

## LITERATUROZNAWSTWO

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### Vladimir Tuchkov's intertextual transgression: Folklore, parody, and social criticism<sup>1</sup>

#### Интертекстуальная трансгрессия Владимира Тучкова: фольклор, пародия и социальная критика

**Abstract.** This essay aims at analysing and illustrating a segment of the post-Soviet short fiction of the contemporary Russian writer Vladimir Tuchkov. It specifically discusses his collection of very short stories *And he earned many dollars...: New Russian fairy-tales*. These short stories exemplify many characteristics of Tuchkov's oeuvre more generally. The discussion analyses the satirical contents of these miniature fictions, which the author places in the tradition of the Russian classics and of Russian folklore, within the theoretical context of parody, pastiche, intertextuality, and folklore. Tuchkov's short narratives create a de-familiarised, quasi-mythological space where pre-modern, Soviet, and post-Soviet times converge. This results in the critical, satirical foregrounding of certain continuities in Russian culture, society, and mentality throughout the centuries despite the enormous political and social change, which it has experienced, as much as constituting, like Russia's traditional fables, a critical and satirical engagement with contemporary social reality in Russia. The contribution examines the specific intertextuality with a satirical folkloristic genre as a literary expression, which reverberates with a post-Soviet readership, given its inherent concern with social structures. It is suggested that the employment of these concepts and literary forms in this combination serves to reinforce their overall effect of creating a hyperbolised, satirical representation of social reality.

**Keywords:** Vladimir Tuchkov, satire, intertextuality, fable, fairy-tales

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*A dumb beast of burden spoke with  
human voice [...] (2 Timothy 2:15, AMPC)*

## 1. Introduction

The post-Soviet Russian writer Vladimir Tuchkov has been enjoying popularity among Russian readers in the post-Soviet period, possibly owing to the readers' sense that his works offer an "exact diagnosis", through various means of literary representation, of "Russian reality, which is unique and irreproducible not only on planet Earth, but also through the entire universe"<sup>2</sup>, as the publisher *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (NLO) observes of Tuchkov's works. Tuchkov's oeuvre has many facets and encompasses differing genres, a series of novels and a great number of short fictions<sup>3</sup>. On the one hand, it is characterised by features that are generally taken to be an expression of postmodern poetics, with parody, stylisation, intertextual play, and self-referentiality<sup>4</sup>, and with occasionally gruesome plots lacking overt intervention from the implied author, on the other. The Belorussian literary scholar Irina Skoropanova, for example, suggests that: "Postmodernists conduct an active deconstructive dialogue with the Russian classics, in the course of which the absolute is de-absolutised, the canonised de-canonised, and new values are established"<sup>5</sup>. It is noteworthy that what little scholarly interest his short fiction has received has mostly focussed on an aspect that Tuchkov's poetics share with that of another, better known post-Soviet writer, Vladimir Sorokin: the creation of a quasi-mythological space, where pre-modern, Soviet and post-Soviet times converge (Lipovetsky 54–71; Kokšeneva 109–113). It will be argued that Tuchkov's appropriation of the Russian folkloristic traditions, by which he both parodies them and directs satire at society and political culture, may be less deconstructive towards the Russian literary and social tradition than reconstructive and contiguous with it.

The present article concerns itself with one specific aspect of one specific collection of Tuchkov's short fictions, namely the Aesopian genre, as evi-

<sup>2</sup> "[...] avtor risuet širokoe polotno rossiiskoi deistvitel'nosti, kotoraiia unikal'na i nepovtorima ne tol'ko na planete Zemlia, no i vo vsei Vselennoi. [...] eto absoliutno golaia real'nost', kotoroi avtor stavit tochnyi diagnoz' (Tučkov 2010: 4). This and all subsequent English translations from the Russian as well as from German scholarly sources are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of Tuchkov's printed works, see the References.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Bogdanova 6–7; Epstein 1995: 202–203; Hassan 267–271; Kuricyn 177–229; Sheppard 2000: 356; Timina 101–104; Anderson 61, 96; Groys 195; Shneidman 205.

<sup>5</sup> "Postmodernisty vedut aktivnyi dekonstruktivistskiy dialog s russkoi klassikoi, v khode kotorogo osushchestvlietsia deabsoliutizatsiia absoliutizirovannogo, dekanonizatsiia kanonizirovannogo, utverzhdaiutsia novye tsennosti" (Skoropanova 17).

denced in the collection *And he earned many dollars...: New Russian fairy-tales (I zarabotal mnogo dollarov...: novye russkie skazki, 2005)*. *And he earned many dollars...: New Russian fairy-tales* is a collection of three fictional cycles containing 163 short comic stories in total, published in 1992 (*Fifth Russian book for reading; Piataia russkaia kniga dlia chteniia*), 1998 (*Sixth Russian book for reading; Shestaia russkaia kniga dlia chteniia*) and 2004 (*Seventh Russian book for reading; Sed'maia russkaia kniga dlia chteniia*), the major theme of which are the peculiarities and pathologies of post-Soviet Russian society. Most of these stories are pastiches of Lev Tolstoy's four cycles of didactic stories *Russian books for reading (Russkie knigi dlia chteniia)* (Tolstoj 1957: xxi), written between 1875 and 1885, as well as of other works by Tolstoy and certain other writers. Tolstoy's stories, fables, and fairy-tales were written for the children of peasants in his Iasnaia Poliana estate school, and covered themes and motifs drawn from nature, plant, and animal life, as well as history, geography, and ethnology. They were aimed at teaching primary school children the basics of nature, society, morality, and peasant life and "reflect their author's movement away from elitist noble to democratic folk values", as Laura Wilhelm (177) describes his narratives.

