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AKSENNOV AND STALINISM: POLITICAL, MORAL, AND LITERARY POWER

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Stalinism has necessarily been a central subject of serious Russian literature since the 1930s. The grotesque nature of Stalinist society has generated memoirs more fantastic than fiction and novels especially rooted in history. Survivors of the experience are unavoidably concerned with the moral problems of resisting and responding to evil, torn between a desire for revenge and the ideal of forgiveness. Aksenov’s *The Burn (Ožog)* must be read in the context of this history and the texts it produced. The burn of the title refers both to Stalinism and to the burn of creativity. By recapitulating his own biography, Aksenov writes a literary-historical confession that traces the effects of Stalinism on the author’s generation from the 1940s to the mid-1970s. In attempting to reconcile his love of Russian culture with his hatred of Russian barbarity, Aksenov sets the novel in dialogue with two authoritative texts: his mother’s memoir of her years in Stalin’s camps provides the focus of the moral dimension of *The Burn*, while Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, probably the single greatest work of art produced in response to Stalinism, is *The Burn’s* stylistic parent. An analysis of that dialogue is the focus of this paper.

In defining his personal relationship to the history and literature of his time, Aksenov also incorporates his own development as a writer. In *The Burn* he refers explicitly to *A Ticket to the Stars (Zvezdnyj bilet)*, *Surplussed Barrelware (Zatovarennaja bočkotara)*, “The Steel Bird” (“Stal’naja ptica”), and “The Heron” (“Caplja”), and indirectly to at least “Wish You Were Here” (“Žal’, čto vas ne bylo s nami”), “The Victory” (“Pobeda”), and
“Rendezvous” ("Randevu"). A brief review of Aksenov’s biography and of the themes, motifs, and structures that recur in *The Burn* will therefore be useful.

1. **History: Aksenov’s Biography.** Aksenov was born 20 August 1932 in Kazan’. His mother, Evgenija Ginzburg, taught history at Kazan’ University; his father, Pavel Aksenov, was an important Communist Party official. His parents were arrested in 1937, when he was four years old. His mother served a ten-year sentence and then settled in exile in Magadan, Siberia, with her second husband, Anton Val’ter, a prisoner who worked as a doctor. There Aksenov rejoined his mother when he was seventeen, finished high school in 1950, and, because his parents said “it’s easier for doctors in the camps” (Beseda, 433), enrolled in the First Leningrad Medical Institute, from which he graduated in 1956. He worked briefly as a quarantine doctor in the port of Leningrad, and then was sent as a general practitioner to a village on Lake Onega. There he began to write, publishing two stories in 1959. With the success of his first novella, *Colleagues* (*Kollegi*, 1960), Aksenov and his first wife moved to Moscow, where he soon left work in tuberculosis clinics to become a professional writer (Johnson; Meyer, “Aksenov and Soviet Literature of the 1960s”).

Aksenov’s first works described the personal world of his contemporaries, written in the language they spoke. The thaw of the Xrusčev period allowed his “new” voice to be popular—his rejection of official clichés came at the right moment. But when the thaw ended, he was attacked by conservatives, and on 8 March 1963 he was made to recant publicly at a writers’ meeting by Xrusčev himself. This personal humiliation and the end of liberalization were a turning point for Aksenov. His first “happy” period was over (Dálgard, 6), and his style became increasingly grotesque, outgrowing the limits of the permissible.

In 1965 he wrote “The Steel Bird,” an allegory of the rebirth of Stalinism and of the possibility of popular resistance to it; it was rejected by Soviet publishers and only appeared in the United States in 1977. After the trial of Sinjavskij and Daniel’ (1966) and the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), it became clear that many of the gains the intelligentsia had made under Xrusčev had been lost. “Wish You Were Here” (1969) was the last collection of stories Aksenov published in the USSR. That year he began writing *The Burn* in anger and desperation; he completed it in 1975. In the same year he was a visiting lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles; he managed to publish an account of his California experiences, “Round the Clock Nonstop” (“Kruglie sutki non-stop”), in *Novyj mir* in 1976. But his participation in promoting the unofficial almanac *Metropol’,* which appeared in the United States in 1979 after being rejected by Soviet publishers, in addition to the publication of *The Steel Bird and The Burn* in the West, resulted
in his forced emigration in 1980 (the story is told in Say Cheese! [Skaži izjum!]). Since settling in Washington, D.C., Aksenov has published collections of plays and stories, including the recent “Svijažsk” (1981), which summarizes the themes of his early stories and reveals their hidden religious basis (Meyer, “Basketball”). Three novels have also appeared: The Burn (1980), The Island of Crimea (Ostrov Krym, 1981), and Say Cheese! (1985).

