Interview with Ilya Kukulin about the Trends of the Modern Russian Literature

Ilya Kukulin at Lake Mendota, Wisconsin. Picture by Prof. Irina Shevelenko

Editor's Note: Kukulin is often called one of the best Russian literary critics, but he is also a poet and a scholar. He graduated from Moscow State University with a degree in psychology and obtained a degree of Ph.D. in Literary Theory at the Russian State University for the Humanities, writing a thesis on the works of Daniil Kharms. He is the editor of the online literary journal TextOnly and the book series New Poetry. In 2015, he was awarded the Andrey Bely Prize in a nomination "Scholarship in the Humanities" for his book The Machines of Noisy Time: How Soviet Montage Became the Method of Unofficial Culture (Moscow: 2015). Till the beginning of April, 2016, he served as a Visiting Professor in Russian Language and Literature at Washington and Lee University and kindly agreed to give an interview for Contemporary Russian Literature at UVA. Our conversation took place in a charming Lexington coffee shop on the campus of Washington and Lee. I spoke with Kukulin about the place of Russian literature in the world's culture and about the moral responsibility of modern day Russian writers as well as critics to overcome the legacy of Soviet literature and return to the humanism of the classics. The opinions in this article belong to the interviewee.

"If literature has a social function, it is, perhaps, to show man his optimal parameters, his spiritual maximum. On that score, the metaphysical man of Dostoyevsky's novels is of greater value than (Mr. Kundera's) wounded rationalist, however modern and however common."
Elena Dimov: Ilya, let's start with a traditional question: please tell us a little bit about yourself.

Ilya Kukulin: I was born in 1969, and at the moment I am an Associate Professor at Moscow Research University of Economics, in its School of Cultural Studies. This University's design is reminiscent of a Western style, more precisely, of an American colleges of liberal arts, but with fewer opportunities for choosing a specialization. During this year, I've also worked as a Visiting Professor at Washington and Lee University. Besides that, I work in Moscow as a senior researcher at the School of Humanitarian Studies of the Academy of National Economics and Public Administration. Using an English idiom, I wear many hats: I am simultaneously a literary critic, cultural historian, and social historian, and here I have been teaching Russian language and literature. In Moscow, I also teach modern Russian literature and cultural studies.

ED: What is your opinion on the mission of literature?

IK: I do not think that literature has some incredible special mission. But like any art, its function is to make the world richer and promote the transformation of human consciousness so that we can have more opportunities to experience the world, to perceive and understand each other, and become a little bit different, maybe a little bit better than we are. At the same time, we should not forget that literature is both entertainment and a way of understanding the world, all in one. Besides this, the mission of literature as an art is to bring joy to the world and, similar to catharsis, transform the sadness of which there is so much in the world.

In the modern period, the concept of catharsis becomes suspended because we see increasingly more suffering and discomfort all around us, which we definitely know cannot be solved in the near future. In this situation, the task becomes to help people cope with this disastrous experience, to not let people succumb to the temptation of considering this world unfair and terrible. This is also because there are some people, a lot of people, who promised to move us toward a better future and social order, but turned out to lead people to different nightmares. That is too familiar to the citizens of the former Soviet Union, which I am as well. Literature helps us to live through the painful experience at the present time and to make this experience meaningful and endurable -- rather than postpone it for the future, about which we know nothing.

ED: Would you please explain more on what the task is of a literary critic as a person who undertakes the study of literature and explaining literature, to understand literature. After all, the critique has certain functions, doesn't it?

IK: Regarding the task of literary criticism, it seems to me that there the most important thing is the definition of the word itself, according to Kantian's interpretation of «critique». Criticism is usually associated in our minds with ?criticizing? something. But in fact, the Kantian understanding of critique as a method for explanation of the world defines the function of literary criticism as a whole. The word ?critique? does not mean disapproval or negative judgment, but analysis and making the matter comprehensible and clear. Being comprehended in this sense, literary criticism has its social and ethical aims. Of course, you remember Alexander Pushkin's words that poet has to be judged by the law, which he (today we would add: or she) established for him- or herself.

