The Brothers Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* (1971, trans. 1977)

Some Questions for Class/Further Study

These questions are *not* definitive. We won't be able to cover them all in one class. They are selectively based on my reading of the novel – and some selected criticism. The interpretive nature of literary study ensures there are other angles/perspectives. Use the questions as a platform, from where to leap into your own Zone.

(NB: Page numbers refer to my copy, Gollancz's SF Masterworks series, 2012.)

1. Read these two small excerpts. They contain several significant themes and issues from the novel. See how many you can identify. Note them down, with a view to discussing them at the start of the class.

   A. Red's sudden vision/experience of 'another world'. P.83 (Ch2). From: He had never felt this outside of the Zone [...] before he even had the chance to investigate."
   B. Noonan's reflection on Harmont/the Zone, pps. 109-110 (Ch3). From He turned onto Central Avenue [...] I won't live till the end."

2. To what extent do you think the Soviet context (of 'the Thaw' and the resultant freeze) is important for reading the novel?

3. Is this a 'science fiction' novel?

   a) What is the role of 'science' in the narrative? See, for example, pps: 18-19; 135-138; 140-141; 143. (You might also want to think of the import of Pilman's interview at the beginning and Noonan's declaration of exhaustion at the end of Ch3. p. 155)
   b) Is it not, as many critics have asserted, a 'fairy-tale'? See, for example, 26-27; 32; 52-3; 76-77; 134; 140. If you are interested in this, read Lem's essay/review of the novel and Csicsery-Ronay's 1986 essay (module website).

4. Are the aliens/visitors at all significant? 4; 128-29; 130-136 (inc. the 'Roadside Picnic' notion.)

5. The Zone. Is it a literary device? 13, 16, 21-22; 26-29; 33; 85

- What do you think Red means in his outburst: “There’s no getting away from it [the Zone].”? (49; 51)

6. Are the Zone’s objects/artefacts *specifically* important? Or are they just ‘magically-oriented’ devices, secondary to the plot. (Empties, Hellslime; Shriekers, spinners; spacells, etc.) Or is their real import as commodities? 40-41; 69; 109; 136.

7. Is there an explicit and consistent social critique made in *Roadside Picnic*? 127; 128-9. Also, how do we read Red’s statement on Harmont as ‘a hole’? Ch1, p. 42.

8. What is the significance of the revenants or ‘zombies’? 61-2; 65; 91; 92; 92; 110; 138; 141
And of Red’s child, ‘Monkey’? 73; 78; 140-1; 155. See also, “the nonhuman illnesses of man.” P.69

9. The End. What is the significance of the Golden Sphere? 61; 113-114; 161; 165; 188-190. His final statement – is it a Utopian longing? Or do we understand it cynically, as a cry of despair and defeat? 193.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.

Science Fiction and the Thaw

Of the many creative boom periods in the history of sf—fin-de-siècle England and France, revolutionary Russia, the US Golden Age, the New Wave, cyberpunk, Japan in the 1990s—none has had as much immediate impact on the public sphere, the political culture, and the currents of mainstream literature—or was viewed as such a potent threat by the ruling order—as the sf of the Soviet post-Stalin Thaw. Inevitably associated with its most prominent authors, Ivan Efremov and the Strugatsky brothers, the sf of the Thaw was in fact the work of a large creative community that included many other writers as well, among them Sever Gansovsky, Vladimir Savchenko, Olga Larionova, Valentina Zhuravleva, Gennadi Gor, Ilya Varshavsky, Vadim Shefner, Rafail Nudelman, Ariadna Gromova, and Kir Bulychev. A generation of Anglophone readers was introduced to some of their works when, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a few publishing houses, led by the UK-based Macmillan, embarked on an ambitious project of publishing major works of Soviet sf, primarily of the Thaw cohort. Several volumes of the Strugatskys' oeuvre appeared in English translations, as well as some stories and single novels by others.[1]

The translation project was typical of the internationalist mood of the English-speaking cultural atmosphere of the time, when works of the Latin American boom, of Japanese and African fiction, and eccentric European writers like Lem and Calvino appeared on bookshelves in unprecedented numbers. Translations of Soviet sf, however, were doubtless also driven by the wish to further the "spirit of détente," the pause in the Cold War inspired mainly by the threat of nuclear war, the passion for space exploration, and the drive for consumer goods—shared by the people of the US and the USSR, and, not incidentally, characteristic inspirations for sf. Soviet sf also spoke to Western readers' desire for otherness. At a time when Western sf was itself booming with experiments in form and social imagination, Soviet sf represented an alternative tradition altogether, an ethical-literary environment far different from the fast-forward techno-modernity of most Western and Japanese sf. Later (indeed, at the time many of the translations finally appeared in print), as the Brezhnev regime clamped down tight on all forms of opposition, there was a wish to see Soviet sf writers as low-key dissidents, one step away from *samizdat* and persecution.

