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From Moscow to London and Return: Some Perspectives on Boris Akunin's *Erast Fandorin Series*

The beginnings of crime fiction in Russia date back to the second half of the 19th century. *Detektivy* appeared at roughly the same time as the detective story in England, but very different literary traditions developed in the two countries. Arthur Conan Doyle and then the authors of the Golden Age explored and expanded the classic “whodunit”. The layout of the plot in a detective story envisages a murder, investigated by a sleuth, who’s usually a private individual. The detective gathers evidence and identifies the culprit. The offender is punished, and order is eventually restored.

In Russia crime writing debuted with Fëdor Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment*, published in 1866. The protagonist is a student, Rodion Raskol’nikov, who kills an old pawnbroker and her sister. What motivates the culprit is a strong sense of social justice. Raskol’nikov wants to take from the evil woman what she exploited from people in need, and give it to the poor. The aim to bring justice combines with a dilemma originating from the crime itself: whether it is ethically acceptable to kill an evildoer in the name of good.

In this first *attempt* at crime fiction, Dostoevskii introduces the offender at the beginning of the story; the reader is acquainted with his crime right away, and knows he is the murderer. Through the use of dramatic irony, the author keeps the offender’s identity concealed from the other characters, and sets up an investigation. This functions both as a device to let the student clarify his philosophical position, and his ethical stance *vis-à-vis* the reader, and as means for the police officer in charge, Porfirii Petrovich, to scrutinize them. Porfirii is increasingly convinced of Raskol’nikov’s culpability, but has neither witnesses nor evidence. Rodion eventually confesses his crime to a young woman, Sonia, who has forcedly become a prostitute to support her family. Sentenced to eight years in Siberia, the student redeems himself through both rehabilitation and Sonia’s love.

Dostoevskii outlines, in his archetypal crime novel, some structural narrative features, which have since then characterized the main trends of Russian, Soviet and to a certain extent post-Soviet crime fiction. Unlike the classic English detective story, the focus is not on the “whodunit”, but on the “whydunit”. Solution of the murder case fails to be at the center of the plot, and the mystery dissolves quickly, as the killer is often known from the early stages of the story. The semantics of the investigation lies in the effort to uncover the offender’s motivations, and the social context is crucial in identifying and analyzing them. Thus, the plot’s denouement in a *detektiv* often pictures a confession by the criminal, instead of identification by the investigator. In fact, the detective’s role is to determine how and why evil surfaces in the individual, and the extent to which it harms the State. Hardly is he called to solve an enigma, or defend civil society. This is why sleuths are mainly police officers or members of the institutions, rather than private persons. Cultural collectivism is embedded in the very foundation of Russian society, in which the many unmistakably outweigh the one. The investigator defends the State, threatened by uncontrollable criminals, and not civil society. Punishment is seldom represented. The emphasis is on the rehabilitation of the criminal and his re-integration into society. Any Russian fictional offender knows that pardon only comes from above, from God or the State, and because of this arrest is not a deterrent for criminals, nor is it necessary to exemplify it. Wrongdoers must *regenerate* themselves morally through rehabilitation, and only once they are redeemed, can they be graced with forgiveness from above.¹

¹Anthony Olcott, in his study on the *detektiv*, *Russian Pulp*, argues: “The *detektiv* is a social morality play [...] It is the continuing affirmation of that necessity for the individual to subordinate himself or herself to the larger entity of the state that the genre provides its most illuminating lessons about the way in which Russians understand themselves and their place in the world about them”. He then quotes crime writer Igor’ Vinnichenko: “even *detektivy*...may serve to better the soul”, A. Olcott, *Russian Pulp. The detektiv and the Russian Way of Crime*, Oxford 2001, p. 46. Both the scholar and the author emphasize the moral function of the authorial word, and the social responsibility of the writer, a mainstay of Russian literature.

Consequently, it is not unlikely for crime writers to find in the culprit's suicide an alternative finale for their stories. The awareness that it is not for society to forgive pushes the guilty to take their lives, and avoid earthly verdict.² No punishment is shown, and no order is restored.

Russia has thus produced, in over a century, a corpus of crime scripts that focuses mainly on the story of a crime (and not on its solution), and look for those motivations compelling the evildoer to trespass social boundaries, and violate the law. The ethical nuances of the genre come through in the representation of the investigation as a moral pursuit, and in the emphasis on rehabilitation over punishment. The term *detektiv* translates literally *detective fiction* in Russian, but the use of the two designations defies their common etymology.

