The News and What Is Behind It: Social Disorder and Conspirational Reading in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature

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"The human mind cannot grasp the causes of events in their completeness, but the desire to find those causes is implanted in the human soul."[1] Tolstoy's *Voina i mir* (*War and Peace*), from which this quotation has been taken, can be read as an exploratory enquiry into the world's complexity in post-revolutionary times; a time when the novel, due to its multilayeredness and pluriperspectivity, seemed to be the only medium fit to analyze and to counter monocausal, misleading, and biased explanations of historical events. Tolstoy famously challenged historical writing in general, and French historiography in particular, rejecting the common cult of the "great man" and replacing it with his own, rather mythicized, understanding of "national spirit." *Voina i mir* is *not* a novel about conspiracy theories, of course, but it *is* a novel about the epistemological and communicational patterns that can lead to their emergence. One should also bear in mind that, in the novel's "Epilogue," the main character Pierre Bezukhov is involved in the beginnings of what would eventually become a real conspiracy and culminate in the Decembrist revolt of 1825.

1 Tolstoy 2010: 1062. «Для человеческого ума недоступна совокупность причин явлений. Но потребность отыскивать причины вложена в душу человека». – Tolstoi 1940: 66.

Faddei Bulgarin and "Jewish Postal Service"

On the most general level, Tolstoy's novel was primarily concerned with understanding Russia—its society, its history and its historical fate—like most of Russia's serious prose writing during the era of high realism. For Tolstoy and his peers, the novel was a mode of gaining knowledge and seeking the truth about Russia in a time when no other all-encompassing, "thick" descriptions of society were available due to heavy censorship restrictions on all forms of non-fictional sociological and political analysis. However, the novel was of course not the most apt instrument for comprehension where the social reality of everyday life was concerned, for the obvious reason of both its fictionality and its detachment from real-life time, space, and people. No Russian reader would expect information about recent incidents in her town, on her street or in remote parts of the world from a novel. The novel would not be the first port of call for such requests, since there was journalism for at least the 1820s onwards. Although a proper "mass-circulation press" did not emerge in the Russian Empire before the 1860s, the newspaper as a source of information gained some relevance as early as in the late 1820s and 1830s with *Severnaia pchela* (*The Northern Bee*), then the only private newspaper authorized to publish political news.[2] Faddei Bulgarin (1789–1859), the owner of *Severnaia pchela*, was also a prolific writer. His novel *Ivan Vyzhigin*, published in 1829, was a huge success and was translated into several foreign languages. The recipe for success was the adaptation of the model of the French picaro-novel *Gil Blas* to Russian imperial realities. Bulgarin kept the satirical tone and caustically mocked the weaknesses of Russian society of the time—from the Belorussian provinces to Moscow and further afield to the very outskirts of the European parts of the Empire. Bulgarin himself came from the Belorussian provinces and was a descendant of the landed gentry of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As a young man in Wilno he started writing for Polish newspapers. After moving to St. Petersburg in 1819 he launched several publishing projects, the most important of which was notably *Severnaia pchela*. Other than what is suggested by its romantic name, *Severnaia pchela* was notorious for publishing not only sublime pollen, carefully collected from the blossoms of contemporary arts and thought, but everything—from political news to talk of the town, gossip and rumors.

Bulgarin was at the core of news in an age during which political stability was seen as being threatened by dark forces, organized in conspiracies. Russia during the reign of Nikolai I, was, of course, post-December Russia, but it was

2 Cf. McReynolds 1991: 20.

also post-1789, post-1801, and in a way still post Time of Troubles and post-*pugachevshchina*-Russia. Nikolai's reign was marked by a paranoid fear of conspiracies; the public sphere—if one can even speak of something like a public sphere at this time—was subjected to a whole system of measures the aim of which was to prevent the dissemination of seditious ideas. Conspiracy—and it was clear for Nikolai and his counselors that conspiracies lay behind the French Revolution, the murder of Pavel I in 1801, and the uprising of the Decembrists of 1825—was only possible if people had the means to conspire, i.e., to exchange ideas and information. The most efficient way to not let this happen was to control the press.

Bulgarin was, by all accounts, a professional in the detection, transmission, and disclosure of information. Notoriously, he was also a prolific informer to the "Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery," and the literary circles of St. Petersburg despised him deeply for this.[3] In an epigram, Pushkin ridiculed him as "Vidocque Figliarin," referring to the infamous French criminal and chief of Police Eugène François Vidocq, thus pointing to Bulgarin's precarious position at the point at which news was produced, transmitted, and often distorted and instrumentalized.[4] It is precisely Bulgarin's practical expertise in these matters that makes his text so instructive for an analysis of the link between conspiracy theories and the media in early to mid-nineteenth-century Russia. There is a curious passage in *Ivan Vyzhigin* in which the narrator speaks about the role of information and of those responsible for its transmission:

> In the evening, Josel, the Jew, made his appearance, who rented all the mills and kartchmas on the property. This Josel was the general agent for the whole house, privy counsellor both of master and servants, walking newspaper, and relater of all political news, and scandalous anecdotes within a circle of a hundred miles round, and teller of everything good and bad.[5]

Obviously, this episode takes place in the Pale of Settlement, in the Belorussian provinces that had until recently fallen under Polish-Lithuanian reign and where

3 Cf. Reitblat 2016: 12–14, 123–62.

4 Pushkin 1948.

5 Bulgarin 1831: 17. «Вечером являлся Иосель, Жид, арендатор мельниц и корчем во всем имении. Этот Иосель был всеобщим стряпчим целого дома, тайным поверенным господ и слуг, олицетворенною газетою, или источником всех политических сношений, соблазнительных анекдотов, в окружности двадцати миль, и пересказчиком всего доброго и худого». – Bulgarin 1829: 29.