In the West, we read the Thaw writers in the frames we had ready for them. And before we could really get to know them, the favorable moment passed. A few of the Strugatskys' novels that were still in the pipeline were published in the mid-1980s. Then it was over. Important later works, like the Strugatskys' *Lame Fate* (1986), *The Doomed City* (1988), and *Burdened by Evil* (1988), and Efremov's *The Hour of the Bull* (1970), have not seen light in English. (English translations of Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula* [1957], the founding text of post-

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World War II Soviet sf, have never been published outside of the Soviet Union.) Aside from a few academics and connoisseurs, there were few takers. At this writing, not one of the translations is in print. As the historical Soviet Union passes into memory, and—at least for most Western readers—fades even from there, there is good reason to try to gain a new understanding of that movement, one of the most original attempts to frame imaginary futures out of the substrate of bureaucratic despotism. As Roman Arbitman shows us in the memoir published in this issue, Russian writers themselves return to it for inspiration. For Westerners, the sf of the Thaw offers, through its alternative futures, a privileged way of understanding a society whose present was already alien to us.

To understand the role of sf in the culture of the Thaw, we must establish its context. In the past, critics have tended to take one of two approaches to the Thaw writers. Some hoped to find evidence of an oppositional assertion of Marxist humanism against the inhumanity both of Western monopoly capitalism and Soviet Stalinism. They constructed Soviet sf as a partner in the New Left project of socialist reform. Others expected the Thaw cohort to be courageous dissidents, closer in spirit to contemporary fantastic satirists like Sinyavski, Zinoviev, and Voinovich, than to mere crafters of sf. Neither of these is an entirely false stereotype. Many of the Thaw writers were faithful Marxists and Communists (they were often instrumental, however, in showing that these are not identical concepts, just as revolution and utopia are not) who took Khrushchev at his word when he promised a reform of socialism and the emancipation of science for the good of humanity. Many were also persecuted for their writing, either overtly prevented from publishing altogether, or forced to publish work that was fatally compromised. A few of the Strugatskys' works were indeed published in *samizdat* form by an émigré publisher.

But, as Arbitman's and Erik Simon's essays make clear, Thaw sf was in fact a popular literature that addressed the feelings of a large sector of the Soviet population in the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev eras. It spoke especially to the young intelligentsia—students, young scientists and engineers, and humanists for whom science represented freedom from Stalinist superstition. This new intelligentsia was being encouraged to take a leading role in the transformation of Soviet society into a technologically advanced one, and even to lead it into a shining Communist future based not on hollow phrases but material-scientific achievements. For a generation unburdened of Stalin, witnessing the Space Age, believing in the promise of gradual (albeit minimal) improvements in personal life, sf represented a potent synthesis of ideology and science, of personal and social happiness. Utopia, which had inspired the classic sf writers of the revolutionary period, and had been outlawed by Stalin, once again became topical. As Khrushchev's Communist Party itself incorporated utopian imaginings into its 22nd Congress, the scientific intelligentsia was given license to dream about engineering social—and personal—happiness.

The Thaw. Establishing dates for the Thaw is not a simple matter. A "long thaw" begins with the death of Stalin in 1953 and ends around 1972, with the final slide of the Brezhnev regime into the period of "Stagnation." It is more

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of asking for more freedom, of access to foreign research, international exchanges, and an end to interference from ideologists. Here, too, the contradictions were to become pronounced. By the end of his rule, Khrushchev declared emphatically that freedom of thought had to remain confined to the laboratory; there could be no peaceful coexistence in the realm of ideology. This policy became one of the guiding principles of Brezhnev's assertion of control over the scientific community, and one of the reasons why the dissident movement was embodied increasingly by scientists rather than writers in the 1970s.