Author Boris Akunin appeared on the literary scene in the late 1990's, and has averted this pattern in Russian letters. A very prolific writer, he debuted in 1998 with his most popular series of detective stories, the *Erast Fandorin Series*, which now includes fourteen books.

In this lengthy literary 'project',³ Akunin experiments with various subgenres, from the conspiracy mystery to the spy story, from the hermetic and high-society detective story to the political mystery, but all the plots are inspired by the classical English 'whodunit', and are structural homologues. A murder (or a number of them) is committed, the series' hero, Erast Fandorin, investigates, a culprit is identified and the mystery solved.

Akunin has therefore subverted the conventions of the Russian *detektiv*,⁴ in a way that is customary to the tradition of Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, with a touch of Ian Fleming. In his novels, he engages in a dialogue with the British culture of detective fiction that invests the structural, narrative, and thematic codes of the genre, but chooses, on the whole, selected interlocutors, and goes back to the very origin of the detective novel, and the Golden Age of crime fiction. This targeted dialogue is facilitated by the time frame that the writer has adopted in his *Series*. Akunin's are historical detectives, set in the late 19th-early 20th century and cover a span of nearly four decades, from 1876 to 1914.⁵ Nonetheless, Akunin manages the use of references and allusions to British *topoi* with the cultural consciousness of a writer of the new Millennium, alert to the demands of Russia's popular culture of the turn of the century, and inspired by its long-standing Postmodernist experience. The whole *Fandorin Series* is an elaborated patchwork of hints to and citations from both Russian and foreign literature, from Dostoevskii to Gogol' and Tolstoi, from Dickens to Stevenson and Mishima. The elaboration of literature's classics creates a homey environment for the reader, a pleasant *déjà-vu*. However, Akunin's technique in crafting his inter-textual narratives has a Postmodernist origin.

The Postmodernist experience in Russia had a significant impact on the development of late 20th century literature. Despite the secrecy, in which Postmodernist writers had to work until 1980's, they aimed at renewing the language of literature. Their goal was to 'de-ideologize' the Soviet word, inflated by the hyperboles of propaganda, and take it back to its primeval ductility. The re-conceptualization of language was perceived as an artistic gateway from officialdom. It also had a personal backlash, as language is a tool of self-affirmation. The result was a cultural

² The idea of justice as independent of human will is bonded to the underlying fatalism, of which Russian civilization is imbued. This cultural attitude justifies suicide inasmuch as it denies society any ethical responsibility towards the villains. It simultaneously generates a paradox: in a religious culture, people are in full control of their lives.

³ This is how Akunin himself refers to the *Erast Fandorin Series*. In an interview to Kristina Rotkirch, Akunin admitted: "... This is an amazingly un-Russian phenomenon, beginning with the word 'project'...in Russia literature is something that comes not from the head, but from the heart...As for me, I'd like everything to come from the head, whence the 'project' [...] In '97, when it all started, it sounded rather provocative. First came the conception, the idea, that is, something theoretical, and then this concept began taking on certain theoretical features". In *Contemporary Russian Fiction. Russian Authors interviewed by K. Rotkirch*, Moscow 2008, p. 9. The complete *Series* includes fifteen books. The last one is expected in 2018.

⁴ The *Series* is subtitled *novyi detektiv*, new detective story, or new mystery.

⁵ Interestingly enough, at the very end of the 20th century, Akunin has created a literary project, which bucks the trend of much of the most recent crime fiction, sensitive to recent innovations in investigations techniques and technological advancement (P.D.James, James Peters, just to name two). Technological advancement is a mainstay of the *Erast Fandorin Series* as well, but vintage. In *Murder on the Leviathan* (1878) we learn that Fandorin met with doctor Alphonse Bertillon during his last visit to Paris. "He told me about his anthropometric method. Bertillonage is a very clever theory, very clever". In *The Death of Achilles* we read of "communication by telephone, which was rapidly gaining in popularity among the inhabitants of Moscow, [but] was technically far from perfect". B. Akunin, *Murder on the Leviathan*, translated by A. Bromfield, New York, 2005, p. 29; *The Death of Achilles*, translated by A. Bromfield, New York, 2006, p. 166.

jolt, which downsized Soviet speech, but also questioned the ‘logocentric’ nature of Russian civilization, redefined the relationship between writer, text and reader, and reconsidered the social role of the writer.