the landowners belonged to the ethnically Polish landed nobility. Josel's position as a "personalized newspaper" is, at least for the narrator of the novel (that is, Ivan Vyzhigin), highly problematic since Josel is a Jew and holds the monopoly over news transmission in this part of the Empire. The "Jew" in general, as the narrator explains, is so conscious of the high value of information that he uses Vodka to "pick … out of the peasants and servants all the secrets, all the wants, all the connections and relations of their masters, which makes the Jews the real rulers of the actual landholders, and subjects to Jewish control all affairs."[6] The landowners, for their part, are blissfully ignorant of what is going on:

The landlords in these provinces have, in general, no idea of business, and receive their commercial information solely from the Jews. Throughout a whole government, there are only a few persons who take in newspapers, and they merely for notices of law-suits, and for the convenience of reference, if the conversation should turn upon politics.[7]

The landowners depend exclusively on what the Jews tell them. What we have here is, of course, not yet a conspiracy theory, but it is the germ *of* or the allusion *to* one—the idea that Jews, perceived as mobile and crafty, stick together and tend to rule secretly over those among whom they live.[8]

In general, the greater part of the small country-gentry regard the Jews as the best-informed people in everything, even in politics; and, in place of subscribing to a newspaper, expend the money which would otherwise be applied for that purpose, on punch and wine, and the time which would be lost in reading, they prefer to spend in dialogues with the Jews on the state of affairs all over the world.[9]

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6 Ibid.: 57. «Он посредством водки выведывает у крестьян и служителей все тайны, все нужды, все связи и отношения их господ, что делает жидов настоящими владельцами помещиков и подчиняет жидовскому влиянию все дела и все обстоятельства». – Bulgarin 1829: 98–99.

7 Bulgarin 1831: 62. «Помещики в тех странах вообще не имеют никакого понятия о торговых делах, и получают коммерческие известия только чрез Жидов. В целой губернии едва несколько человек выписывают газеты, и то единственно для тяжебных объявлений и для запаса к нелепым толкам о политике». – Bulgarin 1829: 108–09.

8 For more about Bulgarin's anti-Semitism and his novel *Ivan Vyzhigin*, see Katz 2007: 413–20.

9 Bulgarin 1831: 66. «Вообще бо̀льшая часть мелких помещиков почитают жидов сведущими во всех делах, даже в политике, и вместо того, чтобы подписываться

The novel depicts the problem of informational isolation in the backward provinces of the Empire in a satirical manner. For Bulgarin, the only remedy could be provided by newspapers—and the money that one is required to pay for them. According to him, it was highly dangerous to leave the sensitive field of information to the Jews since, in his opinion, they used it recklessly to exploit peasants and landowners. As is well known, Bulgarin's novel is full of anti-Semitic stereotypes,[10] but the emphasis he puts on the problem of communication has been widely neglected to date.[11] In fact, the 'Polish' regions of the Empire are familiar with a phenomenon, called "poczta żydowska" (Jewish postal service), traces of which can be found in the works of eminent Polish writers, such as Józef Ignacy Kraszewski or Adam Mickiewicz.[12] As Aleksander Hertz pointed out, the Jews became an "instrument of the distribution of news," which was all the more important given the isolated existence of local communities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.[13] This was a side effect of the Jews' social and legal situation in the Belorussian and Ukrainian provinces; merchants were more mobile than peasants and landowners as a result of the requirements

на газеты, деньги, которые надлежало бы заплатить за них, они употребляют на пунш и вино, а время, которое должно б было терять на чтение, проводят в разговорах с Жидами о всемирных происшествиях». – Bulgarin 1829: 116–17.

10 Weisskopf ascribes them to the "tradition of Polish anti-Semitism" (2012: 48). However, Bulgarin could have borrowed this idea from one of the anti-Semitic pamphlets that were already circulating in the early nineteenth Century (e.g., de Bonald's "Sur les Juifs," 1806); he could have picked it up during his childhood years in the Belarusian provinces, but he could as well have been inspired by Russian sources: None other than the great poet Gavrila Derzhavin wrote in a report on the living conditions of Jews in Belorussia (1800) that, "predestined to rule over others," the Jews who now are "humiliated" and must live under "foreign yoke" nevertheless "dominate those among whom they live" («Древле предопределенный народ владычествовать, ныне унижен до крайности, и в то самое время, когда пресмыкается, под игом чуждым, по большой части *властвует* над теми, между которыми обитает». – Derzhavin 1878: 276). Derzhavin is equally fascinated and frightened by the Jews' purported ability to "instantly communicate everything among them" («тотчас все сообщают друг другу» – ibid.: 287).

11 Contextualizing the depiction of Jews in *Ivan Vyzhigin*, Elena Katz points out that Jews in fact often served as "intermediaries between the Orthodox Belorussian peasants and the Polish Catholic landowner." – Katz 2012: 419.

12 Hertz 2014: 288.

13 Ibid.: 291.

of their professional activities. It is highly telling that Bulgarin links the Jews' supposed proficiency in information transmission to their alleged tendency to conspire—by then already a common motif in anti-Semitic discourse. Those who control the flux of information are ultimately the secret rulers of society—which is why, following Bulgarin's logic, newspapers are crucial and that is why his *Severnaia pchela* is crucial as a weapon of Enlightenment.[14] Newspapers are the "good," uncorrupted, and unbiased way of passing information, so to speak. There is a structural link between Enlightenment strategies of demystification and uncovering of hidden intentions on the one hand and the emerging awareness of news transmission's problematic effects on the other.