In this political landscape, Thaw sf occupied a middle zone between opposition and conformity. In very few cases do we find open attacks on the system or the ideals of Communism. Even where these are detectable, as in the Strugatskys' *Tale of the Troika* (1968), the critique is softened by genial humor. Sf's particular role was to use the whole armory of indirection to present imaginary alternatives to present conditions, without proposing any historical cause-and-effect connections. The emphasis was on "humanizing" social-technological progress, saving utopia from the mechanical laws of Marxist-Leninist history, and encouraging a sense of personal hope in the future. In this sense, sf served the purposes of the Thaw reforms perfectly. It encouraged the scientific intelligentsia and youth to imagine themselves as personally inhabiting the world they would construct—one adequate for them, replete with problems to be solved and obligations to be met. It encouraged a synthesis of personal and social heroism, and it humanized Socialism with a cheerful voice, in sharp contrast to the withering scorn of the leading critical writers. The pain of the past would be relieved by their futures.

As the freeze hardened in the 1970s, science became more difficult to practice; dissident scientists—including leaders of their fields, like Andrei Sakharov, Pyotr Kapitsa, and Zhores Medevedev—were fired from their positions, exiled, or imprisoned in mental institutions. Among writers, the polarization was complete between regime lackeys and the dissidents. Even as it pursued its compromising middle way, sf reflected this poisoning of the atmosphere. The leading writers of the generation, Efremov and the Strugatskys, were effectively prevented from publishing.

SF and the Thaw. Reflecting back on Soviet sf's Golden Age, it is clear that it spoke to, and helped to construct, a subject that is almost unimaginable today—and perhaps precisely because the creation of that subject was the common mission of its writers. This "New Man," the subject of Elana Gomel's essay, was one or another variant on the utopian synthesis of individuality and collectivity. Genuinely attempting to humanize socialism and science, Soviet sf attempted to imagine the human species as the engineer of technology and personality, rather than the opposite. Although very little useful theory of sf and the fantastic was produced in the Soviet Union, even during the Thaw, the work of Tatiana Chernyshova, whose essay "Science Fiction and Myth Creation in our Age" we present for the first time in English, stands out as a theory of myth construction that parallels the actual myth shaping of Efremov and the

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DANIEL KLUGER FABLES OF DESIRE 4

objects, some are useful, sparking off a technological revolution. Others are neutral or extremely dangerous, for example, the "death-lamp" and "witch's jelly." The artifacts' most important characteristic is that even those objects that can be copied and utilized cannot be scientifically explained.

Stalkers who regularly enter the Zone court danger. They are not left unscathed even if they manage to survive: their children are born with a mixture of human and non-human features, and the latter eventually predominate. Their homes are haunted by the walking dead, partially resurrected deceased friends and relatives. There is a strange connection between the stalkers' non-human children and the walking dead. There are, in short, numerous mysteries intertwined with the novel's depiction of the adventures of the stalker Red Shuchart, who gambles with his life to reach the enigmatic Golden Ball, a machine that reputedly can grant any wish. But the main mystery concerns the meaning of the Visitation itself. What was the aliens' intention in leaving behind these strange and deadly gifts?

One of the novel's characters, the scientist Valentine Pilman, offers several explanations, the most extravagant of which is the source of the novel's title:

> Imagine a clearing in the woods. A car rumbles up the unpaved track into the clearing. A group of young people tumble out, boys, girls, bottles, hampers, portable radios, cameras .... They make a fire, put up tents, crank up music. In the morning they're gone. Beasts, birds and insects that have been watching the goings-on from their hiding places, emerging timidly. And what do they see? The grass is spotted with oil; used spark-plugs and filters lie scattered. Here is some litter, there—a burnt-out light bulb, somebody has dropped a screwdriver .... The tires have brought smears of dirt from some unknown swamp; and of course there are ashes of the fire, apple cores, candy wrappers, empty tins and bottles, somebody's handkerchief, a pen-knife, old newspapers, a couple of coins, withered flowers brought from another clearing .... A roadside picnic in the backwoods of space." (§3.)