The renewal of the literary language occurred through several channels, including an *ad hoc* attitude vis-à-vis the literary text. The Postmodernists deconstructed original texts of diverse typology⁶ by extracting some of their components, and introducing them into different contexts. Thus they changed the semantics of these constituents, and gave them a new life and a new meaning.

Akunin adopts a Postmodernist ‘attitude’ in his work. He *steals* scenes, characters, quotes, from original sources (or introduces allusions to them in his own texts), and deprives them of their context. He then *implants* these elements in his plots, and de facto deprives the material he chooses of its primeval meaning by using it arbitrarily in his prose.⁷

However, Akunin’s goal in using such procedure diverges substantially from the Postmodernists’. He writes in a post-Postmodern and post-Soviet time, when the demands advocated by Soviet writers have waned, as they no longer have any historical justification. Therefore, any presumption about the writer’s intention to create new perspectives for the literary language would be a misrepresentation. For Akunin, literature is a game, and his only aim is to entertain. His target is not language as such, but the reader. By creating texts with the support of old sources, he certainly gives the material he uses a new guise, but this is usually downplayed, ironized and parodied. Playfulness lies at the heart of his narratives.⁸

Akunin’s dauntless intention of experimenting with as many subgenres of detective fiction as possible is part of this postmodernist game, for which the British canon of crime writing represents a motivating factor.

The Russian writer interacts with it at various levels: characterization; interplay of good and evil and plot denouement.

Characterization

The *Series*’ protagonist is Erast Fandorin, a brilliant, educated, handsome man, whom we follow from his early youth up to when he is nearly sixty. Unlike Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, he changes greatly over time. As he points out to his interlocutor, Columbine, in *She Lover of Death*, when he is forty-five: *In my young days, any trivial nonsense was enough to excite me. However, life has tested me so frequently and so cruelly that now it is very hard to get through my defenses.*⁹ The young man *too soft and too delicately raised*¹⁰ turns into a tough and hard-to-break individual. Yet, his developing personality is balanced by a number of unchanged features.

Fandorin embodies the ancient Greek ideal of human perfection, of beauty, virtuousness and courage (*kalokagathia*), to which he adds an uncommon ability to observe and deduct, and promptness to action. As a result,

⁶ One of the key concepts of Postmodernist literary practice envisages the vitiation of any difference between poetic and prosaic language.

⁷ The writer’s *anarchism* is aptly (and ironically) suggested by his pen name, B. Akunin, which reminds of the revolutionary anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin.

⁸ One of the many examples of this is the way Akunin works with the pillars of Russian literature. In a tight dialogue between Raskol’nikov and the sneaky Svidrigailov in Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment*, the latter asks: “Well, wasn’t I right, when I said we were kindred spirits?” F. Dostoevskii, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. by J. Coulson, 1989, p. 245. In the original Russian text Dostoevskii uses an idiom, which has now become part of the everyday language: “We are berries from the same field”. The dialogue happens between two men, who both test the idea of doing evil actions in the name of good, and talk money in relation to Raskol’nikov’s sister, with whom Svidrigailov is in love and whom he has raped. The exchange is philosophically and emotionally charged. In *The State Counsellor* the leader of the revolutionary terrorist Combat Group, Green, goes to see Lobastov, a rich entrepreneur, for money. Lobastov has been helping the revolutionary cause not for the cause itself, but for his own good. Unlike Dostoevskii, Akunin keeps the exchange between the two cold and matter-of-fact. When Lobastov tells his interlocutor: “You and I are berries from the same field. Although we taste rather different”, Akunin plays with the Dostoevskian echo of the idiom, but downplays the reference immediately by offering a parody of it. “What have berries got to do with anything? - Green thought; “why speak in jokes if you can speak seriously?” B. Akunin, *The State Counsellor*, trans. by A. Bromfield, London 2008, p.95.

⁹ B. Akunin, *She Lover of Death*, trans. by A. Bromfield, London 2009, p. 171.