Newspaper Reading and "Paranoiac Overdetermination" in Gogol's "Diary of a Madman"

In order to assess this argument's validity it is useful to take a closer look at the case of one specific reader of *Severnaia pchela*:

> I've been reading the little Bee. A crazy lot, those French! What *do* they want? My God, I'd like to give them all a good flogging. There was a very good account of a ball written by a landowner from Kursk. They certainly know how to write, those landowners from Kursk.[15]

Poprishchin, the hero and narrator of Gogol's "Zapiski sumasshedshego" ("Diary of a Madman"), has a hard time in the department in which he works as a scribe. He is criticized by his superior for putting wrong characters, numbers, or dates in the documents that he is copying. He is shocked when he overhears a conversation between two dogs on a Saint Petersburg street; however, he is less shocked by the fact that dogs can speak and he mentions accounts from newspapers[16] reporting incidents like a fish uttering two words in a "strange lan-

14 Analyzing Bulgarin's anti-Semitic discourse, Mikhail Weisskopf speaks of a combination of "a loyalist pathos with the remains of eighteenth-century Enlightenment tradition." – Weisskopf 2012: 146.

15 Gogol 2005: 177. «Читал Пчёлку. Эка глупый народ французы! Ну, чего хотят они? Взял бы, ей богу, их всех да и перепорол розгами! Там же читал очень приятное изображение бала, описанное курским помещиком. Курские помещики хорошо пишут». – Gogol' 1938: 196.

16 «Читал … в газетах» – Gogol' 1938: 195.

guage"[17] or two cows coming into a shop to order a pound of tea.[18] What *really* troubles him is the fact that the dogs talk about some letters that they were exchanging, that is, their ability to *write*:

> I'd stake my salary that that was what the dog said. Never in my life have I heard of a dog that would write. Only noblemen know how to write correctly. Of course, you'll always find some readers or shopkeepers, even serfs, who can scribble away: but they write like machines – no commas or full stops, and simply no idea of style.[19]

What unsettles Poprishchin so much is, it seems, his impending loss of status. As a nobleman, he insists on his right to maintain a privileged status in a society, at least symbolically, as this position is becoming more and more precarious. If birth is no longer the only criterion for social success, then some social climber might one day challenge him for his job in the department: "Does he [the head of the department] think I'm the son of a commoner, or tailor, or a non-commissioned officer? I'm a gentleman!"[20] he insists desperately.

Poprishchin's mind is hyper-focused, which makes him see connections between things that are remote from one another and which "normal" people would not realize. How do these things enter into his mind? I would argue that this occurs through his reading of *Severnaia pchela*. In the fall of 1833, at the time during which the story is set, *Severnaia pchela* was covering the so-called "Spanish affairs."[21] There was a regular section that chronicled recent developments in this conflict about the succession to the throne of Spain, the first of the so-called "Carlist Wars." The sources were mostly French newspapers.[22] The un-

17 Gogol 2005: 176. «Говорят, в Англии выплыла рыба, которая сказала два слова на таком странном языке, что ученые уже три года стараются определить и еще до сих пор ничего не открыли». – Gogol' 1938: 195.

18 Ibid.

19 Gogol 2005: 176. «Да чтоб я не получил жалованья! Я еще в жизни не слыхивал, чтобы собака могла писать. Правильно писать может только дворянин. Оно конечно, некоторые и купчики-конторщики и даже крепостной народ пописывает иногда; но их писание большею частью механическое: ни запятых, ни точек, ни слога». – Gogol' 1938: 195.

20 Gogol 2005: 179. «Я разве из каких-нибудь разночинцев, из портных, или из унтер-офицерских детей? Я дворянин». – Gogol' 1938: 198.

21 Cf. Zolotusskii 1987: 145–46.

22 Among others: *Journal de Paris*, *Journal des Débats*, *Mémorial des Pyrenées*, *Moniteur*—as quoted in *Severnaia pchela* from 2 December 1833 (p. 1099).

clear situation surrounding the succession to the throne—a fundamental threat to the stability of monarchies—makes Poprishchin start to meditate about his own identity:

Perhaps I don't really know who I am at all? History has lots of examples of that sort of thing: there was some fairly ordinary man, not what you'd call a nobleman, but simply a tradesman or even a serf, and suddenly he discovered he was a great lord or a sovereign. So if a peasant can turn into someone like that, what would a nobleman become? Say, for example, I suddenly appeared in a general's uniform, with an epaulette on my left shoulder and a blue sash across my chest – what then? What tune would my beautiful young lady sing then? And what would Papa, our Director, say? Oh, he's so ambitious! But I noticed at once he's a mason, no doubt about that, although he pretends to be this, that and the other; he only puts out two fingers to shake hands with. But surely, can't I be promoted to Governor General or Commissary or something or other this very minute? And I should like to know why I'm a titular councillor [sic]? Why precisely a *titular* counsellor?[23]

His assumed enemy, the director of his department and the father of his would-be beloved, must be a Freemason, of course, since Poprishchin is already completely absorbed by the conspirational mode of thought—'nothing is as it seems to be, and sinister forces are plotting against him.' In the above-quoted fragment, conspiracy and the fear of the loss of status converge. If his supervisor is a Freemason and if Grisha Otrep'ev, the False Dmitry, was the son of Ivan IV, then he, Poprishchin, might also be someone other than a miserable *titularnyi sovetnik*—which was his grade in the imperial table of ranks (Gogol himself was quite un-

23 Gogol 2005 187–88. «Может быть я сам не знаю, кто я таков. Ведь сколько примеров по истории: какой-нибудь простой, не то уже чтобы дворянин, а просто какой-нибудь мещанин или даже крестьянин – и вдруг открывается, что он какой-нибудь вельможа, а иногда даже и государь. Когда из мужика да иногда выходит эдакое, что же из дворянина может выйти? Вдруг, например, я вхожу в генеральском мундире: у меня и на правом плече эполета и на левом плече эполета, через плечо голубая лента – что? как тогда запоет красавица моя? что скажет и сам папа, директор наш? О, это большой честолюбец! Это масон, непременно масон, хотя он и прикидывается таким и эдаким, но я тотчас заметил, что он масон: он если даст кому руку, то высовывает только два пальца. Да разве я не могу быть сию же минуту пожалован генерал-губернатором, или интендантом, или там другим каким-нибудь? Мне бы хотелось знать, отчего я титулярный советник? Почему именно титулярный советник?» – Gogol' 1938: 206.