2. Literature: Aksenov’s Literary Development. Aksenov’s early works include four novellas and over a dozen stories. His first two stories and Colleagues concern young doctors like himself. Aksenov says he “armored” (broniroval) Colleagues from the start with the intention of publishing it (Beseda, 434), but the novella nonetheless reflects his own ideas. Certainly the conflict between cynicism and optimism is resolved firmly in favor of the latter in a self-consciously socialist-realistic way, but the theme of tension between the desire to belong to the collective and the need for personal fulfillment is constant in Aksenov’s work. In Colleagues this theme involves choosing a career as a writer in Moscow over self-sacrifice as a village doctor. After all, Aksenov greatly admired his stepfather, who selflessly cared for prisoners and their jailers in Siberia, as made clear in The Burn. Besides making his stories officially acceptable, Aksenov’s endorsement of the values of social service fulfills one set of his ideals by proxy, while allowing him to pursue the rewards of professional writing. This early model illuminates the degree to which The Burn is an expiatory novel that affirms a love for Mother Russia even while accepting the necessity of leaving her for the West.

The second novella, A Ticket to the Stars (1962), describes four teenagers who run off to Estonia to find themselves. The stars in the title are emblematic of an ideal—Dimka’s quest for meaning in life is a process of learning to distinguish between the ersatz painted stars on the ceiling of a barroom and his true star. This pattern is found in all of Aksenov’s work: in the romantic tradition, a spiritual ideal is represented by the stars, the moon, an art, a science, even by sport, and is contrasted to its desecration (Meyer, “Basketball”).

In Aksenov’s third novella, Oranges from Morocco (Apel’siny iz Marokko, 1963), the ideal is represented by mundane bright spheres that carry associations of distant freedom. The quest for the exotic oranges is set in Siberia. The bleak Siberian landscape of volcanic hills, which in The Burn are associated with Stalin’s camps, is transformed into a happy realm of play. Aksenov exercises his own freedom stylistically, scrambling chronology and a variety of first-person narratives that explicitly reject official language.

It’s Time, My Friend, It’s Time (Pora, moj drug, pora, 1964) is close to The Burn in structure. A moral quest in three parts, the novella describes the ambivalence of twenty-five-year-old Valja Marvič. Like all of Aksenov’s
semi-autobiographical characters, he alternates between comfortable, passive conformity and the more demanding active role that challenges that conformity. Valja insists on his identity with the worker Serega in order to justify becoming a writer-intelligent. The ideal dimension of this role is represented by Puškin (joined in The Burn by Gogol', Mandel'štam, and Bulgakov); its pitfalls are parodied in the figure of a slick professional writer. The novella's title, taken from Puškin’s poem, emphasizes the ideal of freedom represented in It's Time by a fantastic character from Estonia who dies racing off on a motorcycle for champagne (compare Sanja Guršenko and his Fiat in Rome of The Burn). Freedom is always associated with foreignness. The novella's villain is a bully, who beats up Valja and humiliates him in an explicitly sexual way, hitting him “in a place that’s not talked about” (the Čepcov role in The Burn). Valja deliberates about the morality of his response to Oleg: “I swore to myself I’d forget about that magnificent feeling called hate, biological hate, holy hate” (65-66). This question becomes the central moral problem of The Burn. In both works, the solution is suspended at the end in a series of disembodied dialogues with characters living and dead. In The Burn all these elements are considered in socio-historical terms in relation to political powerlessness; in the early novellas they are treated psychologically, but the pattern of validating literary creation as a way to resolve conflict recurs, as we will see below.

While the novellas are sociologically oriented, Aksenov's stories were conceived as a continuation of the tradition of Russian prose interrupted in the 1920s. The stories combine realism with the avant-garde, seen by Aksenov as a continuation of Gogol’s fantastic tales (Aksenov, “Interview”). This accounts for the greater sophistication of stories written as early as 1961 (e.g., “Halfway to the Moon”), whose thematics persist throughout Aksenov's work. The ideal realm, here represented by a “beautiful lady,” is at odds with Soviet pošlost'; the hero mistakes a “Neznakomka” for his muse-beloved, as in Gogol’s “Nevskij Prospekt,” but disillusionment brings about the hero’s metamorphosis. The worker falls in love with a stylish Moscow stewardess, which opens him to spiritual existence. After 1963, the stories became less realistic, increasingly emphasizing the degradation of Russian culture. “The Victory” was able to appear in Junost' (1965) because it presents the intelligentsia’s struggle metaphorically and apparently ambiguously (Zholkovsky). A passive, shy grandmaster of chess is incapable of refusing to play with a thuggish stranger, and “loses” though he has put his opponent in checkmate. The grandmaster wears simple ties that bear the hidden label “House of Dior”; to him “this small secret had always been a source of comfort and warmth” (Eng. trans., 191). The ineffectuality of this “secret” in securing the grandmaster’s victory suggests the irrelevance of European tastes and ideals, as well as the grandmaster's cowardice in hiding them. His cultural and spiritual life may be superior to
the aggressiveness of G.O. (the initials may stand for Glavnaja opasnost—the main danger), but the grandmaster knows he will lose the game; his values are impotent on the plane of reality, a recurring dilemma in Aksenov's work. At the end the story shifts to the fantastic as the grandmaster engraves one of a store of gold medals prepared for such inevitable occasions in order to commemorate G.O.'s victory; his defeat is made acceptable from the distance of the artistic dimension.