¹⁰ So thinks the head of the Criminal Investigation Division of the Moscow Police, Xavier Grushin, in the first novel of the series. B. Akunin, *The Winter Queen*, trans. by A. Bromfield, New York, 2004, p. 8.

he is a man of the mind as much as a man of deeds. In him the classical Greek hero combines with Sherlock Holmes and James Bond.

The allusion to Holmes is almost cliché, but Akunin tailors it to his own view of the detective-hero.

In *The Winter Queen*, Ivan Brillling, Fandorin's boss at the Moscow police, introduces the young clerk to the deductive method. Brillling has the habit of numerating the observations and deductions he makes: one, two, three. The insisted repetition of this mannerism in the narrative creates a comic effect, and Akunin makes of the bold and self-referential Brillling a parody of Holmes. Moreover, at the end of the narration and with a twist of fate, the author turns him into one of the villains of the story, and kills him. The anarchic Akunin ironically uses Holmes' famous skill only to empower his criminal with it, thus calling into question the function of Brillling's ability, and ultimately, the dialectics of good and evil, otherwise unchallenged in Doyle.

Once the criminal is dead, Akunin endows Fandorin with both the skill and the mannerism. The hero regains the power of deduction, which thus goes back to the *right* side, but he inherits the touch of parody as well.¹¹ In *The State Counsellor*, he is even teased by Moscow Governor's valet, Frol Grigorevich Vedishchev, for his habit. Speaking to the Governor, Vedishchev tells him: [...] *Erast Petrovich will have this Judas sorted out for us in a jiffy. «That is one, that is two, that is three», he'll say – and all done and dusted!*».¹² The ability to observe and deduct is mocked and reduced to a kind of magic.

The dialogue with Doyle is not confined to Fandorin's personality, but clothes, as well, the relationship to his attendant, Masahiro Sibata.

After a period of service as a diplomat in Japan, Fandorin goes back to Moscow in 1882, and takes along a Japanese servant, Masahiro. Masa is an *ex yakuza* boy, whose life was once saved by Fandorin, to whom he remains completely faithful. The Japanese is increasingly involved in his master's undertakings, and often helps him in action. From *The Death of Achilles* on, he becomes a steady presence in the *Series*. Fandorin and Masa create a partnership, along the lines of the more famous Holmes-Watson or even Agatha Christie's Poirot-Hastings. For Doyle and Christie, though, the hierarchical relationship between the two partners functions as a device to inform the reader on how the power of observation and deduction turns into a tool to solve murder cases. In the couple Fandorin-Masa, instead, the intellectual hierarchy is replaced by the social: master-manservant. Masa's role is not to contribute to the solution of mysteries; rather he deals with criminals, when action requires it. In other words, Akunin transforms Holmes' and Poirot's sparring partners into a James Bond in a minor key, who knows the way of the Ninjas, and is often equipped with all sorts of Japanese gadgets to *bang up* criminals. Akunin's attitude is benevolent towards his character, but nonetheless ironic. An artless womanizer, Masa finds himself in the most embarrassing situations with women. He is portrayed as short and stout, with eyes often referred to simply as slits, *working his short legs so briskly that his companion could hardly keep up with him*.¹³ His Russian is basic and spoken with a very heavy and funny Japanese accent.¹⁴ More than a mythical warrior, he seems the caricature of a hero in a Japanese *manga* of the late 1960's, like *Judo Boy*.

Irony is an access key to Fandorin as well. His 'holmesian' features are but one side of his multifaceted personality, in which mind and body equally contribute to hunting criminals. In all of the mysteries, the tale of action balances that of "ratiocination", and both fictions revolve around one single character, Erast Fandorin, who is able to carry out the two tasks skillfully.

¹¹ *Jade Rosary Beads* is a collection of seven short stories and three novellas, each one dedicated to a master of crime fiction. In one of the novellas, *The Prisoner of the Tower, or A Short But Beautiful Journey of Three Wise Men*, Fandorin even meets with Holmes and Dr. Watson in France to chase Arsène Lupin. The work is dedicated to Maurice Leblanc, but it is, implicitly, a tribute to Doyle, as it is narrated from the points of view of Masa, Fandorin's valet and assistant, and Dr. Watson. The novella duplicates the combination Arsène Lupin-Sherlock Holmes ("Herlock Sholmes") that Leblanc adopted in a few short stories written between 1906 and 1910. In *Jade Rosary Beads* a dedication to Doyle precedes *The Scarpea of the Baskakovs*, one of the short stories.