happy with being only a *kolezhskii assessor*,[24] but this was still one grade higher than Poprishchin). The issue of *samozvanstvo* (imposture) was a popular topic at the time: it was none other than Bulgarin who published a novel about the tribulations of the "False Dmitry" Grisha Otrepev in 1830.[25] The reigning dynasty, the Romanovs, had come to power in the aftermath of the Time of Troubles. Tsar Nikolai I's ascent to the throne had been overshadowed by a short period of confusion that triggered the December uprising of 1825—the conspirators thought that Nikolai's elder brother Konstantin was the legitimate heir to the throne. They did not know that the latter had renounced his claim in an unpublished note. The most prominent example of a usurper and a magical rise from a modest origin, albeit a noble one, up to the highest scale of political power was of course Napoleon.[26] Read against this backdrop, the "Spanish affairs," so meticulously reported by *Severnaia pchela*, can be seen as an allegory of the political order's general instability in post-1789 Europe.

Poprishchin loses his orientation; he can no longer be sure of his position in society. Even his superior position as a human being is called into question in a world in which dogs correspond with each other, cows order tea, and bees collect and disseminate news. His imaginary attempt to reestablish order by the traditional Russian measures, so dear to the landed gentry ("Those French! … I'd like to give them all a good flogging"),[27] is of course nothing more than pathetic, given the scope of the crisis that struck *ancien régime* Europe.

Poprishchin is not prepared for a world in which one is confronted with events from remote countries on a daily basis; he reads the global news through the prism of his own individual situation—and *vice versa*. At the same time, this is the world, where political order is put in jeopardy by conspiracies and intrigues. Fears over the loss of status and fears about political instability, induced by dark conspiracies, come together. In fact, reading the issues of *Severnaia pchela* from the fall of 1833, one is prompted to note that the way Bulgarin's newspaper was covering the events did not inspire much confidence—the respective articles are all based on accounts taken from other sources in the style of "According to French newspapers …," "As the *Messager* related in its latest edition … ." The editors often explicitly point out that one cannot be entirely sure about the verisimilitude of the reported "facts." These "facts"' are an end-

24 Cf.: Gogol' 1940: 343.

25 Faddei Bulgarin. *Dmitrii Samozvanets. Istoricheskii roman*, 4 vols, Sanktpeterburg 1830.

26 Zolotusskii 1987: 148.

27 See above, footnote 15.

less series of intrigues, murders, executions, confiscations. The protagonists bear exotic names, often all too familiar to readers of romantic literature, such as Don Carlos, Queen Isabella, Don Miguel, Don Pedro Pastor, Donna Maria. All this fires Poprishchin's semiotic imagination and nothing is there to stop the flames from spreading. This confusion calls for a great, all-encompassing disentanglement and he eventually understands:

> There *is* a king of Spain. He has been found at last. That king is me. I only discovered this today. Frankly, it all came to me in a flash.[28]

However, we, the readers, know that nothing is as it seems, of course: the Great Inquisitor approaching Poprishchin—"a mere tool of the English,"[29] as the well-trained newspaper-reader Poprishchin assumes—is obviously none other than a keeper in a madhouse. We know this, since we understand the semiotic structure of Poprishchin's diary—the author, Gogol, conspires with his readers behind his protagonist's back. But can we really be sure that we are immune to the "flash of lightning" that makes us think we understood what *everything* is all about (while it is evident to some invisible author/reader that this very flash of lightning is the most ridiculous aberration possible)? We are never safe from falling prey to the conspirational mode of reading the world, as long as there might be others out there with their own undisclosed intentions—e.g., dogs—who will not admit to their sinister dealings, even when Poprishchin confronts them ("Tell me everything you know."). [30] All he can do is jot down: "Dogs are extraordinarily shrewd [literally: "extraordinary politicians"], and notice everything, every step you take."[31]

Poprishchin progressively adopts the "paranoiac overdetermination" that Svetlana Boym described as one of the basic features of "conspirational thinking."[32] This formula matches the psychosemiotic core of Poprishchin's problem perfectly: from a certain point onwards, he correlates everything to the "Spanish affairs"—and then to himself. In this context, it is highly instructive to see how

28 Gogol 2005: 189. «В Испании есть король. Он отыскался. Этот король я. Именно только сегодня об этом узнал я. Признаюсь, меня вдруг как будто молнией осветило». – Gogol' 1938: 207.

29 Gogol 2005: 195. «орудие англичанина» – Gogol' 1938: 214.

30 Gogol 2005: 181. «расскажи мне всё, что знаешь» – Gogol' 1938: 200.

31 Gogol 2005: 181. «Она [собака] чрезвычайный политик: все замечает, все шаги человека». – Gogol' 1938: 200.

32 Boym 1999: 97.

Gogol's contemporary, Vladimir Odoevskii, came to a quite similar formula when analyzing the semiotics of insanity in his article, entitled "Kto sumasshedshie?" ("Who Are the Insane?"), published in the journal *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* (*Library for Reading*) in 1836.

In insane people, all the notions, all the feelings, are gathered in one focus; in them the particular power of one specific idea draws in everything that belongs to that idea from all over the world; it acquires the ability, so to speak, to rip off the objects parts that are connected to each other for a healthy person, and to concentrate them in a kind of symbol … We call a person insane when we see that he finds connections between objects that we think are impossible.[33]

Gogol greatly appreciated the literary representation of madness in Odoevskii's stories about artists.[34] Gogol had initially planned to make the protagonist of "Zapiski sumasshedshego" a musician; then his story would have remained in the framework of the romantic paradigm of 'inspirational insanity.' The shift to a civil servant and copyist was also a shift to the more general (and more *realistic*) topics of semiotics, scripture, and mediality.