In Surplussed Barrelware (1968), as in Oranges, an array of social types journey toward an ideal, here explicitly identified as the Good Man. Two characters dream independently of him, an idea used almost allegorically, as in The Burn. But while Oranges was optimistic, here bureaucrats reject the sublimated religious love for the barrelware that unites the questers (Aksenov, "Interview"). In The Burn the questers themselves conspire with the bureaucrats in degrading their ideals.

The Burn was begun with no idea of publication in the Soviet Union, but Aksenov used its central ideas in the novella Rendezvous (1971). In Ljova Malaxitov, the scholar, poet, sportsman, film producer, and jazz musician, Aksenov paints a satirical portrait of the Moscow intelligentsia, removing the thematics of Stalinism in order to produce a publishable variant of material from The Burn.

3. Synthesis: The Burn. Book 1, "The Men's Club," describes the debauched state of the intelligentsia in the late 1960s. Malaxitov's professions are distributed to five characters, who represent the cream of the arts and sciences: the research biologist Aristarx Kunicer, the saxophonist Samson Sabler, the doctor Gennadij Mal'kol'mov, the sculptor Radius Xvastiščev, the writer Pantelej Pantelej. They share a patronymic—Apollinariević—and a common past, represented by the character Tolja fon Štejnbock. The story of Tolja's life with his mother in Magadan in the late 1940s, which closely resembles Aksenov's, is told in fragments embedded in book 2, "Five in Solitary." Here too we discover the origins of the recurring character Čepcov in the KGB officer who rearrests Tolja's mother. Book 3, "The Victim's Last Adventure," dissolves into a phantasmagoria that merges historical periods and transfers the conflict between the oppressors and the intelligentsia to the imaginative plane, where it is left in suspension. The members of the intelligentsia, although cast as victims, are shown to be as depraved as their oppressors, and hence unwittingly in collusion with them.

Aksenov represents the intelligentsia's problem as a failure to attend to and protect its muse. The literal basis of this central metaphor is established in a Magadan scene: Tolja is unable to rescue a Polish girl, Alisa, from a convoy of prisoners. The pathos of her situation is underscored by the prospect of her rape by prison guards. By the 1960s Alisa reappears as a loose society woman; in book 3 she is also a KGB spy. That is, having
stood by while she was raped, the intelligentsia then takes advantage of her, and she finally betrays them: political sticks and material carrots have reduced them to a state of lazy provincialism and impotent passivity.

The heroes have lost their memory. Throughout book 1 they keep trying to remember their collective past, the tragedy of fon Štejnibok. They have trouble recalling Mandel'štam’s poem, “Sleeplessness, Homer,” and even the poet’s name. Their muse is in such a state that she has trouble reminding them of their literary and historical heritage. One of the guises of the heroes’ muse is Arina Beljakova, the first woman Samsik Sabler makes love to:

Her mission was very important, though somewhat ridiculous for a European girl. For six months since the showing of the movie [The Witch] in the Soviet Union, she had been walking the wet, uneasy streets of this city, where she had once run away from the School for Noble Young Ladies, and would unexpectedly... accost the local Samsiks, the pathetic little offspring of the Stalinist era, lead them away to the crumbling houses of the Silver Age, and teach them to love, appearing to them as an unforgettable image of freedom. (43)1

To provide an image of freedom, the muse must inspire them with the culture of the Silver Age and of Europe. The beautiful French movie actress Marina Vlady, who starred in the French film The Witch, played that role in reality for Aksenov’s generation, since she was married to Vysockij. The character Arina Beljakova suggests Aksenov’s own muse, combining love, medicine, and literature. Her sexual education of Samsik is linked to Tolja’s first sexual experience: in Beljakova’s Silver Age apartment building all the cables and pipes are overheated and shine through the walls; Tolja loses his innocence in “the Crimea,” a manhole full of underground steam pipes where the ex-zeks of Magadan live while waiting for transportation out of Siberia. Both scenes of initiation are followed by KGB raids: becoming a man involves recognizing and remembering the reality of political oppression.