¹² B. Akunin, *The State Counsellor*, p. 19.

¹³ B. Akunin, *She Lover of Death*, p. 184.

¹⁴ In *She Lover of Death*, p. 186, the female co-protagonist of the story, Columbine, looks for Masa's help, one time that his master is not available. Together they discover a corpse, and Masa understands that the man has been murdered. He ventures into an explanation of the evidence in his strongly accented Russian, the awkwardness of which gives the whole paragraph a very amusing tone.

He inquires, tests, gathers evidence to prove his theories, but chases after felons all over Moscow as well, with his Herstal, or disguised to boldly penetrate criminal hideaways, usually equipped with a number of gadgets. With his tall and slim figure (which he keeps fit by performing gymnastics every morning), black hair with silver sideburns, his charming light stammer,¹⁵ he's handsome and attractive. In almost all of the Fandorin mysteries, there is a 'Fandorin girl', who helps the hero with the investigation. Fandorin is a kind of James Bond, paradoxically *ante litteram*, and Ian Fleming's 007 is indeed a source of inspiration for Akunin. But he's just a starting point. The detective's Bond-like talents are only the anticipation of a personality, which Akunin takes to extremes.

The detective practices the martial arts and has as an extensive knowledge of Japan and Japanese culture. He believes in the Hindu doctrine of the reincarnation of souls, and behaves accordingly. Technical innovations interest him greatly and as early as 1900 he sets out *from Moscow to Paris on a three-wheeled motored vehicle...to establish a new distance and speed record for self-propelled carriages*.¹⁶ He is brave, righteous, and lucky: in chance games fortune is always on his side. Besides, he is a talented linguist and knows English, Japanese, French, German, and some Bulgarian and Turkish.

The quantity and quality of his talents is out of the ordinary; he hardly has any weakness,¹⁷ and his physical abilities are almost supernatural. He seems to be undefeatable, just like a superhero. The exaggeration is deliberate and ironic: Akunin's source is James Bond, but he hints at the superheroes of the American comic books of the 1930's and 40's. In a key passage of the *State Counselor*, Fandorin, following the example of the Japanese Ninja warriors, performs a trick called "the Flight of the Hawk", in order to escape from the perpetrators. He jumps into empty space, and lands on the snow, stunned, but whole, *able to get upon all four and stand erect*.¹⁸ The image of Superman in his struggle against archenemy Lex Luthor hovers over this Bond in retro mode.

Thus, Akunin outlines a very charming character,¹⁹ but which the ironic eye of his creator constantly tails, and whose countless assets are always shadowed by the just-enough-hinted-at presence of parody. Holmes and Bond are a start, which the writer artfully manipulates to create a gentle parody thereof.²⁰ Not only. Akunin stretches his comic intent to the solution of the murder cases, in which Fandorin stars as the hero. His dashing physicality and intellectual abilities clash with the uncertainty surrounding the mysteries' denouement. In the *Series'* opening novel, *The Winter Queen*, Fandorin identifies the culprits, but fails to annihilate them completely, with harmful consequences. In *The State Counsellor* the prize for his success is the resignation from the state service. In *The Death of Achilles*, Fandorin detects the gun-for-hire, who then discloses to him the name of the instigator, instants before passing away. In *Coronation* it is the villain who offers the detective the clue to the case at the closure of the story.

¹⁵ The stammer is the consequence of what we would call today post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition from which Fandorin suffers from the day of his unfortunate wedding to Elizaveta von Evert-Kolokol'tseva in 1876. This peculiarity adds to the charm of the Russian detective, and along with his passion for automobiles, is reminiscent of the shortcomings as well as the interests of another famous investigator, Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey.

¹⁶ *She Lover of Death*, p. 225. In the above-mentioned interview with Kristina Rotkirch, Akunin claims that one of the reasons for setting his stories in the late 19th-early 20th century is the technological progress: "It's the period of Art Nouveau, when manual and machine labor come together", p. 13.

¹⁷ Even his numbness to love, after the tragic death of his first wife, turns out to be deceitful. Reading the adventures narrated from the second to the eighth book of the series, we are led to believe that Fandorin cannot really commit to anyone, despite the few temporary relations. However, in *The Diamond Chariot*, during his period in Japan as a Russian diplomat in Yokohama, we learn that he falls in love with a Japanese woman, Midori Tamba. He then meets Elizaveta Altairskaia-Luanten (Klara Lunnaia), with whom he lives from 1911 to roughly 1914. His last companion is Elizaveta Anatol'evna (ca 1919).