For his part, Tuchkov exchanges the content or background of elementary knowledge about nature, the world, and society for motifs and myths concerning post-Soviet existence. Thematically, the three cycles broadly correspond to the three "periods" of post-Soviet Russian society and politics, beginning with the early post-Perestroika years, with their new degree of political and economic freedom, political chaos, and the rush to make money. The second period could be described in terms of the further erosion of Kremlin power *vis-à-vis* society, the regions and other influential institutions, thrown into relief by a weakening and alcoholic president and all manner of constitutional disputes. This period was also characterised by radical economic reform and financial instability and witnessed the rise of the so-called "oligarchs". The third period was and is marked by the restoration of state power generally and of the Kremlin's position in particular, to the possible detriment of civil society and other state or constitutional authorities, such as the Russian parliament or *the Duma*. This was accompanied by the immense personal popularity of the new president, significant economic improvement, as well as Kremlin action to neutralise the influence of the so-called "oligarchs". Against this background, Tuchkov embodies and parodies the attitude of the people toward politics and various actors on the political scene, like the president, the government and the *Duma*, as well as characterising "oligarchs", bankers, business-people, and clergy, many of whom are portrayed as tricksters, simpletons, and fools, and all of whom have internalised the given social structures.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Tuchkov's *And he earned many dollars...* represents a convergence of different literary strategies: a number of literary forms and critical concepts converge and reinforce the satire of contemporary, post-Soviet Russian society. These literary forms and concepts encompass the following: intertextuality and pastiche; the folkloristic genres of the fable and the fairy-tale; semantic devices such as hyperbole, irony, humour, and satire<sup>6</sup>. The present discussion will focus on the intertextual dimension relative to the genres of the fable and the fairy-tale.

Intertextuality, defined by Julia Kristeva as a “[...] mosaic of citations, as [...] absorption and transformation of another text [...]” (Kristeva 348), is a key characteristic of Vladimir Tuchkov's writings; intertextuality in Tuchkov's works materialises as the direct or indirect referencing and employment of already existing literary texts, heroes, plots, and styles. Often, Tuchkov's works also exhibit protagonists who are more “types” of people than truly realistic individuals, something we will recognise in our later text-based analysis. One of the forms, which Tuchkov's intertextuality often takes, is that of pastiche, which Frederic Jameson suggested viewing as being:

like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic (Jameson 167) (emphasis in original).

The Russian literary theorist Iurii Tynianov, who, like Bakhtin, used the term “stylisation” for what Western scholars seemingly prefer to call “pastiche”, argued, in his discussion of the parody of various aspects of Gogol's writing in Dostoevsky's oeuvre, that, in fact, stylisation and parody, though distinct phenomena, are closely related. Parody involves a recognisable contrary, and often unnecessary relationship between its subject and its object. Tynianov further defined a differentiation that is parallel to that between parody and stylisation: *parodiinost'* and *parodichnost'*. The former describes an intention to consciously engage with

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<sup>6</sup> Owing to the specific focus of the present discussion, the last three categories of humour, irony, and satire are not introduced theoretically, even though they offer insight into Tuchkov's works. Relevant approaches, for example concerning satire, irony, and “relief” and “superiority” theories of humour may be found in: Düring, Naumann, Wilpert; Hutcheon 47–53, 156–158; Graham; Ostrower 25–41; Berger 45–64; Bergson 93; Hill 197–198; Milne; Davies 176, Purdie 126; Lewis; Critchley 9–12, 61–62; Esslin 429. For a discussion of satire and irony specifically in contemporary Russian literature, see Timina 49–60.

another text, character or style, whereas the latter lacks such a semantic engagement (Tynianov 9, 22, 47; cf. Porter 22).

Even though Tuchkov's pastiche appears to be parodic towards the Russian classics<sup>7</sup>, the present discussion will suggest that this only holds true at the surface level, and that Jameson's definition of pastiche as being different from literary parody in its semantic intention, and Tynianov's concept of *parodiinost'* as a conscious semantic engagement with a reference text may be applicable to Tuchkov's fiction, too. What makes Tuchkov's pastiches and intertextuality so remarkable is their multidimensional character. They operate at various levels: at that of pastiche of a particular literary work, that of pastiche of the particular style of specific writers, and that of specific genres. This discussion will engage more specifically with parody of the Aesopian genre further below. In addition, they are recognisable at the level of numerous direct and indirect references and allusions to Russian and world literature, such as the Bible, for example.

The second set of terms to be introduced consists of the folkloristic and Aesopian genres of the fairy-tale and fable, since these feature prominently in the stories by Tuchkov to be analysed later. It has been suggested that Russian popular culture, both before and during the Soviet period, has been more inclined to favour oral traditions than the written word. Seth Graham, in his discussion of what he calls Russian "jokelore", argues that jokes (*anekdoty*) as folkloristic forms of expression resonate more strongly within Russian culture than critical or dissident novels, for example (Graham). The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard suggested that "myths serve to legitimise institutions, social and political practices, legislation, ethics, ways of thinking" (Lyotard 49). Given that folklore can be myth-bearing itself, where myth is understood as embodying a grand narrative of origins and legitimacy, for example of society and its power structures, then folklore is equally – or perhaps even particularly – well suited to engage critically with myth (cf. Kuprina 96–97, 137–153, 221–226). This is something that certain Soviet jokes did with official political mythology, a function that Graham calls "meta-mythological" (Graham 43)<sup>8</sup>. Tuchkov's short prose can be profitably viewed in the light of such "meta-mythological" appropriation of well-known folkloristic material. The writer utilises folkloristic themes and genres, whose primary purpose may be to explain a given society and its origins and possibly lend legitimacy to its power structure, in order to project criticism of Russian society.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Russian postmodernist intertextuality and pastiche, see Timina 86–104; for discussions of intertextuality in Russian literature more generally, see, for example, Kibal'nik 2013 and 2015; Fokin 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Cope's discussion of allegory as domesticating ancient myth (Cope 93–98).