Contemporary images of freedom are to be found in Western films showing a world in which the sense of ambivalence and inadequacy plaguing Aksenov’s generation has no basis. In the late 1940s in Magadan, Tolja sees Stagecoach seven times. The Ringo Kid, who eliminates two Apaches at a gallop, is the perfect teen-age image of bravery against all odds. But Tolja’s identification with him is useless in real life—he can only fantasize rescuing Alisa from the convoy or his friend Sanja from Čepcov’s brutal interrogation. The latter fantasy is imagined in English, because it is unthinkable within the Russian context. The Magadan cinema highlights Tolja’s confusion: since he wants to be a normal Soviet schoolboy, he is ashamed of his parents, who are “enemies of the people,” but he reveres his mother and Martin, a Volga German and a practicing Catholic. Stagecoach provides an escape to a mythical America. In the 1960s it is replaced by European films with “Brigitte and Claudia Cardinale and Sophia Loren and that fat Anita and Monica the intellectual and Julia-keep-your-hands-off” (45).
Aksenov conveys the spirit of the 1960s, when Russia opened up to the West, by studding the text with Marlboro cigarettes, Danish beer, names associated with American jazz (Thelonius Monk, Willis Conover), Greenwich Village, Soviet copies of American baseball shoes, a “shabby little jacket from Liberty’s,” even Yul Brynner’s bald head. The names of Western cities appear throughout—Paris, London, Rome, San Diego, Pisa, Oxford—to collapse the imaginative distance, while highlighting the political one, between them and Moscow:

No friends the truth is dearer to us
What’s more the door we long for is so near
To walk along Picadilly for a few bars
to turn onto the Nevskij through the Arc de Triomphe
swim across the wall and jump over the Spree
then to the Nikitskij Gate through Rockefeller Center. (216)

But the meaning of the West for them is lost, as its objects become empty status symbols and mere luxuries. The writer Pantelej walks off with the liquor from a party at the Brazilian embassy, where he finds:

Gordon’s Gin and Cinzano Dry and Queen Anne and Armagnac and Mumm and Campari and Remy Martin and Ballantine’s and Smirnoff and Benedictine surrounded by a guard of Schweppes and Coca-Cola. (61)

That this sense of freedom is an illusion becomes clear when Pantelej is summoned to the chief censor (the “High Priest”): the latter surreptitiously smokes a Kent, while, like the grandmaster in “Victory,” Pantelej wears his Oxford tie and a California button that says “Fuck Censorship!” pinned to the lining of his jacket. The Western objects lead to the novel’s central problem—the intelligentsia’s failure to resist repression.

4. Aksenov’s dialogue with Ginzburg’s memoirs: Responses to Stalinism. The history of the confrontation between the generation of the 1960s and Stalinism in The Burn begins with Tolja’s first encounter with Čepcov. The scene is based on Aksenov’s own experience, as recounted by his mother in part 2 of her memoirs. The connection is emphasized by the closeness of the name Čepcov to that of Čencov of the memoir (Lowe). Just as the novel’s social analysis depends on our knowledge of Russian history, the power of Aksenov’s concretization of the traumatic burn in Tolja’s experience relies on our ability to fill in the details, to relate the character to Aksenov himself. The Burn, then, is written in dialogue with his mother. Both writers try to understand the tragedies of their personal lives in the context of Russian history, and consider how to respond: should one, can one, forgive? Mother and son respond differently both stylistically and ethically.
A. Style. The problem of the relationship of reality to fiction is addressed by the use of the motif of the fairy tale. Ginzburg contrasts the surreal horror of the real world of Stalin's camps to the purity of children's fantasy. When working at the Magadan kindergarten, she staged "Puss in Boots" and "The Seven Little Kids." The script for the first was confiscated at the time of her arrest as potentially subversive material. The broadcast of the second cost her her job—an ex-zek cannot be given public prominence. The tragic irony of the confusion between the two disparate worlds shows her real life to be more fantastic than fairy tales, while the private, innocent domain of children's stories is fraught with political perils. Ginzburg was one of the first to recognize Stalin (whom she calls "the Georgian dragon") in Kornej Čukovskij's children's tale "The Cockroach" ("Tarakanišče"); as a result of mentioning this at home, she was denounced, fired from her job, and threatened with a third arrest (341-44).

Ginzburg, like Tolja, goes to the Magadan cinema, but with opposite emotions. Fresh from prison camp, she is taken to "a quite incomprehensible film about spies" (205). After ten years in camp with all sorts of alleged "spies," the film about fictional spies seems simply silly. A real spy later denounces her. Awaiting arrest, she goes to the cinema—"It's perfect peace of mind for at least two hours" (351). The fantasy world of the film can distract from all-too-dramatic reality, but there can be no confusion between which is which.

Ginzburg's husband Anton, the model for Martin in The Burn, was a practicing Catholic. The night before he is to report for rearrest, they go to an Italian film in which a Catholic mass is shown. Anton calls Ginzburg a Hottentot because she has never attended mass, while behind them someone says "Fancy that! How they used to worship God! Just as if he were Stalin!" (354). The inversion of God and Stalin and the word Hottentot in the context of the dragon imagery of Whirlwind casts the camp nightmare as a twenty-year-long pagan blood sacrifice. The Italian film provides the perspective from which to view it, but the film is only a substitution for reality, a reminder of moral values already held. For Ginzburg the freedom presented in the Western film is the possibility of practicing Catholicism. It contrasts strongly with Aksenov's stylistic use of film for carnival effects under the more general rubric of freedom.