¹⁸ B. Akunin, *The State Counsellor*, p. 228.

¹⁹ Akunin calls him Erast, Erasmus, "pleasant" in Greek. His first name is also an allusion to Nikolai Karamzin's short story, *Poor Liza* (1799). The nobleman Erast seduces and abandons a poor peasant girl, Liza (Elizaveta), who then drowns in a pond on the outskirts of Moscow. Erast Petrovich's companions are all named Elizaveta. Fandorin is a Russianized version of the German von Dorn, "thorn" in German. The detective is pleasant, but also a thorn in the side of criminals and authorities.

²⁰ The slightly comic effect is implicit in the German origin of the detective's family name, which has an unusual sound in Russian. The German derivation points to the Western perspective adopted by Akunin in creating his character.

The chasm between the hero's outlandish skills and the transience investing the mysteries of which he is supposed to be the champion add some clumsiness to the character. Fandorin's portrait is paradoxical, and he, ironically, often looks like a failing superhero.

It is this *flaw*, nonetheless, that allows Akunin to elude cliché in characterizing his champion, and it is in this puzzling space that the author succeeds in tethering the manipulation of the British classics to the Russian tradition.

Fandorin is a civil servant, who works as a detective for hire only for some time in his life (1891-1904). He starts as a low ranking official, and eventually becomes a State Counselor Emeritus.

It is clear from the beginning, though, that he has a complex relationship with the central power, and refuses to serve just any master. His motto is: *I serve the cause, not the people*.²¹ Faithful to Russia and to justice, as the political and espionage mysteries he is involved in testify, he refuses any task that might contradict his freedom or his professional deontology or even his moral code.²² Thus, he is a civil servant and a member of the state, but hardly a representative of the establishment. In the dichotomy between the many and the one, he tries to always balance the interests of Russia with the protection of those individuals who are potential victims of crime. The respect for the individual is maximized in him, and to preserve anyone's life is for Fandorin a priority, an obligation to be fulfilled under any circumstances.²³ His materialism pushes him to even oppose the idea of suicide, and works towards preventing it, whenever he can.²⁴

Fandorin is then rooted in the Russian tradition of crime writing, but endowed with the independence, the personal freedom and the respect for the individual, that are prototypical features of investigators in Western crime fiction.²⁵ Akunin's hero owes much to the Russian and the British lines of detectives, but his creator twists both traditions around through the prism of irony and *lurking* parody, and invents a fresh and unique figure, which, in the words of Marcel Berlins, is *impossibly heroic*.²⁶

Interplay of good and evil

Fandorin, a man of firm moral principles, often operates in contexts in which the dichotomy of good and evil, unquestioned in the English classic detective story, is ambiguous. Akunin, repeatedly in his interviews, says that he likes to test his ideas on his characters, and often voices his own beliefs through the villain.²⁷ In his mysteries it is not unlikely to find wrongdoers who are motivated by sensible ideas.

In *The Turkish Gambit*, an espionage mystery set during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, Fandorin's antagonist is a Turkish spy, Anwar-effendi. He's disguised as a French journalist at the Western detachment of the Russian front that fought the war in the Balkans. Akunin manipulates history to plot his mystery around a fictitious telegram sent to the Russian front that should have led to Russia's defeat in the conflict.

Fandorin unmasks the culprit, who does not surrender to the Russians, and fights till the end. He takes hostage a young woman, Varia Suvorova, who is at the front, on the trail of her fiancé, a Russian soldier. The action takes place in a strong room, which Anwar manages to close in order to remain alone with Varia, leaving Fandorin and a few others behind. Akunin uses this suspension in the progression of the plot to let Anwar explain

²¹ The motto is a retelling of Chatskii's "I should be pleased to serve, but worming oneself into one's favor is sickening" (Служить бы рад, прислуживаться тошно), in Aleksandr Griboedov's 1833 famous comedy of manners *Woe from Wit*, act II, scene II.