The existence of several explanations, none of which is ultimately endorsed, is an ironic meta-generic commentary directed at those readers who expect science fiction to clarify all mysteries out of existence by tying up all loose ends. The novel itself deviates from sf and develops into something closer to allegorical fantasy or fairy tale when it uses the traditional motif of an object capable of fulfilling every wish, the Golden Ball. This artifact, the most enigmatic in the Zone, can only be reached by overcoming deadly obstacles and sacrificing one of the seekers in the process.

Much has been written about the connection between sf and the fairy tale. This connection is more evident in *Roadside Picnic* than in any other of the Strugatskys' novels. The Zone is reminiscent of the underworld, and the stalkers' dangerous excursions there are the traditional fairy-tale journeys to the Kingdom of the Dead. After such a journey, the fairy-tale hero is characteristically given magic gifts whose nature is ambivalent in that they can, like the artifacts found in the Zone, be used for both good and evil purposes. Another fairy-tale element is the story of Red's non-human daughter, nicknamed Monkey, a subplot that parallels the famous fairy tales of P. Bazhov, which are

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ELANA SOMEL SFS VOL 22 NO 1. 5

the book.[2] As in Lem's *Solaris*, the epistemological issue of coming to terms with the totally Other both shapes the unfolding of the plot and regulates the reading process as the implied reader is guided into following the intellectual, emotional, and moral odysseys of the principal characters, all of whom are stalled by their incapacity to fit the totally unknown into familiar semantic frameworks. The Zone remains an empty signifier, corresponding to nothing in consensus reality; but precisely by virtue of its emptiness, it throws into sharp relief the provisional, unstable nature of this reality, delineating its borders as drawn by science, culture, and common sense and broaching a possibility of change. In questioning all cultural codes, the Zone undermines the structural basis of allegory which rests on their fixedness. It breaks up the cozy circuit of mutual approbation between the reader and the writer in which the process of allegoresis produces textual knowledge that essentially confirms what the reader has already known. Like *Solaris*, the book ends on a deliberately ambiguous note: Red Schuhart's final confrontation with the mysterious Golden Ball may signify either the futility of his search or the fulfillment of his wish for the utopian transformation of reality.

Red's prayer/demand to the Ball which is reputed to have a miraculous power expresses the same desire to wipe clean the slate of history which we have seen at the end of *The Ugly Swans*: "HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED!" (*Piknik na obochine* 152, my translation; *Roadside Picnic* §4:153. Yet here the apocalypse is left, as it were, pending; the book ends with Red's cry for freedom and happiness but there is no answering transformation which, by its very impossibility, marks the limit of human aspiration. The closure of *The Ugly Swans* separates the text from the history it encodes and thus leaves it intact as the master narrative to which the book defers; the open-endedness of *Roadside Picnic* inscribes history's malleability. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, in his article on the Strugatskys' fairy-tale paradigm which he largely conflates with utopia, sees in the ending of the book the restoration of the "utopian form as a trace, if only in the *possibility* that Red's utopian wish may be fulfilled" (23). But it is precisely this lack of final resolution that denotes the dimension of freedom and choice absent from the frankly wish-fulfilling destruction of the old order at the end of *The Ugly Swans*. Fredric Jameson reads in the closing lines of *Roadside Picnic* "the unexpected emergence, as it were, beyond 'the nightmare of History' and from out of the most archaic longings of the human race, of the impossible and inexpressible Utopian impulse here none the less briefly glimpsed" (157). History returns not as a master code but as a dynamic process powered by human desire and action at the moment when it is seemingly being abolished in the confrontation with the alien "something" that lies beyond its boundaries.

The collision of the allegorical and science-fictional modes in the Strugatskys' work is the result of the peculiar conditions under which writers, and especially writers of non-realistic fiction, laboured in the Soviet Union. The poetics of censorship permeates Soviet culture to the extent which, I believe, is largely unappreciated because the political pressure and the writer's need