The two main folkloristic genres employed by Tuchkov in *And he earned many dollars...* are those of the fable and the fairy-tale<sup>9</sup>. According to the Soviet literary scholar Lidiya Vindt, a fable is characterized by “semantic bi-planarity”, that is by the existence of a symbolic meaning in addition to the narrative itself; by animate and inanimate objects, which serve as “symbols of human relationships”; “peculiarities of plot structure”, such as a “comparison, a parallel, an antithesis” (Vindt 89–90). Indeed, Tuchkov’s short narrative pieces are organised along such lines of classical fable plot structure from an original situation leading to a specific action and reaction, all eventually culminating in a result. They historicise and alienate contemporary society by creating quasi-historical and quasi-fantastical realms, and at other times placing the drama in the animal kingdom. Often the narratives confront the human world with anthropomorphised animals. The dramatised actions of Tuchkov’s stories are predominantly comedic. Given that these works are contemporary to his Russian reader, their *tertium comparationis* and *Sitz im Leben*<sup>10</sup> will be obvious to their Russian readers, but might require greater hermeneutical efforts from future generations<sup>11</sup>. Of course, Russian literature has its own prominent fable tradition, with its peak in the eighteenth-century, and represented by writers such as most famously Ivan Krylov, but also Count Antiokh Kantemir, Aleksandr Sumarokov, Vasilii Maikov, Iakov Kniazhnin, among others. The genre, whose development in the nineteenth century will be returned to below, resurged in the early twentieth century and during Soviet times, represented by writers such as Vladimir Maiakovskii, Maksim Gor’kii and Dem’ian Bednii. Their works have been described as didactic “literary Populism [sic]” in the pursuit of socialist realism (Wilhelm 176). Wilhelm writes that the “agitational fabulation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped bring this social substratum to power”, “on whose behalf the fables in the Tolstoian subtradition had been composed” (Wilhelm 211). Vindt had written in 1926 that the new Soviet fable, which expressed “sympathy with those rebelling”, was “unusual” because the genre “mov[es] along the traditional outlines of punishment for the malcontent and the apotheosis of humility” (Vindt 105). The “mythic” dimension of Soviet life under Stalin in the 1930s–40s and the following two decades likewise proved particularly fruitful for the genre (Wilhelm 226–236). In general terms, traditional Russian fables are characterised by their humour, the comic, exaggeration, vulgar language, stylised *skaz* narration, periphrasis, rhyme, and their satirical qualities<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of genre-specific intertextuality in Russian and Ukrainian fairy-tales, see Kuprina 229–330.

<sup>10</sup> “Setting in life”, the alleged original context and function of a text.

<sup>11</sup> See Payrhuber for a more thorough theoretical discussion of the genre of the fable, in particular in German literature.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the Russian fable, see, for example, Immendörfer.

As will become evident in both the theoretical and text-based discussion further below, Tuchkov's stories likewise exhibit a number of these characteristics. What Wilhelm wrote in 1994 seems to have materialised in his prose fiction as well:

[Russian fables] employ intriguing animal imagery and Aesopian techniques to advance their perspectives on Russian experience both past and present. It may be hoped that the flexible fabular mode will prove an equally fertile resource in the interpretation of the disintegrated Soviet state's uncertain future (Wilhelm 236).

The fairy-tale in the present context is best approached as being a "freely invented, short folkloristic, entertaining prose narrative of fantastic, miraculous events and situations without temporal and spatial limitations" (von Wilpert 547), a genre which allegorically and satirically engages with present social reality. Bengt Hohlbeck has suggested viewing fairy-tales as "symbolic answers to real problems" and as "collective day-dreams, which relate to reality" in traditional societies (Bausinger 1244–1251). The Russian fairy-tale likewise has its own distinguished tradition which cannot be reviewed fully in the present context<sup>13</sup>; it may be stated in parallel with the fabular genre, however, that the Russian fairy-tale, for example in Soviet times, likewise lent itself both to the ideological promotion of social cohesion (Balina, Goscilo, and Lipovetsky 105–121) as well as to criticism thereof (Balina, Goscilo, and Lipovetsky 233–250). Mark Lipovetsky argues that because Soviet fairy-tales "connect[ed] the Soviet ideological utopia with the collective unconscious" and even though they served to "feed and support totalitarian ideology" as well as to "simplify the catastrophic and confused reality of the Soviet epoch", they were also able to develop a satirical trajectory (Balina, Goscilo, and Lipovetsky 233–234). In 2005, Lipovetsky stated about early post-Soviet literature that the:

fairy-tale paradigm proved its ability to modify its "face" according to changes in the cultural and historical situation. In the 1990s that paradigm survived by giving up its anti-totalitarian powers. These were not amputated, but retreated into the deep layers of "genre memory" in order to surface when needed (Balina, Goscilo, and Lipovetsky 248).