²² In *The State Counsellor* the new Governor General of Moscow, Prince Simeon Aleksandrovich, who replaced Fandorin's protector prince Dolgorukoi, offers him a position as head police-master of Moscow, which he refuses because of ethical concerns.

²³ An exception to this is the destiny Mr. Sotsky (the Decorator) encounters in the novella *The Decorator*, in *Special Assignments*, trans. by A. Bromfield, New York, 2007, p. 334.

²⁴ Cfr. *She Lover of Death*.

²⁵ In this respect, Fandorin resembles Georges Simenon's Maigret. In my view, though, this is more of a coincidence than an intentional *beau geste* towards Simenon. The two typologies of detective are very different in personality, psychological profile and interaction with the others. Maigret hardly functions as a source for Fandorin.

²⁶ M. Berlins, *The Times*, 10/17/2009, p. 12.

²⁷ Cfr. Tibor Fisher interviews Boris Akunin at the London Book Fair 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlxMl9w_gzs.

his beliefs: *I see salvation not in revolution, but in evolution [...] The forces of reason and tolerance must be helped to prevail...And where do reason and tolerance prevail? [...] I am thinking of those countries, where man learns to respect himself and others a little, not bludgeon others into agreement, but to convince them through argument, to support the weak and tolerate who thinks differently than him. Ah, what promising processes are in train in Western Europe and the USA! I do not idealize them...but they are heading in the right general direction [...] Today, your immense powerful state {i.e. Russia} constitutes the main danger to civilization.*²⁸

Anwar-effendi has a progressive and pro-Western outlook on the future of European civilization, hampered, in his opinion, by a backward Russia. The pro-Western Fandorin - and Akunin with him - would hardly disagree with him. However, the Turkish spy is ready to *deliberately sacrifice the Ottoman state in order to deflect the Russian threat to mankind.*²⁹ Deflecting the threat does not only have cultural and political implications; it has social and moral ones as well: the spy kills a few people to enact his plan. The idea is sensible; the means are unacceptable, and that is why the servant to the cause, Fandorin, chases him.³⁰ But Anwar serves his cause as well and a good one, and Akunin releases him from the humiliation of surrendering to the enemy. In fact, the author dignifies him with the death of a Byronic hero: Anwar shoots himself. Once the peace is signed and the war is over, Fandorin is left with the bitter aftertaste of the defeat. He remarks: *The peace is far too good [...] Europe will not recognize it. Anwar executed his gambit perfectly, and I lost the game.*³¹ The culprit is identified and exits the plot; order is restored, but Akunin blurs the line of moral dualism and turns the well-confined ethical boundaries of the classic detective story into a paradox. The good wins but feels defeated and on the wrong side of history; the bad moves out of the picture, but the author honors his courage and the sensibility of his position, thereby calling into question the dialectics between hero and antihero, and ultimately, between the virtuous and the sinful.

Plot denouement

This moral uncertainty affects the narrative structures of some of the mysteries in the *Series*, and their plotting solutions too. It creates a pattern in which the British and the Russian traditions of crime writing merge to create a world of mystery fiction, which is unusual to both cultural universes.

An example of this is *Murder on the Leviathan*, the most “English” of Akunin’s detective stories. A wealthy English Lord and his servants are killed in Paris, and the statue of the Indian god Shiva along with a shawl, goes missing from his room. A golden badge, left in the Lord’s room, leads the French inspector in charge to the first-class passengers of a steamboat, the Leviathan, about to set sail from Southampton to Calcutta. The inspector gathers the ten passengers missing the badge into a salon on the boat. All of them, of various nationalities, are potential suspects. The Leviathan becomes the setting of the action: the plot develops aboard the ship.

Obvious inter-texts for this mystery are Agatha Christie’s *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *Death on the Nile* and Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*. From them Akunin borrows various components. One is the hermetic plot, which envisages that key events take place within a closed space. A second constituent is the typology of characters: a heterogeneous group of people, of various social lineages, of different nationalities, languages and cultures. The diversity stirs up inter-cultural prejudices, conflicts and misunderstandings. A third element is the number of shared stylistic and thematic details that strengthen the obvious connection between the English novels and the Russian.³² A fourth link between *Murder on the Leviathan*

²⁸ B. Akunin, *The Turkish Gambit*, translated by A. Bromfield, New York 2005, pp. 201-201.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 201-203.