After decades of exposure to distorting, abstract language, Ginzburg values the direct relationship of word to object as a means to truth. While she uses fairy tales specifically to tell her own tragic Cinderella tale, Aksenov is allegorical. Parallel to her "Georgian dragon" and "Tarakanišče" is Xvastiščev's sculpture of a dinosaur named "Smirenje" (humility, submissiveness). Its victims are the Muse and the young Tolja, betrayed by his older brothers, the creative intelligentsia. Čepcov is a kind of eternal Kaščej Bessmertnyj, who rises from near death, and there is a magical helper,
Sanja. Aksenov replaces Ginzburg’s particular, realistic method with a general, schematic one. Right after a reference to Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, Aksenov quotes the song of the Stalin period, “We were born to turn fairy tales into reality” (176); he has turned reality into a modernist allegory, juxtaposing Bulgakov’s, Stalin’s, Ginzburg’s, and his own “fairy tales” to the history they share.

B. Moral Response. The moral problem of *The Burn*—revenge or acceptance—is focused on Čepcov, and here particularly Aksenov struggles with his mother’s resolution of the issue. Her acceptance of Christian ideals is clear in her treatment of Čencov, as it is of all the evil she describes: forgive them, for they know not what they do. She shows compassion for all and looks for the best in people. Though she mocks Čencov, calling him a knight errant, she is grateful to him when he comforts Vasja:

“It’s not for long. . . . It’s not like ’37. You’ll be seeing in the new year together.” (287)

Taught by all those years of lies, I had not believed him at the time. In retrospect I am grateful to Čepcov for his humane attempt to give us some assurance, and glad for him that his heart had stirred at the sight of my parting from Vasja. (294)

In *The Burn*, Aksenov describes her “hatred” for Čencov (304). In her memoirs, Ginzburg chooses not to harbor her hatred; perhaps this is a deliberate distortion of historical truth, but it is made in the name of what she considers to be a higher moral truth. For Aksenov, Čepcov personifies the banality of evil. He appears in various disguises—a spy-cloakroom attendant at Kunicer’s institute; at the Hotel National; as Theodorus, a mercenary soldier in Africa; as a nurse in a sobering-up station; in book 3 as a face on a television screen; finally as a “cheerful, friendly old janitor” in a “Chinese museum” on the moon, no longer a man but a “philosophical construct” (525). His epithet is his “two hot greedy and mocking eyes like ripe cherries” (298), or other little berries—cranberries, black cherries—by association with Jagoda, the chairman of the NKVD until he was shot in 1937, and Berija (note Sergeant Berija Jagodović Gribočujev of the cloakroom guard at Pantelej’s recantation [122]).

The focus of Aksenov’s characterization of Čepcov is his sadomasochistic sexuality, which is linked to the emasculation of his victims. When Čepcov comes to arrest Tolja’s mother, he sexually humiliates Tolja, kicking aside the screen that hides his bed to expose his masturbatory activity (303). Tolja imagines Čepcov undressed: “A huge figure of a man with resilient buttocks, a hairy, protruding stomach, a heavy pendulous penis like that of a dominant male in a herd of seals, a wrinkled old killer” (302). The description is repeated in a flashback of this scene, thereby explicitly connecting sexual and political impotence: “Weakness, the fear of helplessness . . .
you’re in the hands of the *apparat*, in the huge, inhuman, subterranean grip of the state!” (385). As Čepcov leaves with Tolja’s mother, Tolja thinks “at any second he may go for you, this bull, and will start to maul you and push you around as though you were a woman!” (304). The oppressors are all marked as sexually perverse: when the High Priest interviews Pantelej, they show each other their tattoos. The High Priest reveals the same “little pendant of wrinkled skin” (162) as Čepcov, and he ends his striptease panting. Čepcov’s Magadan superior enjoys whipping his daughter’s buttocks; twenty years later in Moscow Čepcov rapes his stepdaughter in fury, when he realizes she’s typing dissident literature given her by her lover: sexual sadism and ideological persecution are linked. Interrogating prisoners (pincers to the testicles) brings Čepcov to the verge of orgasm (83), and he enjoys his own pain while wrestling with a fellow spy-cloakroom attendant (95).