ED: Ilya, I understand that this is a very broad topic, but can you briefly describe the main trends of modern Russian literature in your understanding? What is happening now in Russian literature?

IK: First of all, let's define the way in which we can speak about contemporary Russian literature. It is important for me that this literature, since its inception, has been and remains European literature. Similar to this, American literature is European in its spirit, though it sounds paradoxical. It means that these literatures belong to the same circle of cultures that are called Western culture. In this sense, Russian literature is part of the same context as French, German or British contemporary literatures. Only in this context we can consider it ? it is not exotic, but has the same trends that are important now for modern Western culture in general.
ED: This is obvious for classic literature, but does it relate to modern Russian literature which, figuratively speaking, seethes? It is all agitated and unsettled.

IK: The contemporary look always discerns the seething, and then what remains? or, to be more precise, what we ourselves cause to remain -- becomes a classic. Innovative Russian literature seems to me to be a field of intense struggle, and though this struggle is invisible and often goes without controversy, there are multiple diverse flows, which can be schematically reduced to two or three.

In the first one, the writers reproduce mutatis mutandis some trends that existed in Soviet literature. The Soviet literature was exotic: it was arranged unlike European literature because it was a large-scale system of social and psychological programming. British researcher Evgeny Dobrenko has written some important books about this feature.

The second aspect of the Soviet literature was the creation of the system, if you will like, of alternative social programs. This is what we can call non-official literature, i.e. the literature that emerged in the Soviet era, was published and went through censorship with some difficulties. This kind of literature offered less support to the officially approved social programs of human transformation and their mobilization but more to the questions of humanism and individualization, the possibility of ethical action and compassion to the private person.

Soviet literature was not uniform, but the idea about literature as an intermediary for ideological and social programs was very important for Soviet literature and was shared both by those who were at the helm of governance in Soviet literature and those who tried to resist. Besides, Soviet literature was based on the idea of progress; this idea was probably gone from modern Russian literature, including the heirs of Soviet literature who left this idea a long time ago.

The second trend was connected to the so called uncensored literature. They were not the authors who wrote something forbidden, but mostly they did not aim their work at passing through Soviet censorship. This meant that they turned on the self-censorship? not automatically, but in case of uncensored literature it was much more probable. It was a literature more diverse and more European in style that allowed itself to be more problematic. Its authors questioned the unity of self, or meaningfulness of language? especially of the Soviet ideological language? It included many elements that could be found in Western counter-culture of the 60s, including American literature and poetry. It happened not because these Russian authors specifically imitated somebody, but most likely because after they left the Soviet paradigm of social programming, they had to reconsider critically the main elements of Russian and especially Soviet cultural canon.

Mass literature is another important trend that exists in modern Russian literature. In Soviet literature, popular culture was not separated into a special segment but pretended to be something unified with the rest of literary field. For example, the considerable part of detective genre in the USSR was presented as some kind of production novels.

Now there is a lot of detective literature, women's prose. Sometimes these works are quite curious, but the most part of this literature stratum is focused on pure entertainment.
Nevertheless, the most recent large-scale experiment in popular literature was at the beginning of the 2000s. There were the works by Boris Akunin (Chkhartishvili), who continued the tradition of the intellectual detective, say, in the tradition of G.K. Chesterton and, at the same time, of Umberto Eco. His novels were aesthetically postmodernist, but they were riveting—especially his early novels—and easy comprehensible.

There are also noticeable the ideas of imperialism in Russian fiction especially science fiction?

ED: Don't you think that the emergence of the idea of imperialism was logical because the traditional Triad (God, Tsar and Nationality) holding the Russian empire disappeared (the doctrine: pravoslaviye - samoderzhaviye - narodnost'- E.D.)? From this Triad, only one element was left - Nationality.