³⁰ Akunin builds a similar character, Green, in *The State Counselor*. Green is a terrorist, and a member of the People’s Will Party, which existed for real in Russia in the years 1879-1883. The Party aimed at obtaining democratic reforms from the tsar, including the convocation of a Constituent Assembly to draft a constitution, the introduction of universal suffrage, and freedom of speech, press and assembly. However, the means they used to achieve their goals were reproachable.

³¹ B. Akunin, *The Turkish Gambit*, p. 209.

³² Marcia Morris has dedicated two seminal essays on the topic, *Canst Thou Draw Leviathan with a Hook? Akunin Collides and Colludes with Collins and Christie*, in “Clues: A Journal of Detection”, 28, 2010; *Wilkie Collins’s Legacies: The Moonstone is Boris Akunin’s Murder on the Leviathan and Children’s Book*, in “Wilkie Collins Journal”, 11, 2011.

and its British precursors is the structural outline of the story. It considers (part of) a crime committed for personal reasons (robbery); a small number of suspects known to the reader; the hero, who is beyond suspicion and successfully investigates the crime; the identification of the offender, and the solution of the mystery; the consequent restoration of the pre-existing order. Akunin chooses this typical English finale in the third-to-last chapter, only to call it off in the following. In fact, the mystery has a two-stage solution.

In the first, Fandorin identifies the perpetrator of the crime(s), a man named Renier, who is then murdered by the police inspector officially investigating the case. The criminal exits the stage, and order is apparently restored. However, this solution is provisional, as we learn that the true mastermind of the crime is, in fact, Renier's wife, the cunning and bloodthirsty Marie Sanfon, a well-known Belgian criminal. In this second and conclusive part, Fandorin fully solves the mystery, but Sanfon demonstrates that there's no evidence against her. She only risks a short prison sentence for the attempted murder at one of the passengers to which the others were witnesses. Fandorin observes: *And extenuating circumstances will be found for that: temporary insanity, shock, the pregnancy [...] It will be absolutely impossible to prove anything else. I assure you, Marie Sanfon will be at liberty again very soon.*³³

In this two-fold ending, the "English" closure is only apparent. Akunin twists it around in the final denouement, where there is no punishment for the offender. The author seems to have opted for a solution in the Russian "style". However, while punishment is secondary to rehabilitation in Russian crime writing, in *Leviathan* Akunin takes it a step further. The culprit escapes punishment and rehabilitation altogether: she's granted liberty. No order is restored, no punishment is given, and no redemption is possible. In such overall rebuff, Akunin denies the victims any sense of justice, the offender any re-integration into society, and the reader the catharsis implicit in the legal recognition of the offender as such. The writer bypasses what would be a traditional English solution to the criminal plot, only to convert an ending *à la russe* into a nihilistic play.

In his journey from Moscow to London and return, Boris Akunin created a new literary space, where entertainment is at the heart of his project. If Russian writers have neglected the idea of the poet-prophet for over a quarter of a century now, Akunin is no exception. The writer is not the critical conscience of a country's culture, nor is the authorial word a revealed truth. Art is a game, and crime fiction engages in it at best. Within the space of a *detektiv*, all narrative, thematic, linguistic, stylistic, and structural devices are intertwined to create a product that does not preach or teach, but merely entertains.

Akunin's playful intent surfaces in his anarchic attitude *vis-à-vis* tradition, both national and foreign. Making the lesson of the Postmodernists his own, Akunin overlooks literary conventions and customs, and uses them as he pleases, adjusting original sources to his own narrative demands. Mindless of the weight of tradition, the Russian writer's sacrilegious manners turn the *sancta sanctorum* of world culture into a universe of experimentation, and a target for the parodist's intentions. Characterization, morality, and plot closures are often mocked, threatened and toppled. High literary tradition is downplayed, ironized and shuffled with popular culture: Dostoevskii and Griboedov wink at Superman and the Japanese *manga*; the homage to 'king' Athur Conan Doyle and 'queen' Agatha Christie turns into a pretext to create an irresistibly charming but equally flawed hero.

In Akunin's literary world, this is not surprising. As his spy Anwar-effendi claims in *The Turkish Gambit*: *Literature is a toy.*³⁴ And with a toy one plays.

³³ B. Akunin, *Murder on the Leviathan*, p. 222.

³⁴ B. Akunin, *The Turkish Gambit*, p. 204.