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Re-thinking Home

Thomas Venclova, a well-known Lithuanian poet and Soviet dissident, said that in the modern world, “nationality is not a matter of origin but a matter of free choice.”

The winter of 1991 is so memorable for me. It was my last year of high school. We were confusedly preparing for our exams. I'd told my parents I wanted to apply to study journalism. My mother said the profession had no future. In the end she was right, and I became a chemist. 1991 remains so vivid, not because Nelson Mandela ended the violence in South Africa, or because Soviet forces stormed Vilnius to stop Lithuanian independence, or because the US started Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, but because the girl I secretly loved, my classmate Sveta Fink, received her repatriation papers, and would be returning to Germany.

I later learned my classmate Mariza was Jewish, and would be departing for Israel after our exams. My best friend, Sasha, would also be leaving for Munich that year. Denis and Pavel decided to return to two different Russian cities, whose names I've forgotten, because I never saw them again. It's like the feeling when scout camp comes to an end: your friends have all gone somewhere, and you've been left behind, to wander through corridors and collect their traces — towels and a pile of books, amongst which one is your birthday present. It is 1991. The USSR, the political project that defined your life, is over. The more people leave, the more difficult it becomes for those who have been left behind. You have to be German, Jewish, Polish, Kazakh, Russian, and at the same time keep all the books they left you. And so you travel. You have your Nomadic mentality, you rove from one point to another, searching for a new home—and finally, start writing.

Tatyana Rybalcheko, a Tomsky University researcher, writes about this problem in the Russian context: “With the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the realization of national identity becomes an existential choice, and no less, a demand for mass consciousness.”¹

I agree with James Baldin, who said that authors are always trying to write the same book, and find new ways to express the same things. The search for identity is the major theme of my work. I use what instruments I have at my disposal: voice, intuition, experience, and attention to detail. But I'm no researcher. It's obvious for me that art must be controversial, and should be free to assume whatever form it likes.

A good example of such art is Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. You read this book for pleasure, while also knowing that it was banned for 50 years from the Soviet Union because it criticized the Soviet regime.

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1. Рыбальченко Т. Л., *Национальное как тайна архаического и как мистификация в прозе Владислава Отрошенко*, [в:] Проблемы национальной идентичности в русской литературе XX века: Коллективная монография по материалам 2-й Интернет-конференции „Русскоязычная литература в контексте славянской культуры: проблемы национальной идентичности” (30 октября – 10 ноября 2009 г.), под ред. ей же, Томск: Издательство Томского университета, 2011, сс. 212-229.
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According to Vassiliy Kisseelev, researcher, since Edward Said and Homi Bhabha's publications, the methodology for examining identities has been revised. Referring to their definition: "The personal identity has a mechanism of referring itself to a collective whole. This is a system of interpretations, a conventional design for which the objective premises, such as commonality of language, territory, economic order, and external institutions, are only grounds for a symbol production that does not require mandatory authenticity and easily replaces the actual or desirable imaginary."²

For me, it's a question of different optics.

In *Destination. Road Pastoral*, I focused on my protagonist's struggle to explain his identity to himself amidst Kazakhstan's new realities, and his travels to compensate for his lost home. In my novel *Prazaki*, I think about the pros and cons of a new global reality.

Six years ago, I was in a local market in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. People threw me uncomfortable stares, which one can get in any country. So I ran. I found myself in front of a KFC. The smell was so familiar. I began to wonder if we were all like Colonel Sanders' children in this new reality of globalization.

To end, I'd like to quote the Russian writer Sergei Dovlatov: "I'm a son of an Armenian mother and Jewish father, and have long wondered about what nationality I belong to. In the end I concluded that I am Russian by profession."

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2. Киселев В.С., *Мультикультурализм в литературном измерении: проблемы и перспективы развития в российском литературоведении*, [в:] Проблемы национальной идентичности в русской литературе XX века: Коллективная монография по материалам 2-й Интернет-конференции „Русскоязычная литература в контексте славянской культуры: проблемы национальной идентичности” (30 октября – 10 ноября 2009 г.), под ред. Рыбальченко Т.Л., Томск: Издательство Томского университета, 2011, с. 5-32.