The perversion of normal instincts by the oppressors and their victims motivates the abundantly described sexual debauchery with which Aksenov enjoys characterizing the intelligentsia. Their humiliation is shown as a loss of manhood and of innocence, from which they escape into alcohol and promiscuous sex. Their debauchery is continuous with that of their jailers. At the beginning of *The Burn* Kunicer makes sexual use of a seventeen-year-old (like the Polish Alisa) lab assistant, Inna. The name of the stepdaughter Čepcov rapes is Nina. Aksenov connects the two acts: “Inna! he wanted to shout after her. Nina, Marina, or whatever your name is” (19). Afterwards Kunicer is irritated by Inna’s nakedness, just as Nina is disgusted by her stepfather’s. But Inna is in league with Čepcov in his incarnation as cloakroom attendant at Kunicer’s institute; she reports to him after leaving Kunicer’s office. The victims and their jailers are intertwined; in Inna they coexist. The compassion of Ginzburg’s memoirs extends to her jailers; the revulsion in Aksenov’s novel extends to the jailed.

Outside the amphisbaena of victims and victimizers, Aksenov posits an alternative, a “third model,” as it is called by its inventor, Sanja Gurčenko. In the course of *The Burn* Sanja evolves from Tolja’s Magadan adventure-hero into a more universal ideal figure. The moral counterpart to the aesthetic muses, Sanja represents the Judeo-Christian tradition alluded to throughout the novel. As a teen-ager, Tolja had admired Sanja as a real-life Ringo Kid, daring and independent, and had therefore been surprised that Sanja accepted Martin’s Catholicism, since Tolja thought the two realms mutually contradictory. Pantelej meets Sanja twenty years later in Rome, where Sanja is a Jesuit priest, combining in adult form the same duality. For Aksenov, he represents both the ideals Aksenov and his mother learned from Anton Val’ter and the sportsman Aksenov continues to associate with the “healthy” Soviet life:
He looked more like a professional ice-hockey player than a priest. Under his black cassock, topped by a clerical collar, one could sense a lean, trained, athletic body. . . . What was extraordinary was the fact that there was an elusive something in his looks that was definitely Soviet.  

“He could have played a part in a cowboy movie, that priest” (264), says Pantelej of him. Pantelej and Gurčenko drink together and cruise around Rome in the priest’s Fiat. All the elements of Aksenov’s ideal world are combined: the La Dolce Vita aspect of Italy (260) is reconciled with both the Vatican spiritual and ancient Roman physical aspects. Pantelej says, “That night was a very special night in my life, a night like a beacon. After such a night you could go into the wastes of Siberia, you could even go to prison” (264). The strong religious sense that enabled Martin to survive the camps and maintain his extraordinary generosity even toward his own jailers was difficult for Tolja to accept as a teen-ager; it seemed weak, passive, shameful from the “healthy” Soviet perspective. Here Aksenov has his cake and eats it too: La Dolce Vita and macho pride plus purity of spirit. Aksenov suggests that this is not only a personal ideal, but a model for his generation. Pantelej tells a secretary of the Writers’ Union about meeting Sanja, and the secretary turns out to have had almost the same experience. “Perhaps, old man, you and I both dreamed this?” (268). Like the characters in Barrelware, the two men dream independently of the Good Man, thereby confirming his objective existence.

In response to Pantelej’s questions about God, Gurčenko presents the idea of a third model, which he defines as follows:

Sometimes man comes close to it in moments of creativity—in music, in poetry, in mathematics—but he only just comes close, he only senses its presence. . . . It is impossible to understand. . . . The inexplicable—that is the third model. . . . The higher emotions . . . are inexplicable, fantastic, and it is with them that the precepts of Christianity are concerned. Christianity is like a breakthrough into space, that most courageous and far-reaching spurt toward the third model. Christianity, being itself fantastic, relies on fantastic emotions and proves the existence of the fantastic.  

Applying this view to life, Gurčenko concludes:

It is not so much our actions that are important and meaningful—since no matter what we may do, such actions are neither small nor great—as the spiritual meaning of our actions; in other words, the quality that belongs to the realm of the fantastic, that is what is capable of breaking through toward the “third model,” into the truly real world.  

Aksenov applies Gurčenko’s third model within The Burn to determine how to respond to Stalin’s crimes, how to forgive oneself for failing to protect one’s loved ones, how to accept one’s own impotence. Martin, preaching forgiveness, reads Tolja the Passion according to Saint Matthew. Tolja is torn between “the avenging Ringo Kid and the all-forgiving Christ”
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(365). He cannot accept the ideal of forgiveness: projecting his sense of sexual humiliation onto Christ, he imagines Christ on the cross without a loincloth, mocked for his nakedness. The same drama is enacted in a previous scene at the Yalta sobering-up station by Dr. Mal'kol'mov, who feels rage at "this Stalinist cannibal" Čepcov and prays for forgiveness: "You must know, oh Lord, that I don't have the strength to show pity for a man like this!" (198). Later Dr. Mal'kol'mov treats Čepcov, who is on the verge of death. First he thinks, "Your two hands are saving the life of a sadist; they're resuscitating a criminal." But Mal'kol'mov is a doctor, and so he answers himself, "Your hands are incapable of exacting revenge" (285). Kunicer, the dissident scientist, acts similarly. When Nina asks if he is going to kill Čepcov for raping her, he replies, "I am a Christian" (389).