Gogol was convinced that we are lost in a world of signs and that there are no guidelines whatsoever to help us out of this mess. In modern times (and Gogol's story is of course about modern times) this problem is the problem of a reality constructed on the basis of information obtained by way of mass communication. Russian literary fiction had been dealing with this problem, to greater and lesser degrees, from the 1820s onwards. A particularly interesting case in this regard is Gogol's novel *Mertvye dushi* (*Dead Souls*, 1842). The inhabitants of the town of N followed Bulgarin's advice and subscribed to newspapers:

At that time all our landowners, officials, merchants, shopmen, and all our literate folk, as well as the illiterate, had become—at least for all of eight years—inveterate politicians.

33 «В сумасшедших все понятия, все чувства, собираются в один фокус; у них частная сила одной какой-нибудь мысли втягивает в себя все, принадлежащее к этой мысли, изо всего мира; получает способность, так сказать, отрывать части от предметов, тесно соединенных между собою для здорового человека, и сосредоточивать их в какой-то символ… Мы называем человека сумасшедшим, когда видим, что он находит такие соотношения между предметами, которые нам кажутся невозможными». – Odoevskii 1836: 61–62.

34 Cf. Mann 2012: 358–59. Cf. Gogol's letter to I. I. Dmitriev, 30 November 1832 in Gogol' 1940: 247–48.

The *Moscow News* and the *Son of the Fatherland* were read through implacably and reached the last reader in shreds and tatters that were of no use whatsoever for any practical purposes. Instead of such questions as "What price did you get for a measure of oats, my friend?" or "Did you take advantage of the first snow we had yesterday?" people would ask, "And what do they say in the papers? Have they let Napoleon slip away from that island again, by any chance?" The merchants were very much afraid of this contingency, inasmuch as they had utter faith in the prediction of a certain prophet who had been sitting in jail for three years by now. This prophet had come no one knew whence, in bast sandals and an undressed sheepskin that reeked to high heaven of spoilt fish, and had proclaimed that Napoleon was the Antichrist and was being kept on a chain of stone behind six walls and beyond seven seas but that later on he would rend his chain and gain possession of all the world.[35]

In Bulgarin's logic, newspapers were an instrument of counter-conspiracy, heralds of Enlightenment, so to speak. What Gogol shows in *Mertvye dushi* is quite the reverse: the reading of newspapers alienates the town of N's inhabitants from their everyday life. Instead of dealing with issues that would really concern them, they have to digest disconnected bits of information that do not make any sense. It is left up to them to "concentrate" them into "some kind of symbol"—which is why they come up with absurd theories about Napoleon being the Antichrist who is aspiring to world domination.

The modern world, according to Gogol, is marked by "politics," newspapers and the effect that is inevitably triggered by the merging of politics, print culture and a public sphere under rigid censorship control: conspiracy theories. In Gogol's *Dead Souls*, newspapers are torn to pieces that are "of no use whatsoever." Their material defectiveness reflects the insecure status of the world-view that is

35 Gogol 1996: 205. «В это время все наши помещики, чиновники, купцы, сидельцы и всякий грамотный и даже неграмотный народ сделались, по крайней мере на целые восемь лет, заклятыми политиками. 'Московские Ведомости' и 'Сын Отечества' зачитывались немилосердно и доходили к последнему чтецу в кусочках, не годных ни на какое употребление. Вместо вопросов: 'Почем, батюшка, продали мерку овса? как воспользовались вчерашней порошей?' говорили: 'А что пишут в газетах, не выпустили ли опять Наполеона из острова?' Купцы этого сильно опасались, ибо совершенно верили предсказанию одного пророка, уже три года сидевшего в остроге; пророк пришел неизвестно откуда, в лаптях и нагольном тулупе, страшно отзывавшемся тухлой рыбой, и возвестил, что Наполеон есть антихрист и держится на каменной цепи, за шестью стенами и семью морями, но после разорвет цепь и овладеет всем миром». – Gogol' 1951: 206.

induced *by*, and becomes possible *through*, newspapers. The reader, as an eternal plot-maker (i.e., an "inveterate politician"), is trying to capture whatever sense may be around. If he relies solely on what newspapers tell him about the world, then he will inevitably slip into the conspirational mode of thought. This will make him prone to all sorts of manipulations.[36]

Reading Between the Lines and the Conspirational Mindset in Dostoevsky's *The Demons*

When speaking about the nineteenth century, a time during which literary studies were only just developing and when there could be no question of any media studies of course, it is a good idea to turn to the expertise of writers and journalists if we wish to understand the effects of mass media on individual minds and on the public sphere. Fedor Dostoevsky was active in both fields and he had some experience in clandestine, perhaps even conspirational, activities dating back to the late 1840s when he attended the meetings of the Petrashevskii Circle.[37] He was obsessively interested in the way revolutionaries made use of texts to propagate their ideas and to communicate among themselves. This is what his novel *Besy* (*The Demons*, 1871–72) is about.

In *Besy*, the printed word is surrounded by an aura of significance that can mean both: highest value and the utmost suspicion. It can turn out to be absolutely worthless as well. Stepan Verkhovenskii, the provincial town's leading intellectual, suddenly understands this in a key scene of the novel when, during a charity event organized by the towns' ladies and while holding a revolutionary leaflet in his hands, he exclaims:

> This is the shortest, the barest, the most simplehearted stupidity—*c'est la bêtise dans son essence la plus pure, quelque chose comme un simple chimique*. Were it just a drop more intelligently expressed, everyone would see at once all the poverty of this short stupidity. But now everyone stands perplexed: no one believes it can be so elementally stupid. 'It

36 It is important to note in this context that Poprishchin was very much aware of the fact that the public sphere was under the control of censorship: After a visit to the theater, he jots down that he is surprised that the body of censors "let through" ("пропускала") the play that he had seen. – Gogol' 1938: 198.