Given that folklore in traditional societies can fulfil the anthropological and mythological function of explaining social reality and society's origins, Tuchkov's conscious borrowing of such genres and of their "anti-totalitarian powers", to apply Lipovetsky's terminology to Tuchkov's folkloristic narratives, may indeed be "meta-mythological". Tuchkov's fictions may not only be viewed as criticism

<sup>13</sup> For an introduction to Russian fairy-tales in different literary periods, see, for example, Balina, Goscilo, and Lipovetsky; see also Miller, Williams and Williams for a discussion of folklore and fables in the Soviet Union.

of present Russian society, but perhaps more profoundly of certain continuous cultural characteristics, which give preference to traditional social structures and paternalistic ways of explaining and legitimizing society's dominant narrative. The two literary genres of the fable and the fairy-tale have continuously proven their creative productivity in accompanying developments in Russian society and in engaging with them in different, sometimes ambivalent ways.

Having introduced the concepts of pastiche, parody, and intertextuality as well as the literary genres in question, it may be productive to examine the interrelationship between both categories: the parody of folkloristic literature. Wilhelm, in her study of the fable in modern Russian literature, describes the emergence of fabular parody as a "typical and revealing phenomenon" (Wilhelm 134) in the age of realism; she views this phenomenon as "indirect evidence of fabular canonization" (Wilhelm 135). In other words, genre parody, which was already present in Krylov's fables but flourished later in the realist age, proved the existence of the fable as recognised genre. Given that the fable is "structured around obvious incongruities", it invites parody; both the fable and parody "demand that the reader perceive their dual design for complete understanding" and are therefore "forms of defamiliarization" (Wilhelm 135). Wilhelm suggests that, in addition to such structural closeness in their semantic challenges to the reader, nineteenth-century parody served the genre's evolution. She describes fabular parody as part of a "dialectical literary struggle", which "criticizes through creation": "The parodistic text is in a sense a parasite, but a potentially beneficent one. So intense is its focus upon form that parody may emerge as a sort of practical critical activity" (Wilhelm 136). Fabular parody of the time of realism may also have had a self-conscious and "metalinguistic" dimension in that it challenged the prevalent notion of art as imitating life (Wilhelm 136). At the same time, Wilhelm argues of the fables of Ivan Barkov (1732–1768) that parody may also be a "form of tribute to the original model: imitation, even with a vengeance, may in truth be the sincerest form of flattery" (Wilhelm 137). The present discussion follows a somewhat parallel argument: Tuchkov's parody of Tolstoi's fables may be appreciative in artistic motivation and continuous in moral intention and social concern, applying a time-proven literary paradigm to post-Soviet social reality. Having said that, Tuchkov's parody of such genre clichés may surely also have a heightened self-conscious interest, of course, and may even manifest parody of Russian literature's concern with social reality.

In the introductory section of his work, Tuchkov identifies himself as a *raznochinets*. Since the time of Catherine II, Russian imperial society had been marked by a mismatch between social status and social function, resulting from the absence of genuine civil society. Many people who had enjoyed education no longer fitted into their original social category and had no easy access to any other. Such



intellectuals of “sundry rank” were called *raznochintsy*. The officially non-existent class of *raznochintsy* later became a breeding ground for the radical intelligentsia with their particular desire to learn from the “simple” people and to bring culture and education to them, in their turn. With their general desire to see improvements in social conditions, such *raznochintsy*, therefore, adopted a critical attitude towards the regime (Hosking 263–264). Tuchkov thereby identifies himself with this historical category of people encompassing presumably their general ideas, and their status as standing outside of – and at a critical distance from – society. He laments the fact that in the Russia of his days “this very society has moved against the time”<sup>14</sup>, suggesting that Russian society has regressed rather than progressed.

Tuchkov's satirical presentation of the social defects of his time alienates the real world by clothing the society he criticises in an allegorical, Aesopian “cloak”; or by displacing it to an archaic time; or by exaggerating and comically exposing its characteristics, thereby offering the reader distance from his own society; in fact, these differing strategies may coexist and reinforce each other in a given text. Such alienation occurs both at the “formal” level of the texts themselves and at that of implied authorial intention, as will become clearer in the course of the discussion below.

### 3. Social satire

Having introduced the central thematic concerns of these cycles, and before moving on to a discussion of why folkloristic genres may be used productively for social criticism, we may first turn to an appreciation of the fairy-tale as object of literary pastiche in Tuchkov's work. A specific work by Tolstoj, which is parodied by Tuchkov, or rather used as a template for parodying Russian political centralism, is Tolstoj's *Three bears (fairy-tale)* [*Tri medvedia (Skazka), Novye azbuki*] (Tolstoj 1982: 7–8), a version of a popular Russian fairy-tale, which in English is known as *Goldilocks and the three bears*, also published in 1834 by a near-contemporary of Tolstoj, the English poet Robert Southey (Southey, electronic source). Tuchkov's narrative *The little girl and the tri-une being (fairy-tale)* [*Devochka i triedinoe sushchestvo (Skazka)*] (61–62) concerns a little girl who gets lost when picking berries. She comes across a villa, which she believes to be the home of the personified “Kremlin Administration”, the “One Party” and “Personally Comrade President”. She walks in and finds three differently sized bowls, chairs, and beds. She tries to figure out their internal hierarchy, to which

<sup>14</sup> “[...] eto samoe obshchestvo dvinulos' vspiat' [vremen]” (Tučkov 2005: 8).