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ELANA SOMEL

6

either to bow down or to rebel have been taken for granted as purely external factors which might determine the writer's choice of themes or explain his/her silence but have not been seen as productive of generic strategies and structural paradigms.[3] Pressure, of course, deforms; but the literary text is not a passive substance that can be molded into any shape. Censorship supplies the impetus for the recourse to those allegorical techniques of encoding and concealment that allow the writer to speak to his/her audience above the heads of the powers that be. But literary forms are not ideologically neutral; once admitted, allegory takes over and produces its own textual dynamics that carries messages very different from the intended message of the authors: it implies control, compulsion, and the immutability of the given history which is the history of oppression. Even when censorship is no more, allegory is loath to give up its artistic position, returning to the same set of tools that have now achieved the status of a fully-fledged and highly popular generic mode. Sf, on the other hand, opens up the text to multiple interpretations and epistemological uncertainty which undermine allegorical rigidity. It paradoxically achieves a political dimension by placing itself beyond topicality. In the Strugatskys' work the science-fiction paradigm peaks with *Roadside Picnic* and largely peters out afterward, ceding priority to the allegorical poetics of censorship.

NOTES

1. A title in sans-serif type is a literal translation of the Russian title of a book not published in English.

2. See Lem's discussion of *Roadside Picnic* which specifically focuses on the artistic and intellectual challenge of portraying the truly alien intelligence.

3. Censorship has been, of course, a constant concern throughout Russian literary history. In the nineteenth century Alexander Herzen, Saltykov-Schedrin, Chernyshevsky and other men of letters protested the restrictions imposed on freedom of speech by the Tsarist government. In the Soviet period censorship was very much the central fact of cultural life. However, with the possible exception of Herzen, the influence of censorship has been mainly seen as restrictive and mutilating rather than productive.

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ISTVAN CSICSERY-RONAY JR. 7

even in Soviet legislation and in the training of international business negotiators.[5] In literary culture, the connection between socialist realism and the fairy tale is so close that Katerina Clark (pp. 4-7) has proposed a "Master Plot" for the Soviet novel based on modifications of Vladimir Propp's well-known master plot of the fairy tale defined in *The Morphology of the Folktale*. The case of socialist realism demonstrates the extent to which the fairy-tale paradigm has been the privileged literary tool for propaganda. It is well known that the schema of socialist realism proposed by Zhdanov and Gorky was drawn from folkloristic models. When socialist realism was first proclaimed as the official literary manner, at the First Writers Congress in 1934, Gorky demanded that writers should pattern their heroes on those of folklore (Clark: 34).[6]

2.2 The Strugatskys and Technocratic Utopianism in the Early '60s. The Strugatskys began writing within the tradition of the socialist realist quasi-fairy-tale paradigm, which they adapted to represent the ideals of the generation of scientists and engineers whose leading position in Soviet culture had been validated by the success of the Soviet space program and the de-Stalinization of science. It is already clear in their early work that they intended their SF to "personalize" the future. Their goal was to rescue the vision of a socialist utopia from the monumental distance to which Stalin and the Stakhanovite cult of Socialist Man had placed it, and to return it to a human scale. The Strugatskys thus joined their SF to the general trend of the "humanization of Marxism" in the Eastern Europe of the '60s. Their model for this was space exploration, with its romantic associations with adventure and its heroic associations with the ethics of honest scientific method. In the era of space travel, the Strugatskys seemed to say, class struggle would end, the material and the social causes of scarcity would be defeated, and the Earth would be united in a single utopian society, whose life would be given interest and meaning by its perpetual struggle with nature. The history of science would replace the history of class struggle. The conflicts that were to keep the dialectical movement of history alive were to be the ethical and cognitive problems faced by scientists and explorers as they encountered new worlds and new aspects of nature. There would still be choices, but they would no longer be between good and evil; instead, they would be between "the good and the better" (Suvin "Introduction," p. 4; Sinyavski satirizes exactly this phrase in *On Socialist Realism*, p. 50). With the Strugatskys, science thus became the historical vehicle of a new fairy-tale paradigm, which was more realistically motivated than the old one (since the villains are never absolutely evil, nor are the happy endings absolutely happy), but was identical in structure. This modification not only allowed the Strugatskys more artistic freedom to depict psychologically divided characters and ideologically ambiguous situations. It also gave them a powerful theme that expressed the hopes of the new Soviet technocracy in the late '50s—the multitude of scientists, engineers, and scientific students who were accorded new respect by the successes in outer space.

One cannot appreciate the importance of the Strugatskys' work without understanding the role of the Soviet scientific intelligentsia in the post-Stalin

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humanity knows itself. Banev has such strongly divided loyalties—both to the weakness of human beings and to the strength of the slimies—that he remains an outsider in both worlds, with no power to create a world which he would willingly be "inside of."