The contradiction between the morality of forgiveness and avenging the innocent is resolved by means of the "Third Model." Fiction itself is the realm of the inexplicable, the fantastic; beyond action, it is a means of breaking through toward the "truly real world." In the novel Aksenov does wreak revenge on Čepcov. Just as the KGB officer revealed Tolja's embarrassing private sexual world behind the screens, Aksenov shows Čepcov in all his depravity, panting with pleasure as he tortures and rapes. At the same time, Mal'kol'mov, the doctor (Martin is a doctor, Aksenov was a doctor), can resuscitate Čepcov with his brilliant discovery, "Lymph-D," a kind of elixir of life and spiritual fluid, the antipode of the shameful semen that flows so conspicuously through The Burn. That is, the creative intelligentsia, as forgiving Christ, can be a life-giver even unto the evil-doer: Aksenov mercilessly exposes the evil, but forgives and restores the life of the evil human being. Before doing so, he torments Čepcov a little by having him recognize his own "crimes." Agonized by the conflict between his duty to turn in his stepdaughter for typing samizdat manuscripts and his love for her, Čepcov renounces the actions of his lifetime and rams his head repeatedly against a radiator. It is not for one man to judge another; Aksenov has Čepcov pass judgment on himself. In this way Aksenov entertains the whole range of variations of hate, contempt, revenge, and Christian forgiveness, all of which he sees as a fitting response to Stalin's evil. In this imaginative process, he expiates his guilt at being unable to take action in daily life, while taking action here according to Gurčenko's philosophy.

5. Bulgakov and The Burn. In opposing political power through spiritual authority, Aksenov follows the Russian romantic literary tradition from Puškin to Solženicyn, in which literary artists are the earthly representatives of Christian values. Aksenov's faith that literature can affect political life is supported by the section "The Evolution of a Type Discovered by Zoščenko" (331-33). Ždanov is the next evolutionary stage of the type described by Zoščenko's boors and bureaucrats and Bulgakov's dog-turned-man Šarik
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(Heart of a Dog). Aksenov identifies the chief conflict of his time as "Zoščenko vs. Ždanov." The evolution of his generation away from believing in Ždanov he attributes to the effects of the author's "sole defensive weapon—Awareness":

It took several years to comprehend the true force of that weapon. Then we admitted that it was this world, the world of calm little loners, the world of poets, that was the true world, and that the other one . . . was false, ephemeral, and already reeking of decay. (332-33)

Čepcov evolves out of Zoščenko's bathhouse attendant; Bulgakov's vision inspires The Burn at a deeper level. The importance of The Master and Margarita for Aksenov's generation as a whole and for The Burn has been recognized (Weil and Genis, Mal'cev), and its stylistic presence noted: "the evaluative ironic suffixes and particles in the speech of the neutral narrator . . ., the free handling of time and space, the system of doubles, the active inclusion of the fantastic in the weave of events" (Weil and Genis, 79).

In fact, the very structure of The Burn is based on Bulgakov's novel, both the comic, fantastic dimension and the religious, eternal one. The former is signalled in the text: the fivesome, temporarily represented by a narrational "I," flies to the Crimea with two friends and participates in a series of festive adventures, which culminate in Yalta with a masked ball in the Café Oreanda. Through these scenes float pink ten-ruble notes, "like the money that cascaded onto the theater audience in Bulgakov's novel Master and Margarita" (176) (as the translator renders "takaja pošla bulgakovščina" of the original [152]). The Yalta scenes deliberately evoke Master and Margarita: the barmaid calls the KGB to report the bizarre barefoot trio, but "Alas, the vigilant lady was unable to finish her report" (167). But where Bulgakov would have this culminate in the retribution exacted by Azazello and company, in The Burn the trio is co-opted: the barmaid decides they are KGB agents too and feeds them Intourist goodies. The episodes culminate in a ball scene that parodies universal brotherhood: flower-children win over a major general, who faints at the "damned hallucination" of floating rubles. Everyone ends up at the police station,

the scene of a happening more bizarre than anything you might see in a foreign film. . . . The duty room was invaded by an incredible rabble of people, . . . two men in masks, . . . and a dubious-looking character of clearly foreign origin even though he had a Komsomol badge pinned directly onto the skin of his bare chest. (189)

The dubious foreigner is Patrick Thunderjet, a professor from Oxford. Introduced at the beginning of the book as a friend of the five heroes, he is contrasted to Bulgakov's Satan, who appears suddenly in Stalin's Moscow. But Thunderjet has none of the metaphysical powers of the "foreign professor." There is no identifiable agent of the floating rubles in Yalta; though Thunderjet and friends "remind everyone present of the proximity of
frightening infernal forces” (185), his name refers only to his jet-setting, and no cosmic clap of thunder ever occurs. In Master and Margarita evil deeds are discrete, identifiable, however various in magnitude; in The Burn the boundaries between good and evil are diffuse: Gogolian pošlost‘ reigns with little hope of apocalypse. Bulgakov’s heroes are redeemed through love and compassion; in The Burn the redemptive forces are memory (of fon Štejnbock and Russian literature), which has been lost, and faith (in a Catholic Christ), which has emigrated.