of the three inhabitants the largest, the medium-sized, and the smallest of these items belong. After having tried the porridge, she lies down in one of the beds and falls asleep. She dreams of the “tri-une being”, that is the President, the Kremlin administration, and the One Party, returning home, seeing, waking and caressing her, before giving her a lift back home in a Mercedes. However, when she is woken up, it is by none other than the bear family itself consisting of the three bears from Tolstoi’s tale, Mikhail Ivanovich, Nastasia Petrovna and little Mishutka by name. Unlike in Tolstoi’s fairy-tale, however, the bears, who in a comic way have become “trans-world”<sup>15</sup> characters, do not try to catch and eat the unnamed girl, who pleads with them for mercy. The bears calm her down, and burst into laughter when she informs them that she had dreamt that she had walked into the house of the country’s ruler(s): “don’t be afraid of the rulers, stupid girl. You have really scared us!”<sup>16</sup>. Then they feed her, ring her grandparents, lay her down to sleep, and in the next morning accompany her to the tramway station. The humour of the story obviously derives from the reader’s familiarity with the plot and surprise experienced at seeing how Tuchkov modifies the latter by substituting three political institutions for the bears, which even so proves to be a mistaken conclusion, since the fairy-tale bears do indeed turn out to be the owners of the villa. Another implicit satirical element is yet again the people’s childlike adoration of the ruling “troika” of Kremlin, Party, and President. In this “fairy-tale” the main semantic structure is that of incongruity, both of the reader’s and of the little girl’s expectations concerning the identity and behaviour of the three bears. At another level, the interchangeable identity of the bears and Russia’s leaders may verify Vladimir Propp’s structural analysis of the Russian *skazka* to the effect that what is of importance in a fairy-tale is its plot and not its characters or their motives, which may all be interchangeable (Propp 27; Ricklefs 1249).

Another intertextual reference point in Tuchkov’s *New Russian fairy-tales* is the Bible, among others. The fable-cum-parable [*An incident on the water (true story)*] [*Sluchai na vode (Byl’)*, 2004] concerns foolishness, envy, and greed. When a businessman sees and hears an advertising agent, with whom he is acquainted, drowning in the Moskva river, he does not offer any assistance for fear of losing his own life. Instead, he cries out for help himself. A peasant comes along on his mare, purchases a life belt from the businessman and throws it into the river. The advertiser drowns nonetheless, and the peasant is only stopped from pushing the businessman into the river by his mare, who speaks to him, telling him it wants to leave Moscow soon, since it already has to “puke”

<sup>15</sup> Brian McHale defines “trans-world identities” as fictional characters who move from one fictional world into another, viewing this as a postmodern device (35–36).

<sup>16</sup> “vlasti ne boish’sia, glupaia devochka, a nas ispugalas’!” (Tučkov 2005: 62).

because of these “he-goats”<sup>17</sup>. This story may remind the reader both of a narrative from the Hebrew Bible and of a parable from the New Testament. In Numbers 22, the prophet Balaam is commissioned by the elders of Midian and Moab to curse the Israelites as they pass by their territory. On the journey, Balaam's means of transport, his ass, sees an angel three times, invisible to Balaam, and comes to a halt. When Balaam beats the ass for presumed disobedience, it starts to speak and complains about how unjustly he is being treated by his master. This is followed by the angel revealing himself to Balaam and commanding him to bless Israel. The second biblical reference is to the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10): a man who has been robbed is not being helped by two members of his own clergy, who were in a position to offer help. But a Samaritan, a disdained outsider in Jewish society, who theoretically could have been expected not to care, was willing to apply his own oil and wine on him and to bring him to safety at an inn.

In Tuchkov's story, elements from these two scenes seem to have been combined, again commenting on – and ridiculing – what the implied author views as social reality: *tovarishchi*, comrades or, more precisely, people from the business class, do not help each other, but are interested only in making profit, even if that facilitates a fellow-businessman's death, given that the businessman sells the life belt to the peasant instead of throwing it in himself. It takes someone from outside their own circle, indeed from another time and society, namely a peasant, to make an effort to save the drowning man, even sacrificing parts of his presumably small wages. Moreover, it is an animal who is charged with braying out the truth about human beings and specifically businessmen: stupidity is reversed. It is the (business-)man who is stupid and acts like an ass (or he-goat), while the ass (or mare in this case) is imbued with common sense, calling the business-people “kozly” (“goats”) in her turn. This notion of animals braying out truths about human society is also a central element in the genre of the fable.

Above and beyond the rather explicit Biblical references, Tuchkov also quotes a line from a poem written by Leonid Martynov (1905–1981), *Secret friend (Tainyi drug, 1971)*<sup>18</sup>: “And he threw a life belt towards the drowning man” (“I kinul tonushchemu spasatel'nyi krug”). Martynov's poem has a serious subject. At first glance it is about a friend who has saved the lyrical “I” from drowning, but did so from a distance, without getting personally involved, to the lyrical “I”'s emotional discomfiture. The life belt provides a link between Martynov's poem and

<sup>17</sup> “Poedem, govorit kobyłka, iz etoi moskvy [sic!] poskorei, a to menia ot etikh kozlov uzhe blevat' tianet” (Tučkov 2005: 14).

<sup>18</sup> “Ty, moi drug, / Na odnoi iz bushuiushchikh rek, / Mne, tonuvshemu brosil spasatel'nyi krug, / Chtoby vybralsia ia na spasitel'nyi breg, / Odinok, nikogo ne uvidev vokrug / Potomu, chto moikh blagodarstvennykh ruk / Postesniatsia, nelaskovyi ty chelovek!” (Borowsky, Müller 544).

Tuchkov's story. By facing the reader with the hyperbolically related (un-)social etiquette of the business class and by calling members of the latter 'kozly', while at the same time indirectly calling to mind a poem, which deals with serious questions concerning the nature of friendship, Tuchkov reinforces the comical elements in his story, whereas at the surface level it may appear as a parody of Martynov's serious subject-matter.