37 Frank 1979: 239–91.

can't be that there's nothing more to it,' everyone says to himself, and looks for a secret, sees a mystery, tries to read between the lines—the effect is achieved![38]

This "between the lines" is precisely the point at which politics and the printed word meet in mid-nineteenth-century Russia and it was fertile ground for conspiracy theories. In 1848, the "Buturlin Committee," an organ that supervised the censorship institutions during the last years of Nikolai's reign, ordered that censors should no longer content themselves with a superficial control of the written texts, but that they should read "between the lines" as well.[39] This new orientation was probably induced by a note on censorship that was addressed to the Tsar in 1848 by the poet and *homme de lettres* Petr A. Viazemskii. He suggested that the censors should not only search for "forbidden words" in what was actually written, rather they should also take the sense that is often "hidden under other words" into account. "In every word there is a hint. Our literature, and especially some of the Saint Petersburg journals are full of these hints and allusions that are transparent for clever readers."[40]

The nameless provincial town in *Besy* is populated with these sorts of "clever readers" who know all too well that the seemingly harmless surface of the words might only be a cover-up for some hidden message. The novel is full of examples of this conspirational mode of reading. This mode of reading and interpreting *texts* can easily be extended to a reading and interpreting of the *world* in which they live. However, the constant awareness that nothing is as it seems—and this is the crucial point that the narrator makes in his account of the events—makes it impossible for the inhabitants of the town to know what is *really* going

38 Dostoevsky 1995: 484. «Это самая обнаженная, самая простодушная, самая коротенькая глупость, – c'est la bêtise dans son essence la plus pure, quelque chose comme un simple chimique. Будь это хоть каплю умнее высказано, и всяк увидал бы тотчас всю нищету этой коротенькой глупости. Но теперь все останавливаются в недоумении: никто не верит, чтоб это было так первоначально глупо. 'Не может быть, чтоб тут ничего больше не было', говорит себе всякий и ищет секрета, видит тайну, хочет прочесть между строчками, – эффект достигнут!» – Dostoevskii 1974: 371–72.

39 «между строк» – Skabichevskii 1892: 344.

40 Petr A. Viazemskii: [Zapiska o tsenzure]. «Смысл этих [запрещенных] слов … может притаится под другими словами … На каждое слово есть обиняк», Viazemskii pointed out, «Литература наша и особенно некоторые из петербургских журналов исполнены этих обиняков и намек<ов>, прозрачных для смышленных читателей». – in Gillel'son 1969: 324.

on. This is why it is so easy to deceive them. Stepan Verkhovenskii, who does not understand very much throughout the whole story, understands this at least: the generalization of suspicion is tantamount to its invalidation. The real conspiracy consists in this generalized suspicion that renders futile any attempt to make sense of the events that shook the provincial town.

The narrator himself seems to be satisfied with Stepan Trofimovich's finding that "nothing is behind all this." We know that this was exactly Dostoevsky's reaction when he witnessed the trial of Nechaev.[41] This stance would be the most legitimate and the most appropriate, on condition that there indeed had been no conspiracy, if there were no sinister forces at work. However, the novel's entire semiotic structure clearly indicates that there is in fact something behind all the events contained therein.

Every value ascribed to the printed word *can be* and *is* in fact most often invalidated: one example is the most ridiculous ageing writer Karmazinov who represents "literature," another is Stepan Verkhovenskii who is taking a volume of de Tocqueville to read in the garden, all the while hiding a novel by the popular writer Paul de Kock in his pocket.[42] Governor Lembke likes to assemble (to "glue") models in his leisure time until his wife forbids it, allowing him to write a novel instead, "but on the quiet" (*potikhon'ku*).[43] The climax of this meta-hermeneutic grotesquery is the charity ball and the ominous "quadrille of literature" in the third and the "most difficult part of my chronicle," as the narrator confesses.[44] One could hardly imagine, he writes, "a more pathetic, trite, giftless, and insipid allegory than this 'quadrille of literature.'"[45] It "consisted of six pairs

41 "I never would have imagined that this was all so simple, so straightforward. I do admit that until the very last moment I thought that there was something between the lines" (my translation – J. H.). «Никогда я не мог представить себе, чтобы это было так несложно, так однолинейно глупо. Нет, признаюсь, я до самого последнего момента думал, что все-таки есть что-нибудь между строчками». – Dostoevskii 1975: 205.

42 Dostoevskii 1974: 19.

43 Dostoevsky 1995: 311; Dostoevskii 1974: 244.

44 Dostoevsky 1995: 502. «Сам[ая] тяжел[ая] часть моей хроники» – Dostoevskii 1974: 385.

45 Dostoevsky 1995: 508. «Трудно было бы представить более жалкую, более пошлую, более бездарную и пресную аллегорию, как эта 'кадриль литературы'». – Dostoevskii 1974: 389.

of pathetic maskers," some of them representing letters (X and Z), one embodying "honest Russian thought":[46]

"Honest Russian thought" was presented as a middle-aged gentleman in spectacles, tailcoat, gloves, and—in fetters (real fetters). Under this thought's arm was a briefcase containing some "dossier." Out of his pocket peeked an unsealed letter from abroad, which included an attestation, for all who doubted it, of the honesty of "honest Russian thought." All this was filled in orally by the ushers, since it was hardly possible to read a letter sticking out of someone's pocket.[47]

"What on earth is this?" one person asks. "Some sort of silliness," a second person answers. "Literature of some sort," a third person supposes.[48] But we already know what it is: It is a game of blowing up and popping balloons of significance. The unfortunate "quadrille" ends abruptly when the news of an outbreak of fire in the Zarech'e district arrives. "There's something behind this fire,"[49] the crowd will suspect in the morning. They have no choice but to apply the conspirational mode of reading, imposed on them by the semiotic structure of the public sphere in the provinces of imperial Russia. Governor Lembke loses his mind and, of course, losing one's mind means gaining insight into some secret meaning: "A dull smile appeared on his lips—as if he had suddenly understood and remembered something," the narrator remarks.[50] Literature, madness, and conspiracy theory converge.