4.1 *Roadside Picnic*. The themes and techniques of the Strugatskys' fiction I have been discussing culminate in *Roadside Picnic*, one of the most significant works of recent SF. It is a fable of the despair of the '60s' intelligentsia facing the complete destruction of the reform movement, which was betrayed—as the fable has it—not so much by the Brezhnev regime, as by the moral-spiritual conditions which made that regime possible: the inertia of the masses in a world undergoing a convergence that is a bitter parody of the one Sakharov had hoped for in his memorandum of 1968. This is the convergence of Eastern and Western ennui, the fruit of global acquiescence to purely material satisfactions and the abdication of all higher moral purposes—the victory of "realism" over utopian idealism.

The novella tells of the aftermath of a "Visitation" by mysterious extraterrestrials to the imaginary Canadian town of Harmont (along with four other unidentified spots on the globe), where they stayed for a few hours invisible to human beings. Their arrival was attended by several non-fatal cataclysms. When they departed, they left behind a sharply circumscribed area filled with mysterious, and often dangerous, objects and phenomena, and named the "Zone." As the world gradually quarantines the Zone and its incomprehensible reality, the "treasures" of the Visitation are leaked from it and used to create commodities and weapons. The backbone of the story is the ambiguous Pilgrim's Progress of Red Schuhart, an uneducated but fiercely proud and loyal "stalker," who smuggles forbidden objects out of the Zone to sell to underworld fences. Red returns grudgingly to the perilous Zone again and again to support his family, and to escape from the dreary, apathetic life of the social world to the intensity of the Zone. In a desperate attempt to find a miraculous way to reverse the degenerative mutation of his only child (which is an effect of the Visitation), Red ultimately goes on a murderous quest to the heart of the Zone, searching for a Golden Ball that the superstitious stalkers claim will grant one's dearest wishes. When he reaches the Ball, he is forced to think for the first time in his life about his place in the world and the way the world should be. In the end, he can only utter a wish-prayer to the powers he believes lie behind the Ball: "HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED!" (4:153).

Picnic is the Strugatskys' most polyvalent and ambiguous work, but its narrative strategy is quite lucid. The tale systematically dislodges each element of the fairy-tale paradigm from its conventional whole and inverts it. Each moment and function of the tale is alienated from its conventional issue, and as a result the whole fairy-tale form is inverted.

In one of the best commentaries on *Picnic*, Stanislaw Lem contends that the realistic elements of the tale, which make it an admirable "experiment in the philosophy of history," are gradually devoured by elements of the "black fairy tale" (*Microworlds*, p. 275).

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There is no question that among the Strugatskys' works, *Picnic* is the most obviously bound to the fairy tale's universe of discourse, and this relationship is not concealed. Fairy-tale motifs appear explicitly in the narrative itself, almost always in "black" versions. The stalkers are given to identifying the Zone with "Pandora's box" (2:90) and the mysterious artifacts as the treasure of the *1001 Nights* brought by the Visitor-genie (1:35). The Zone is "the hole into the future" (1:37), a place without time (1:30), the path to the other world: "The further into the Zone, the nearer to Heaven," say the stalkers, only half ironically (1:17). These fantastic identifications are easily rationalized in the realistic manner of the tale, for the uneducated stalkers are notoriously superstitious. But there are also episodes that support these identifications without irony. Red's foray into the Zone with the Institute for Extraterrestrial Cultures' research scientist, Kirill Panov, at *Picnic*'s outset is a version of *Hansel and Gretel*. As a sort of zero-degree scientist, Red determines a safe course and the location of a deadly "graviconcentrate" by tossing metal nuts and bolts ahead of the expedition's car. Their vehicle then follows the path laid out on the return trip to the Institute. The Zone itself is depicted as a rationalized version of an enchanted region, where the grass is a black bramble and shadows extend in the wrong direction (1:19, 26). Inside it is the "treasure"—a rare artifact left by the Visitors—in a sinister garage, "guarded" by monsters: in this case, a pool of "witches' jelly" and the mysterious silvery web that causes Kirill's death. The opening foray is repeated in even more overtly fantastic form in Red's climactic quest in chapter 4.