#### 4. Folklore and satire

By virtue of copying Tolstoi's use of the Aesopian genre, which by definition is didactic and at times critical and satirical in nature, Tuchkov engages with post-Soviet society in a pedagogical, but also entertaining way. He claims that the purpose of his stories is to educate Russians in the matter of making money (the 1992 cycle), fighting for social order and justice (in the 1998 cycle), and struggling against retrogressive socio-political developments (the 2004 stories); his pieces are indeed critical of social and political realities. As subtitles to his stories, Tuchkov uses a set of genre-specifications largely similar to those of Tolstoi (e.g. "Legend", "Allegory", "Pure Truth", "Joke", "Prescription", "Discussion")<sup>19</sup>, and he organises these stories along the lines of a classic fable plotline (i.e. situation – action – reaction – result), which we will return to. This enables him both to historicise and to de-familiarise contemporary society by creating archaic, quasi-historical, and quasi-fantastical realms. The quasi-mythological or archaic nature of the narrative world of his stories is achieved by the simplification of complex contemporary social structures. Tuchkov creates representative types or "myths" of a group or collective of specific social actors: "the people", "the individual", "businessman", "banker", "oligarchs", "reformer", "members of parliament"<sup>20</sup> and so on. Skoropanova defines Tuchkov's characters as "simulacra" of Tolstoi's characters, which are "transferred into a commercialised Russia" and "equipped with contemporary psychology and language"<sup>21</sup>. This, in conjunction with Tuchkov's use of old-fashioned, anachronistic or inappropriate language, such as that of "peasant", "Rus'", "Kremlin sage"<sup>22</sup>, and substandard language, enables him to evoke the sense of historical and spatial remoteness of a fairy-tale kingdom in

<sup>19</sup> "Basnia", "Allegoriia", "Chistaia pravda", "Retsept", "Shutka", "Rassuzhdeniie" (Tučkov 2005).

<sup>20</sup> "narod", "individuum", "biznesmen", "bankir", "oligarkhi", "reformator", "deputyaty" (Tučkov 2005).

<sup>21</sup> "Personazhi ego knigi – simuliakry: geroi L. Tolstogo, perenosimye v situatsiiu kommertsializiruiushcheisia Rossii kontsa XX v., nadeliaemye sovremennoi psikhologii i iazykom" (Skoropanova 20).

<sup>22</sup> "muzhik", "Rus'", "kremlevskii mudrets" (Tučkov 2005).

some pre-enlightened, quasi-absolutist age that is often associated with the genres of fairy-tale, fable, and saga. This historical relocation, created both by the use of Tolstói's generic formulations and by stylising the characters, is ironically confirmed by Tuchkov himself, who says of his *Russian books for reading*: "There arose problems of age identification [...] The readers of the *Russian books for reading* are astonished when they learn that their author is still alive..."<sup>23</sup>. Thus, Tuchkov creates a diachronic combination, both linguistically and conceptually, of the past and the present, a historicised, remote literary realm, in which hyperbolised post-Soviet and historical social structures and actants bridge the gap of time and space in order to converge fictionally<sup>24</sup>. What the Danish scholar Ingunn Lunde suggested a propos of the diachronic dimension in Vladimir Sorokin's oeuvre may also be applicable to certain works of Tuchkov: a "juxtaposition of historically embedded linguistic features that go far beyond the realm of single words" (Lunde 298), a combination of certain words, quotations, styles, linguistic and poetic features, which "create perceptions and representations of time, memory and history that spur the reader to reflect on these issues in ethical and political terms" (Lunde 300–301). Thereby, Lunde expresses an idea about Sorokin that is very similar to a feature which Mark Lipovetsky had suggested in relation to Tuchkov: that his works emphasize "the unity of Russian cultural dynamics despite all historical ruptures between the prerevolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods" (Lipovetsky 71).

Another politically and socially significant issue taken up by Tuchkov is that of the relationship between the collective and the individual. In reasoning which seems to echo the illogical assertion of D-503, the narrator of Evgenii Zamiatin's novel *We (My, 1920)*, that the ton (i.e. the One State) is of greater weight than the totality of grams (the individual citizens), which constitute it:

So, take some scales and put on one side a gram, on the other a ton; on one side "I" and on the other "We," One State. It's clear, isn't it? – to assert that "I" has certain "rights" with respect to the State is exactly the same as asserting that a gram weighs the same as a ton. That explains the way things are divided up: To the ton go the rights, to the gram the duties. And the natural path from nullity to greatness is this: Forget that you're a gram and feel yourself a millionth part of a ton (Zamiatin 111).

Tuchkov's 2004 story, *How are people different from the people (Discussion) [Chem liudi otlichaiutsia ot naroda (Rassuzhdenie)]* concludes that, while individuals cause nothing but problems for the state, the people as a collective entity

<sup>23</sup> "Voznikli problemy s vozrastnoi identifikatsiei. [...] Chitateli «Russkikh knig dlia chteniia» izumliaiutsia, kogda uznaiut, chto ikh avtor vse eshche zhiv..." (Tučkov 2003: 278).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Kuprina's discussion of the relationship between mythical and historical time and space in Russian and Ukrainian fairy-tales, 224–225.

is essential for the state's existence. According to the argument presented, this especially applies in times of a terrorist threat (which is likely to be an implicit reference to the Kremlin's policy *vis-à-vis* Chechnya in the 1990s): only the people united as a whole are capable of eliminating terrorism, irrespective of the fact that it may also be innocent individual human beings who have to pay the price for such elimination.