Besy is of course a novel about a conspiracy (or a multitude of conspiracies), but this is well known and does need not to be analyzed further. Even more

46 «Состояла из шести пар жалких масок … честная русская мысль». – Dostoevskii 1974: 389.

47 Dostoevsky 1995: 508. «'Честная русская мысль' изображалась в виде господина средних лет, в очках, во фраке, в перчатках и – в кандалах (настоящих кандалах). Подмышкой этой мысли был портфель с каким-то 'делом'. Из кармана выглядывало распечатанное письмо из-за границы, заключавшее в себе удостоверение, для всех сомневающихся, в честности 'честной русской мысли'. Все это досказывалось распорядителями уже изустно, потому что торчавшее из кармана письмо нельзя же было прочесть». – Dostoevskii 1974: 389.

48 Dostoevsky 1995: 509. «Это что ж такое? … 'Глупость какая-то' … 'Какая-то литература'» – Dostoevskii 1974: 390.

49 Dostoevsky 1995: 518. «Горели неспроста» – Dostoevskii 1974: 397.

50 Dostoevsky 1995: 511. «Тупая улыбка показалась на его губах, – как будто он что-то вдруг понял и вспомнил». – Dostoevskii 1974: 392.

importantly, it is a commentary on the semiotics of conspiracy theory. It lays bare the semiotic and social features that induce "the characters' paranoia and conspiracy theorizing";[51] and its whole structure is, in itself, one big conspiracy—since the narrator is apparently unable to penetrate the mystery, let alone the truly apocalyptic scope that lies behind the events that shook the society of his town. The narrator's incompetence is, of course, part of the game: all we—the readers—can surmise is that there is possibly more going on behind the scenes than he is able to tell us.

It might as well turn out that in the modern world, in which information about goings-on is transmitted by means of mass communication exclusively, the conspirational mode of deciphering reality is ineluctable. "But isn't there a text that remains untouched by this game of convertible signifiers?," a Dostoevsky-reader might by prompted to ask. What about the Gospel, normally the last resort for the unsettled characters of Dostoevsky's novels? Unfortunately, even the Gospel is not exempt from the dubious status of any printed matter in *Besy*: In the last chapter of the novel, Verkhovenskii is impressed by a woman who wanders the land selling the Gospel, and he offers to help her, unfortunately not without suggesting to "correct the mistakes of this remarkable book" in his oral explanations.[52] Even the Gospel is drawn into the whirl of doubt and suspicion. For contemporary readers this fact was probably less astonishing than it is for us today. The first officially sanctioned translation of the Gospel was published in 1860, only ten years before the first installments of *Besy*. During the oppressive reign of Nikolai I, the very idea of a Russian translation of the bible carried an oppositional aura.[53]

The sole remedy is, it seems, a certain straightforward and open-hearted naïveté which alone can put an end to the "unlimited semiosis"[54] that is unsettling the townspeoples' minds. The suspicious mind will always find another hint that allows him to build up a new theory about how everything is linked to everything else and how sinister forces pull the strings in the background. The anonymous narrator of *Besy* refuses to enter into this game. He simply relates what happened. His judgment is clear and univocal, often at the expense of a certain shortsightedness, but this is only for the better. If he is too easily impressed by Stepan Trofimovich's theatrical gestures and his playing the *maître à penser*

51 Lounsbery 2007: 225.

52 Dostoevsky 1995: 645. «В изложении устном … исправить ошибки этой замечательной книги». – Dostoevskii 1974: 491.

53 Men' 2002: 419.

54 Boym 1999: 110 (Boym is referring to Umberto Eco).

in the beginning of his narrative, then he successfully emancipates himself throughout the course of the events—and during the process of writing. As Svetlana Boym has pointed out, "Conspiracy theory is a conspiracy against conspiracy; it does not oppose the conspirational world view as such but doubly affirms it."[55] Dostoevsky's narrator does not participate in this double affirmation; his chronicle is a sober account of events; he relates actions and reveals intentions, but above all he points to the disproportion between the aura of significance and the actual meaning behind it that is, according to his observations, the source of the catastrophes that happened in his town.

What can we conclude from this? Bulgarin suspected a conspiracy of Jews in the Belorussian provinces through their monopolization and control over the transmission of "news." His antidote was the newspaper (and we know what motivated this decision—he was the owner of one). In his "Zapiski sumasshedshego," Gogol demonstrated what happens to a society that is struck by political crisis and, for the first time in history, has access to news from remote parts of the world on a daily basis. Dostoevsky in *Besy* showed that the constant suspicion directed against any kind of printed information leads to a situation in which nothing is as it seems and every word is suspected of containing a secret meaning. There is no way around this. As early as 1836, a casual remark in Pushkin's journal *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*) stated that our time is the "epoch of an uncovering of all mysteries."[56] This is a "dialectic of the Enlightenment" of sorts: the urge to unmask mysteries wherever they are (or even where they are *not*) has become the cornerstone of journalism; it shapes the poetics of journalistic texts and, more importantly, it shapes the way in which readers will read newspaper articles and the world around them.