The Yalta scenes are based on actual events that Aksenov describes in a review of G. S. Smith’s Songs to Seven Strings:

Once upon a time there was a unique area in the Eastern Crimea near the ancient volcano of Kara Dag, a land of easy-going, unrestrained humor and a certain degree of frivolity, a Mecca for young Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s. During the summer seasons of 1967-68, in the tiny coves and inlets, accessible only to the initiated, the “Kara Dag Free Republic” was established. On a night of shooting stars, August 21, 1968, this first multi-party Russian institution since the Civil War was destroyed by the joint forces of the local militia, Komsomol vigilantes and a unit of border guards. This event remained unnoticed by the civilized world because of a similar operation in Prague.

Like the merriment in Bulgakov’s Variety Theater during Stalin’s purges, the Yalta scenes are a feast during the plague, set against the background of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Like the Kara Dag intellectuals, the revelers at the Café Oreanda end up in the sobering-up station, where Čepcov wields his sadistic power over the forces of love and brotherhood. The Crimean setting bears the closest resemblance to an image of freedom that Aksenov can locate within the USSR, from “Wish You Were Here” to The Island of Crimea. But like the freedom of “Crimean Island,” which ends in a Soviet invasion, the carnival free-for-alls of both the Yalta episodes and the Magadan “Crimea” are cut short by Čepcov’s group arrests.

Master and Margarita and The Burn depict their authors’ contemporary Moscow as fantastic in contrast to a realistically described historical past. Bulgakov’s documentary scenes are based on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, and are interspersed among the fantastic events of Stalin’s Moscow in the 1930s. In The Burn scenes in “documentary black and white,” as Mal’cev put it (405), are set in Stalin’s Magadan of the 1940s, where Martin reads the Gospel according to Saint Matthew to Tolja, and a similar passion is acted out, the crucifixion of Tolja fon Štejnbock (Christ as man) cum Sanja Gurčenko (Christ as spirit). These scenes are interlarded among fantastic events set in Moscow of the 1960s. Bulgakov’s cast is made up of comic caricatures; only the Master and Margarita are depicted realistically. In The Burn the only characters with psychological depth are Tolja and his mother. The mysterious figure of Sanja provides them, through Martin, with the connection to the ideal of the third model; he is the Holy Ghost, Martin is Father, and Tolja, the Son. In the role of Pilate, Čepcov does the
authorities' political dirty work; like Bulgakov's Pilate, he suffers the torments of conscience and is forgiven, consigned to an extraterrestrial space by the author. Like the Master, Tolja is resurrected by a divinely inspired Gospel writer, the author himself, whose autobiography is the point of departure for the novel—both authors, like their heroes, are politically persecuted for their art, and are mirrored within the novels by parodies of Soviet writers, Ivan the Homeless and Pantelej Pantelej.

But who plays the role of Margarita? Bulgakov's heroine functions within the plot line as the Master's faithful lover and the preserver of his manuscript. On the metaphysical level, Bulgakov characterizes his muse by her bravery, constancy, selflessness, and, above all, compassion. These qualities enable her to redeem Frieda, and to resurrect the Master's manuscript, which underscores the theme of the religious dimension of art. The same role is played in The Burn invisibly by Aksenov's mother, Evgenija Ginzburg.

Like Bulgakov, Aksenov explores the problem of evil, and the role of the Word, religious and literary, in combatting it. Bulgakov's novel does so from an eternal perspective lent him by his approaching death. Aksenov's novel, written inside the madhouse, carries the present torment of memory and continuing schizophrenia, almost as if seen through the eyes of Ivan the Homeless. Spirit may win out in God's concept of time, but it suffers in the short term which humans experience. Sanja combines the pure, ideal aspects of religion, sport, and a free-wheeling Western style of life, but he has also been rendered impotent by forced labor in the uranium mines. As Aksenov once said, "Manuscripts don't burn, but they sure rot well" ("Beseda"). Aksenov's art has been burned by the Čepcovs of this world, who always get the oranges, the stars, the basketballs, the gold medals, and, in The Burn, a place on the moon, if only as a philosophical construct.

NOTES

1 References are to the English translation by Michael Glenny.

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** For an extensive bibliography of Aksenov’s pre-1973 publications see Meyer, “Bibliography.”