Such seemingly irreconcilable competition between the individual's value and that of the collective is further expounded in the story *Unity and the struggle of opposites (Fable)* (*Edinstvo i bor'ba protivopolozhnostei (Basnia)*, 2004). In an attempt to bring down the President, two opposition leaders possessed of opposed political convictions cannot agree as to whether it would be better to send the people as collective or as individuals into the ring with the President, and so they do both simultaneously. As a result, the people and the individuals set about fighting each other when they meet, competing and completely forgetting about their fight with the President. This is commented upon by one laughing "chief Kremlin sage"<sup>25</sup> with the words: "Unity and the struggle of opposites, indeed! The consensus is in the butt!"<sup>26</sup>. The situation portrayed leads to the impossible conclusion that the only "place" where unity exists is disunity, to the point even of schizophrenia, the term being used in a figurative sense: the mass of individuals and the people are one and the same, and cannot therefore engage in physically fighting one another, only oneself. Tuchkov symbolically refers to opposing traditions of thought and of social construction (individualism versus collectivism) rather than to actual people, and is thereby possibly criticising or even ridiculing Russian history and the history of Russian thought. Another theme of this story is that of malleability. Both individuals and the people as a collective are easily manipulated by the Kremlin and other politicians in a way which calls to mind the last line of Aleksandr Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*: "The people are silent"<sup>27</sup>. Another implication is that the parliamentary opposition is too divided and too much at odds internally for it to be a functioning political force able to confront the executive branch of power.

The subject of the people's malleability is expanded in the first story of the collection, *The people and the vertical (True story)* [*Narod i vertikal (Byl')*], which depicts the President (most likely referring to President Vladimir Putin) as building a "vertical". The reader would expect this to refer to an abstract line of vertical (that is, authoritarian) state power, but the "vertical" in question turns out to be a physical, tangible construction right in the centre of *Rus'* (which is com-

<sup>25</sup> "glavnyi kremlevskii mudrets" (Tučkov 2005: 25).

<sup>26</sup> "Edinstvo i bor'ba protivopolozhnostei, odnako! Konsensus v sraku!" (Tučkov 2005: 25).

<sup>27</sup> "Narod bezmolvstvuet" (Pushkin 98).

pared to a wasp's nest), built with the best materials imported from Germany. The people are in awe of the new construction, especially since there has been no such thing under the preceding president (most likely referring to Boris Yeltsin). This, along with the fact that the people continue to be allowed to drink vodka and beer, is sufficient cause for the people to thank "the Kremlin Administration, the One Party, and personally comrade President for not prohibiting vodka and beer"<sup>28</sup>, an obvious humorous reference to Mikhail Gorbachev's failed anti-alcoholism policy of the mid-1980s.

In Tuchkov's *Russian books for reading*, the theme of childlike adoration of the ruler is complemented by a number of stories like *How to raise the economy (Meditation)* [*Kak nado podnimat' ekonomiku (Razdum'e)*], *How to fight corruption (Meditation)* [*Kak nado borot'sia s korruptsiei (Razdum'e)*] (both 2004) and *Which laws are adopted in the Duma (True story)* [*Kakie zakony prinimaiut v Dume (Byl')*], 1998] that play on the traditional myth of the good ruler surrounded by bad advisors. In these miniatures, the President, seemingly concerned with the fate and well-being of the people, the economy and the country at large, orders the government and parliament to change their behaviour, policy and laws, all to no avail. Those ministers who have been charged by the President (apparently Putin) with fighting corruption at the highest level end up thrashing each other on the Kremlin's roof. Having been ordered to raise the level of the country's economy, they discuss the import of cranes from Germany or the use of Viagra in order to accomplish this task. The humour in these two instances depends on the fact that the ministers are simpletons unable to distinguish between the plain and the metaphorical meanings of words. They hear the phrases "fight corruption" and "raise the economy" [emphases added – N.D.] and end up trying to do so physically, with no effect whatsoever on the social phenomena in question. The above examples from Tuchkov's stories are a "literalisation" of a metaphors, a literary device, which is also extremely prominent in the works of Vladimir Sorokin<sup>29</sup>. As already mentioned, Linda Hutcheon has suggested that "literalisation", e.g. the syntagmatic enactment of a figure of speech, can, like exaggeration, have a structurally ironic function as well as a meta-ironic one (Hutcheon 156–158).

The portrayal of government ministers fighting each other on the roof of the Kremlin when charged to fight corruption is, of course, a hilarious means by which to present these fictional ministers as being in themselves the very embodiment and cause of corruption. The implied moral seems to be that, if one wants

<sup>28</sup> "I vozblagodaril narod Kremlevskuiu Administratsiiu, Edinuiu Partiiu i lichno tovarishcha Prezidenta za to, chto vodku i pivo ne zapretili" (Tučkov 2005: 11).

<sup>29</sup> On Sorokin's use of the "literalisation" of metaphors, consult Sokolov 24–26 and Engel 53–66, for example.

to fight corruption, then one has to fight the government. Moreover, the President himself does not seem to notice the fact that the corruption which he orders his government to fight is itself inextricably linked with the government. He appears preponderant amongst the fools and does not notice that he has himself become the victim of fraud. One of his ministers has had the brilliant idea of falsifying statistics (a word he cannot even spell properly), an idea which is immediately adopted by the council of ministers and leads to the best imaginable result. When the President watches the news on TV before going to bed, he sees that his country's economy is reported as being in good shape, as a result of which he is able to sleep soundly. Additionally, members of the political establishment enrich themselves at the expense of the nation by bribing each other, while the people lack the means to offer bribes and thereby influence the making of laws. The President, this time presumably President Yeltsin, despairs after being refused his request to put an end to bribery, and resorts to alcohol in his helplessness. Skoropanova writes that "[i]f in the children's world of Tolstoi deception, baseness and ingratitude are punished, then the business world vividly described by V. Tuchkov abrogates morality and moral judgement, disfiguring man from childhood"<sup>30</sup>.

