinguishes the postmodern grotesque from its predecessors, when new grotesque language faces no confrontation with the norm because it is hardly defined. Nevertheless, this seemingly “liberated” language, as we notice, brings chaos and disruption in the society. One cannot entirely rely on the Word, since it ceases to convey a clear picture of the world. Furthermore, the grotesque ambiguity reveals itself in the narration, which seems to represent a style of *skaz*, but fails to do so due to the polyphony of discourses. The oscillation between contrasting discourses, where simple conversational, sometimes rude speech intersects with literary and eloquent expressions, creates a grotesque misbalance. Overall, the grotesque, in *The Slynx*, works as an aesthetic category, projecting and intensifying the Soviet and post-Soviet stagnation and crisis of language on the imagined realm of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, existing beyond the past and, perhaps, future as well, until the next Blast will interfere and metamorphose what is already a dream-like presence.
Works Cited