In the novella's design, the deployment of the chapters imitates—still in an inverted, "black" manner—the formal construction of the tale of the three wishes. Each of the three chapters of Red's tale is built around an implicit or explicit wish, each of which boomerangs, leading to a profound loss (thus inverting the fairy tale's conventional ultimate gain). The action of the first chapter begins when Red wishes to dispell Kirill's depression about his inability to understand the Visitors'technology. Red offers to bring Kirill "back to life" by leading him to an extremely rare artifact, known to the stalkers as a "full empty." The tactic works for a short while: "Kirill came back to life before my eyes" (1:9). Once in the Zone, however, Kirill proves to be too clumsy and confident in his institutional insulation to see the dangers of the garage; and Red is too accustomed to working alone to think of protecting Kirill at every step. Kirill accidentally entangles himself in a web of which he never even takes cognizance. Thus Red's wish to revive Kirill leads instead to Kirill's death.

The second chapter's theme is Red's wish to provide his wife and mutant child with a stable middle-class life. After the Institute begins to use robots for exploring the Zone, Red is unable to survive on his lab assistant's pay. He turns to stalking again, but he insists on maintaining some independence from the criminal gangs that smuggle objects out of the Zone to sell to governments and the private laboratories. This wish for independence and dignity also boomerangs when he is betrayed to the police by a former accomplice. To support his family while he is in prison, Red agrees to sell a jar of "witches' jelly"—which even the Institute's research scientists are forbidden to study—to a gang supplying the military-industrial complex.

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10

Because there is no new structure of values to accompany the Visitation's objects, nothing prevents them from being absorbed by the structure already in place. That assimilation is inevitable...and perversely appropriate. Their traces fit naturally into the web of instrumental reason, commodity production and exchange that dominates the lack-world. In the modern world that Red resents so deeply, it is precisely the desire to use science and technology to create a greater human subject—i.e., a species consciousness overcoming alienation—that is lacking. Like the silvery web that kills Kirill, the Harmont lack-world is a web of objects no longer controlled by human subjects.

Red alone resists this enchantment, until the very end. Until then he considers the Zone's artifacts only as means for creating affective happiness: the "full empty" is for "reviving" Kirill, the swag is for supporting his family, the "witches' jelly" for tiding them over while he is in jail. But by the end, the man who formerly would save the life even of his worst enemy is willing to kill an innocent young man to reach the Golden Ball. This can be interpreted as Red's capitulation to the hopelessness of the world, his enchantment (Salvestroni: 30). But we can also read it as the recognition on Red's part that there are no "pure spirits," especially in a world dominated by objects. Indeed, Red's need to make his wish to the Golden Ball is the ultimate expression of the need to compel the tools to serve the deepest human desires, "the wishes that, if they're not granted, it's all over for you" (4:132).

One reason why the Visitors are absent is that the Visitation itself is an image of the scientific-technological explosion, a process that has increasingly come to seem "subjectless"—an impersonal, indifferent, objective evolution blindly operating according to its own runaway feedback, autonomous of the human desires that created its conditions. The dangers the extraterrestrial artifacts pose to human society are clearly the same as those posed by the irrational military and commercial use of contemporary terrestrial technology. The demoralization they augment is the demoralization of contemporary societies. Pilman's roadside picnic theory thus refers not so much to the landing of extraterrestrials as to the way humanity in the contemporary world uses its own technology—as if it, too, were an alien species that might wish at some future time to fly from a blasted zone of its own making. The Visitation is the catastrophic intervention of humanity's own image of the future into the present: it is "what we will be like." The Enlightenment's dream of humanity evolving into a fully rational species becomes a grotesque parody in the aftermath of the Visitation. Humanity is, instead, in danger of becoming a fully *rationalized* species. Pilman at one point wonders whether its reason may not ultimately become a destructive trait in the long run of the species' evolution (3:106). In Harmont, as in contemporary civilization increasingly alienated by the technology on which it depends, rationality becomes a grotesquely externalized object capable of dominating and enervating it own subject.

Read in this way, *Picnic* demonstrates the Strugatskys' complete disillusionment with the technocratic utopianism of the *Rainbow* period, and with it the hopes the Soviet scientific intelligentsia entertained about the power of the STR to transform Soviet society. In fact, the Brezhnev regime, fearing

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