IK: You know, I think that all of this is much more complicated. I agree with you on the major point that the idea of imperialism emerged logically, although it first appeared much earlier. According to our wonderful cultural historian Andrei Zorin, a professor at Oxford University, who particularly analyzed the origin of the so-called Triad?Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality,? the concept of narodnost (?Nationality?) was defined by both the Orthodoxy and autocracy. It meant that the Russian man back in 1833 was defined as one who believed in God and was loyal to the Tsar. And those who did not believe in God or the Tsar presumably were not considered to be Russians. A process of nation-building, which went on in different countries in Europe at that time, was captured in Russia by officials, particularly by imperial statesman and ?political technologist? Count Sergei Uvarov (1785-1855), and worked on building the empire.

Since then, all attempts of independent, society-rooted nation-building in Russia were overturned and blocked. This led to the situation that at every next phase, the imperialist elements acting under the nationalist slogans, became more powerful, and to hateful xenophobia. And now we see the next stage of this process, when, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, social reflection on the roots of this process was forcibly blocked though after the collapse of the British and French empires, their processes of reflection went on quite turbulently.

In Russia, only a few were thinking about this, and these reflections were considered extremely uncomfortable. It was more affordable in the 1990s, because in spite of a difficult situation in the country, the people had much more faith in the future. The condition of triumphant cynicism in Russia these days is more reminiscent of the Soviet Union in the 70s than the 90s, when some people tried to transform their lives, to become more religious or westernized, etc.

ED: I wonder if the rise of postmodernism in Russian literature was a reflection of this nihilism?

IK: Not in the least.

ED: Would you please describe what Russian postmodernism is, very briefly?

IK: There is a fairly widespread illusion among critics and journalists that postmodernism emerged in Russia in the 90s. This is not true. Postmodernist literature appeared in Russia in the 1960s but it remained underground. This concerns literature, but also fine art and other kinds of art. In the 90s all of this was published and therefore gave the impression that postmodernism in Russia emerged at that point in time.

ED: The popular assertion among UVA professors of Russian literature exists that Russian postmodernism is associated mostly with authors such as Pelevin, Ulitskaia etc. How are things in reality?

IK: No, the first Russian postmodernist literary works were Venedikt Erofeev’s Moscow-Petushki and Pushkinskii Dom by Andrei Bitov at the end of the 60s; the roots of Russian postmodernism could be traced back to the works of Daniil Kharms (1905--1942), or to the poems of his friend Alexander Vvedensky (1904--1941), or to radical experimental prose written by Pavel Ulitin (1918--1986) in the 50s, 60s and 70s. His works could be compared, say, with the novels of William S. Burroughs.
Pelevin is a postmodernist, but he is more the heir of the New Age, the spiritual and cultural movement which existed in America during the 1960s. Pelevin mostly draws on the postmodernist methods for his own benefit. Postmodernism assumes that a person is not able to reach the ultimate truth. On the contrary, Pelevin is constantly preaching his interpretation of Buddhism as the final truth. Pelevin is a good writer, but it would be strange to regard him as the foremost representative of Russian postmodernism.

I also think that when speaking about postmodernism, we underestimate poetry, starting with such poets as Viktor Krivulin, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Dmitry Prigov, Mikhail Ayzenberg, Yevgeny Saburov, and ending with contemporary young poets.

From the other side, Yury Davydov (1924?2001), the author of the outstanding historical and surrealist novel Bestseller (2000), was also a postmodernist author, and it would be inaccurate to conceptualize Russian postmodernism only by Pelevin's works or, for example, by Ulitskaia, who is also a good writer. Speaking about the younger artists, we should remember also Denis Osokin who lives in Kazan, and Valery Votrin, who lives in the UK, and many other authors. Denis Osokin's novel Ovsianki (The Yellow-Hammers) became a basis for Osokin's script to Alexey Fedorchenko's film Silent Souls, highly acclaimed by the USA critics. Also the novels by Valery Votrin, Poslednii magog (The Last Magog) and Logoped (Speech Therapist). This literature might provoke discussion, but, to my opinion, these works are socially and aesthetically important.