Tuchkov's stories are profoundly intertextual; they often are pastiches of Tolstoi's educational stories and fairy-tales. They fictionally alienate society and relocate it in a time and space where Russia's cultural past and present meet: Tuchkov's use of such fairy-tale and fable language, motifs, and narrative conventions create a narrative world which hyperbolically, yet clearly recognisably, relate to the historically real post-Soviet experience of ordinary people. This narrative world is located in what may be termed an almost "pre-historical" age, which is an important device used by Tuchkov for the creation of satirical alienation. To be more precise, Tuchkov creates ahistorical, anachronistic, even diachronistic mythological and archaic narrative spaces, combining social features of our own days with those of pre-Enlightenment or even pre-historical times, thereby foregrounding certain cultural continuities. Moreover, in so doing, he makes use of, and responds to, the deeply ingrained Russian cultural preference for folkloristic traditions. Tuchkov's "mimetic desire" (Girard), to appropriate René Girard's anthropological notion to our literary context, is clearly of an Aesopian, allegorical nature: his works hyperbolically "misrepresent" reality to emphasise specific characteristics of reality. They comically exaggerate its characteristics. They surprise both the fictional characters and the readers. They let "social insiders", be it businessmen, government ministers, deputies, and the people, enact the social

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<sup>30</sup> "Esli vo tolstovskom detskom mire obman, podlost', neblagodarnost' nakazyvaiutsia, to mir biznesa, zhivopisuemyi V. Tuchkovym, npravstvennost' i npravstvennyi sud otmeniaet, uroduia cheloveka s detstva" (Skoropanova 21).



script which they have internalised. At the same time, they let “outsiders”, such as a “dumb beast of burden”, brawl out the truth about society, as the epigraph to our article indicates. They let the reader laugh at all of this. The elements that define the special character of this collection of miniature stories, be they intertextuality, pastiche and *parodiinost'*; the fairy-tale and the fable; humour, irony, and satire, all have one structural dimension in common, above and beyond the shared goal of social criticism: that of alienation.

Intertextuality, the employment of pastiche of well-known works of literature, serves to provide a semantic engagement with these original works; these elements draw conscious attention to the process of inviting the reader to think about why the author has chosen a given text as semantic and formal “template”. In the case of pastiches of fables and fairy-tales, the readers' conscious attention is drawn for at least two reasons. Firstly, these classical texts are well-known to them and resonate with them. Secondly, as outlined above, these folkloristic genres have a socially relevant tradition and proclivity for representing, reinforcing or questioning dominant cultural and political mythologies. Likewise, humour, satire, and irony, each on their own but analogous terms, present incongruities, exaggerate, and express semantic opposition. The overall structural effect of what one might call Tuchkov's “super-mimetic” strategy is to surprise the reader in his expectations of narrative form and development: it is to “alienate” or “de-familiarise” his experience of reality. The Russian Formalist scholar Viktor Shklovskii wrote of the notion of *ostranenie* that its purpose was to “make us feel things, to make the stone, *stony*. [...] to increase the difficulty and duration of perception” (Shklovskii cited by Lodge 9, emphasis in original). It appears that such “making the stone more stony” and thereby increasing the process of perception is precisely the very literary and semantic strategy that underlies Tuchkov's *New Russian fairy-tales*.

## Conclusions

At first sight, Tuchkov's relationship with the literary tradition seems to be a superficial, playful and contumelious one; indeed, his pastiche of Tolstoi's original *Russian books for reading* has a comical character, operating through the transposition of Tolstoi's language and themes into a historically alien context, thereby creating incongruity between the narrative world of Tolstoi and that of Tuchkov. Nevertheless, the semantic intention in these cycles, as shown above, does not seem to oppose that in Tolstoi's work of the same name. On the contrary, even though Tuchkov's hyperbolic fables are humour-filled and light-footed, where many of Tolstoi's are more obviously didactic, the implicit social criticism

in Tuchkov's *Russian books for reading* is ultimately rooted in a similar moral concern for society. What the adaptation of Tolstoy's work by Tuchkov presupposes is an appreciative engagement with Tolstoy's works, an open acknowledgement of their being a central source of creative inspiration and of critical importance to the world in which the author lives, rather than, as the Russian literary scholar Timina bemoans, "a playing with the shards, the glass splinters of earlier culture"<sup>31</sup>. Rather, Tuchkov's creativity appears to be strongly influenced by the desire to draw on, and relate to, the accumulated treasures of Russian literature. Tuchkov's narratives, ultimately reflecting the realities of post-Soviet Russia, incarnate a pervasive confusion of values: "in co-authorship with L. Tolstoy, V. Tuchkov ridicules the «New Russian» philosophy, morality, and practice, abrogating morality and transforming people into characters of anecdotes"<sup>32</sup>. Tuchkov's engagement with the classics, however parodic it may seem, may best be approached as affirming the continuing validity of the Russian notion of the writer as performing a task that is both critical of and for society. Likewise, his Aesopian appropriation testifies to the genre's adaptability as well as to its dialectical dynamics and continuous relevance for Russian culture and literature even in post-Soviet times.

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<sup>31</sup> "Igra cherepkami, oskolkami prezhnei kul'tury prodolzhaetsia, no ona ne budet bezkonechnoi: pauza in antrakt vechno dlit'sia ne mogut" (Timina 104).

<sup>32</sup> "V «soavtorstve» s L. Tolstym V. Tuchkov vysmeivaet «novorussskuiu» filosofiiu, moral' i praktiku, otmeniaiuushchuiu npravstvennost', prevrashchaiushchuiu liudei v personezhei anekdotov" (Skoropanova 22).

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