As a matter of fact, postmodernism is an extremely important movement by modern standards. At its origins are such works as the short story Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius by Borges (1947) and the novel Gravity's Rainbow by American writer Thomas Pynchon (1973). Postmodernism as a cultural movement emerged in the 40s-50s of the 20th century in literature and then blossomed. It raised two very important questions. The first: how can the individual distinguish between the real and the virtual? It is a timely question now; it becomes more urgent at this time when we more and more live in the world of virtual reality. The second: to what extent is an individual able to distinguish between their own and alien perceptions within their or her inner self?

Modernism was a program of the adaptation of all alien elements and turning them into its own. According to modernism, any person could understand exotic or archaic cultures and make them their own, or to surpass themselves so that they could accept it as their own culture. But postmodernism suggests that a person can discover within his or her soul many alien images and ideologies that were not his/her own creation and cannot distinguish between one's own and the alien.

With every day, while we are reading social media and absorbing alien texts, we so often cannot differentiate between our own and other people's perceptions, so the analytical work of the postmodern art becomes more and more important. It helps us to realize the fact that it's impossible to make a complete distinction between the self and alien perceptions within our souls, but also that this analytical work should never stop, like everyday ethical reflection.

**ED: Did the rise of Russian classical novels happen in the modern time?**

**IK:** What do you have in mind?

**ED: For example, Zakhar Prilepin's works.**

**IK:** I do not consider Zakhar Prilepin as the successor of the traditions of classical literature.

**ED: How do you relate to the assertion that ?Zakhar Prilepin is our modern day Leo Tolstoy??**

**IK:** Negatively.

**ED: Why is he considered one of the most important contemporary authors?**

**IK:** By whom?

**ED: I have read this idea in some critical press.**
IK: Prilepin, in my understanding, is one of the brightest representatives of the revival of Soviet literature's stereotypes at the current stage. Take his latest novel, the most sensational novel The Abode (Obitel'). This work starts with the assertion in the preface that "Truth is what is remembered." For him, moral nihilism is more characteristic than for postmodernists, which are usually considered nihilists. This novel is built on the thesis that the main positive characters declared that Russia is more important than any individual subject, and the individual's achievements matter only if they are important for Russia. In my opinion, this allows for the manipulation of individuals. According to this novel, human life has aesthetic meaning, but not ethical. In my opinion, it is breaking with the traditions of Russian literature of the 19th century, if we will interpret them, say, due to the essays of the great philosopher Isaiah Berlin. In Prilepin's novels, moral reflections are devaluated.

Prilepin's methods of reestablishing ideology in literature was analyzed in Mark Lipovetsky's recent article "Political Motility of Zakhar Prilepin". Now, I see not the rebirth of the Russian classical novel, but rather the imitation of this renaissance.

ED: So in your opinion, there is no present comeback of the Russian classical novel?

IK: This question is constructed incorrectly. For example, could we say that there is the return of the traditional American novel?

ED: I agree, literature is a vibrant phenomenon evolving in accordance with its own laws, but do the elements of classical psychological literature exist in the works of contemporary Russian writers?

IK: They certainly do, but there is one delicate point. We are accustomed to the fact that the classical psychology is present in thick novels. I believe that today, the most intense psychology has moved to other formats. Current poetry and short prosaic works are more psychologically sophisticated than huge novels, comparable by their volume to Dostoevsky or Tolstoy's works. And among such lengthy novels, which are published nowadays, the most successful works mostly enter into dialogue with modern Western authors but not with the literature of the 19th century.

ED: Could you point out some notable novels of the 2000s?

IK: In my opinion, the turning point during the last decade is the appearance of remarkable novels such as Bestseller by Yury Davydyov (??????????, 2001); Mikhail Shishkin's Maidenhair (Venerin Volos) and A Letter Book (Pismovnik), and novels by Vladimir Sorokin. His Ice Trilogy (Tr. by Jamey Gambrell, N.Y.: 2011) is not close to me, but I like his novel Telluriyya (Telluryia, M.: 2013) -- very much and I especially like his short stories.

There has appeared a very bright trilogy by Oleg Yuriev who lives in Germany, which consists of the novels: Poluostrov Zhidyatin (The Zhidyatin Peninsula), followed by Novy Golem ili Voina starikov i detei (New Golem, or, The War of the Old Folk with the Children) and the final part Vineta, published in 2008.

There is a novel by Leonid Kostyukov Velikaia strana, (?: ??, 2009), the funniest work ever written about America by a Russian author; unfortunately it's almost untranslatable, because its language plays with the differences between English and Russian languages. I would also add the prose by Maria Boteva, who pictures the Russian little town in a tragic and mastery fashion and with poetically innovative style.

Among non-fiction, the most prominent include works by Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich, who writes in Russian and who has received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015. But there are also Russian women authors who are her successors: Elena Kostyuchenko and Elena Racheva. Elena Kostyuchenko's book of journalist prose, Uslovno nenuzhnye, was published two years ago and became an important literary event. This is non-fiction of outstanding style, picturing the life of paupers, of unemployed people, of criminal teenagers, of young drug addicts? Racheva has published a book of interviews of old survivors of GULAG camps, they told about their experience of unfair court and everyday struggle for their dignity.

Speaking about the works written by Russian-language authors during the 2000s, we should remember that Russian-language
literature exists outside of Russia's boundaries. We should keep in mind the Russian literature of Israel. Israeli-Russian writer Alexander Goldstein, who died recently, was one such exceptional author. His latest novel, which came out not long before his death, Spokoinye polia (The Quiet Fields) was an outstanding work, but it was left unnoticed in Russia.

**ED:** Don't you think that the literary critics are responsible to some extent for these outstanding authors who were undeservedly forgotten in Russia, and the literary critic's task is to pull them out of oblivion and to convey their works to the public?

**IK:** Certainly. But let's return to where we started our conversation: modern Russian society is now a state of collective affect. It is the society, which was muddled by TV propaganda, but also people fooled themselves because they wanted it and were frightened by changing post-Soviet circumstances. They cannot accept discomforting information; therefore, these novels, which tell something more complicated than it seems, and also the critical articles which describe these novels, are not perceived by the Russian audience. Literary critics are responsible, but Russian society is responsible too, because many colleagues and I have written convincing words about novels which are coming out, but these articles have sometimes not been read. Though we cannot say that all these literary works have sunk into the void because there are still people who are reading them.

**ED:** Regarding Russian literary prizes, what is the function of the Russian Booker Prize?

**IK:** Do you know by any chance who the latest Russian Booker winner was?

**ED:** I don't remember for 2015, but I'll check (Alexander Snegirev with Vera - ED). The Booker of the Decade was Lozhitsia mgla na starye stupeni (A Gloom is Cast Upon the Ancient Steps?) by Alexander Chudakov (2011), a very good book. What criteria are used to choose the book for the prize?

**IK:** Chudakov's novel undoubtedly is the great book. But there are some problems with literary prizes in Russia at the present moment. I am very glad that recently there have appeared new literary prizes such as the 'Razliche?' (Distinction) Prize, which is given by young critics to the aesthetically radical poets. There aren't many of them, and the awarded amount of money is usually rather symbolic, but the mere fact of awarding these prizes demonstrates a renewal of the understanding of literature.

Regarding the Russian Booker, it is a sad story; in 2009, I published an article in Russian on the evolution of the Russian literary prizes, here you could read it in detail. When the Booker was founded in 1992, the committee tried to award it to people who had been deprived of attention during the Soviet era. It was, figuratively speaking, the State Prize for loyal, but nonconformist intellectuals. The first Booker winner, Mark Khartonov, wrote truly an exceptional novel, Dva Ivana, depicting the fate of an elephant and its young attendant Ivan in Russia in the epoch of Ivan the Terrible. However, Khartonov received the Booker not for this work, but for his second book, Lines of Fate. The Booker Prize, however, did not stimulate reading of this book. Then the prize was awarded to Vladimir Makanin for Blaize-Covered Table with Decanter in 1993. Makanin and the consequent winners of Booker prize were all very worthy authors, but it often felt like payback for them being disadvantaged during the Soviet time. Not always, but often. Some Russian Booker winners were not sufficiently understood by critics and underestimated by readers? I mean Andrei Sergeev with his novel Postal Stamp Album, analyzing the child's experience of the late Stalinist and early ?Thaw? years, the late 1940s and the 50s, and Alexander Morozov with his novel The Others' Letters written in 1968 and published only in 1997. After giving prizes to Ulitskaia and Shishkin (in 2000 and 2001 correspondingly), they began to acknowledge young writers, sometimes very good authors like Alexander Ilichevsky.

However, it would become obvious that the prize was given because it was safe variant but not the representative of some acute problematic literary movement. In general, it became like a kind of Soviet approach, similar to presumptiveness of the Soviet times: ?the West has Beatniks but we have our own poet Andrei Voznesensky who is like the Beatniks but ideologically safe.? The issue was not with Voznesensky, but with the fact that the excellent writer Alexander Ilichevsky was put by the Russian Booker award into Voznesensky's position of the permitted Beatnik. We can describe this process further but it has been a sad situation. In my view, the Russian Booker Prize has currently lost its significance, and there is no need to discuss it in detail.
Far more important was the awarding of the Nobel Prize in 2015 to Svetlana Alexievich. I consider this a jubilant, very important, and fundamental event.

**ED:** Without a doubt it was the most important literary event of 2015. But there were some negative responses in the Russian press because of a lot of negativity in her books.

**IK:** For a significant part of post-Soviet educated community, not for all, but for a significant part, it's hard to look at itself in the mirror. Alexievich's books are a frightening but well-reflecting mirror for the post-Soviet men and women.

**ED:** Was it right for Alexievich, as an outsider, to exalt the negative Russian experience in her books?

**IK:** Alexievich was not an ?outsider? but lived within the Soviet Union. She explains that by origin, she's connected with the three East Slavic countries ? Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

**ED:** One of the most important questions is whether what Alexievich did was innovative for Russian-language literature?

**IK:** Yes, I think so. Svetlana Alexievich paved the way for a new Russian literature.

**ED:** Would you please explain in what sense are her works not documentaries?

**IK:** During the 20th century, Soviet society accumulated enormous, catastrophic psychological experience, which, as she emphasized many times, including in her Nobel lecture, could not be processed and represented by traditional literary methods. This kind of experience is best transferred by poetry or by montage prose similar to Alexievich's.

**ED:** I agree. I received many personal letters describing the terrible experience of the daily struggle in Russia at the end of the 20th century.

**IK:** Alexievich did not merely collect these monologues, she edited them, but most importantly, she created a new literary art form for them, reproduced them into a new literary form. She started as a Soviet journalist but then invented a new literary form for her books and this took her out of the limits of the Soviet journalism to the new literature of the 21st century. She lent these monologues a poetic form.

**ED:** Regarding contemporary Russian poetry, do you agree with the Manifesto of Feodor Svarovsky about the crisis of the individual ?I? and the lyric genre in general?

**IK:** I love Svarovsky, but I don't agree with Svarovky's Manifesto. I have argued with his Manifesto in an article. In my view, the crisis of the lyric genre has existed for a long time and it is a productive phenomenon because it allows us to identify the ?I' of the modern man. Before the beginning of the 20th century, a man confidently said ?I am myself?, ?I understand myself..? Then came Freud, Jung, and other psychologists, and Michel Foucalt, and everything changed.

**ED:** Who is in your opinion the brightest representative of the ?lyrical movement? in contemporary Russian poetry - could it be Dmitry Vodennikov?

**IK:** In my opinion, Dmitry Vodennikov is a very talented poet. He is someone who maximally boosts his self-expression. But he understands and shows this self-expression as a tragicomic performance, as an enacting of the replica of a romantic ?I?, which is sometimes traceable to other poets. In this sense, of course his poetry is very interesting, but it does not return to the traditional romantic ?I? but only imitates such a return in the postmodern situation.

**ED:** Is it possible to point out ?the most important writer? of modern Russian literature? This is a question from students.
IK: When we are speaking about American literature, for example, in America there has never been such a thing as "the most important writer." You can study many different classical writers in different high schools across America, and, in my opinion, it is a very good situation, despite the fact that it forces university teachers to solve the difficult problem of how to integrate these different types of reader experience. But, nevertheless, this situation is potentially fruitful. The existing Russian tradition of choosing "the main writer? is rather dangerous. It was invented by the critic Belinsky in the 19th century for political purposes, for focusing attention on the socially subversive writers. On one hand, he did the right thing, because he participated in the process of transformation of Russian literature into the instrument of defense of human dignity and social reflection, but on the other hand, through his idea of "the main writer," he created false benchmarks for Russian literature for many decades ahead. The idea of "the main writer" was covertly connected with an idea of an "ideological correctness." It seems to me that now, fortunately, there is no main novelist, nor main poet, nor playwright.

I can mention the poets I like, but it does not mean that they are "the main poets." If we talk about the older generation, it is Mikhail Eremin. Mikhail Ayzenberg -- his poems were beautifully translated into English by the wonderful poet James Kates; George Dashevsky who sadly to say recently died; Stanislav Lvovsky; Elena Fanailova; Maria Stepanova; and Linor Goralk, author of poetry and short prose and brilliant comics in Russian. I really like poetry by Polina Barskova, poet and writer; Eugenia Lavut; as well as Olga Zondberg, the author of ultra short prose in one or two sentences. Finally, I would like to mention two very important poets of St. Petersburg origin: Sergey Zavyalov and Alexander Skidan.

A lot of very talented young poets, among them the recently debuted Lada Chizhova, Eugenia Suslova, Nikita Sungatov, and Nikita Safonov -- they all are very young people who are now in their 20s.

Regarding prose, I already listed many authors.

ED: What are in your opinion the most interesting novels of the past few years?

IK: In Russian literature, as well as in French, for example, every time we ask about the most interesting works, it would be more fruitful to talk about those novels whose authors experiment with language, question the author's figure or the habitual types of narration.

In this connection, I would like to draw your attention to new works by Alexander Ilyanen, the St. Petersburg writer. Ilyanen is a Finnish surname; he is Finnish by birth. His latest novel The Pension has been much discussed. It's diary prose in the tradition of Mikhail Kuzmin, of the Kuzmin era, absolutely ephemeral, weightless and very delicately made. It is prose as though about nothing, about the everyday life of a man who lives his rather quiet, withdrawn life. But it recreates the fabric of human existence.

Dmitry Danilov, a popular writer, implements the same task, but in milder, non-sophisticated form; he received various prizes and his works were translated in English.

There are also authors who write more simplified prose, but at the same time experiment with language. When we are talking about the 2010s, this is very important to me in the example of author Vladimir Sharov. I do not completely agree with his previous novel Be Like Children, but his latest novel, The Return to Egypt, which received the Russian Booker Prize in 2014, is extremely interesting, a wonderful thing, and deserves a lot of attention.

I would like to point out the St. Petersburg author Boris Dyshlenko, who sadly to say, died at the end of last year. He was completely unnoticed during his lifetime, but his latest novel Lyudmila, published in 2015 (Lyudmila. A Detective Long Poem. St. Petersburg: 2015), is excellent, in my opinion. An excerpt was published online by the literary journal Zvezda.

There are several other works, which should be mentioned -- there is a novel by Igor Vishnevetsky called Leningrad, about the Leningrad Siege of 1941?1944. It is a significant work that requires thinking, analysis and discussion. Fortunately, Polina Barskova, who studied the history of the Leningrad blockade, wrote an excellent review of this novel. And she herself wrote very important fiction book about the Siege, The Living Pictures.
Modern Russian literature is very rich. There are authors whose "greatness" is overblown by critics, such as Prilepin, but there are also some writers who are paving new paths for the development of Russian literature. In general, I would like to conclude our meeting by saying that Russian literature is in much better condition than Russian society.

**ED: Thank you.**

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