"Entangled threads": The Fallacy of the Conspiracist Worldview in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

Of the stories and novels I have mentioned so far, only Tolstoy's *Voina i mir* does not specifically deal with the problem of the construction of reality through journalism, which is of course something of a truism: The novel is set in the first two decades of the nineteenth century when the press did not yet have the importance it gained over time from the 1820s onwards. It is for this reason that Tols-

55 Ibid.: 97.

56 «эпох[а] разоблачения всех тайн» – Editor's remark ("Ot redaktsii") in *Sovremennik* 1836/2: 312.

toy's approach to the problem of the construction of reality and conspiracist epistemology is of particular interest here: Tolstoy refutes the very idea of intentionality in history—an idea that is crucial for conspiracy theories. At the end of the novel, however, Pierre Bezukhov is presented as "one of the principle founders" of a certain "society,"[57] which is quite an unambiguous allusion to his future role as one of the conspirators of December 1825. This is not the germ of a conspiracy *theory*, but the beginning of a story about conspirators whose aim it was to reform Russian statehood and society. Tolstoy makes this quite explicit when he lets Pierre explain the current situation in Russia (by 1820) in the following way: "Arakcheev and Golitsyn … are now the whole government! And what a government! They see treason everywhere and are afraid of everything."[58] According to Pierre, the problem was not conspiracy itself, but the fact that people like Arakcheev and Golitsyn, two highly influential counselors from the inner circle around Aleksandr I, suspected conspiracy everywhere. Pierre, the future Decembrist, was convinced that "he was chosen to give a new direction to the whole of Russian society and to the whole world."[59]

'I only wished to say that ideas that have great results are always simple ones. The whole of my idea is that if vicious people are united and constitute a power, then honest folk must do the same. Now that's simple enough.'[60]

In the context of a discussion about conspiracy theories, Pierre's "that's simple enough" sounds quite alarming of course. There is a detail that subtly undermines his self-regarding ideas about the future of Russia. Only after having talked about his marvelous success at some meeting in Petersburg Pierre remembers that his wife had been about to say something:

57 Tolstoy 2010: 1246. «Одного общества, которого Пьер был одним из главных основателей». – Tolstoi 1940: 270.

58 Tolstoy 2010: 1255. «Аракчеев и Голицын – это теперь всё правительство. И какое! Во всем видят заговоры, всего боятся». – Tolstoi 1940: 280.

59 Tolstoy 2010: 1267. «Ему казалось …, что он был призван дать новое направление всему русскому обществу и всему миру». – Tolstoi 1940: 293.

60 Tolstoy 2010: 1267–68. «Я хотел сказать только, что все мысли, которые имеют огромные последствия, – всегда просты. Вся моя мысль в том, что ежели люди порочные связаны между собой и составляют силу, то людям честным надо сделать то же самое. Ведь так просто». – Tolstoi 1940: 293–94.

'And what were you going to say?'
'I? Only nonsense.'
'But all the same?'
'Oh, nothing, only a trifle,' said Natasha, smiling still more brightly. 'I only wanted to tell you about Petya: today nanny was coming to take him from me, and he laughed, shut his eyes, and clung to me. I'm sure he thought he was hiding. Awfully sweet!'[61]

This must be read as an implicit comment on Pierre's blindness regarding his own future role in the history of Russia, a role about which he is so childishly proud. Pierre's lofty ideas and his exaggerated self-esteem are juxtaposed with his baby son's belief that he is invisible when he closes his eyes. Pierre reads the world from his own highly biased standpoint; he is convinced of his philosophical superiority (compared to his brother-in-law Nikolai, a slow reader of Rousseau, Montesquieu and Sismondi).[62] He sees himself as an autonomous subject, the conscious master of his intentions and deeds, ready to act in a field that is historically open and which awaits his arrival upon the scene. However, the whole novel (and especially the theoretical *second* part of the "Epilogue") was written in order to prove that this perspective is misleading, since the individual's will is not a decisive factor in history. These two standpoints—Pierre's self-image as a sovereign master of his deeds and historical agent and the perspective of history—inevitably collide, with this collision showing us the inconsistency of any reductionist understanding of history and the world. "It's *not* that simple" is what Tolstoy wants to tell his readers. Or rather it *is* simple, but in another way. We, the readers, know that Pierre's plans will fail (as all his other plans had, including his most ridiculous personal super-plot to kill Napoleon). We know that he will draw himself and his family into a catastrophe and Russia to the brink of a civil war, but at the same time we can admire his truly childlike enthusiasm. There is no viewpoint from which totality could be attained. We either have Pierre's limited point of view or the zero focalization of the narrator's (or rather the author's) reflections on the theory of history. They are mutually incommensurable; to overcome this incommensurability, to *ignore* or to *neglect* it, would mean to enter the conspirational mode of reading the world.

61 Tolstoy 2010: 1268. «'А ты что хотела сказать?' – 'Я так, глупости.' – 'Нет, все-таки.' – 'Да ничего, пустяки', – сказала Наташа … 'Я только хотела сказать про Петю: нынче няня подходит взять его от меня, он засмеялся, зажмурился и прижался ко мне – верно, думал, что спрятался. Ужасно мил'». – Tolstoi 1940: 294.

62 Tolstoi 1940: 292.

The case of *Voina i mir* is crucial here, given that the novel ends with the description of the nucleus of a future conspiracy and the ironic highlighting of the tendency for self-deceit that inevitably accompanies any action in the sphere of politics—according to Tolstoy at least. Pierre's insistence that his secret "society" is a "society of true conservatives," of "gentlemen in the full meaning of the word"[63] is highly telling in this regard. He notably claims that the secret society is necessary to prevent a *coup d'état*, allegedly planned by Arakcheev. However, Pierre's brother-in-law, Nikolai, tries to prove that "all the danger [Pierre] spoke of existed only in his imagination"[64] and declares that he is determined to fight back against any secret society that will launch an assault on the political order of the Empire.[65] Nikolai is not as well-read as Pierre, he clearly lacks convincing arguments in the discussion, but he *feels* that he is right[66] and that Pierre is a "child" (*rebenok*) and a "dreamer" (*mechtatel'*).[67] Nikolai's rejection of any revolutionary endeavor (though obviously *not* his frequent recourse to violence) and his emotional way of reasoning makes him the author's mouthpiece here.[68]

Again, Tolstoy uses a child's or an adolescent's point of view in order to show the fallacy of the conspiracist worldview: Andrei Bolkonskii's 15-year-old son Nikolen'ka dreams of himself and Pierre being heroes, resembling the protagonists in an edition of Plutarch, "leading a huge army" on a battle field. The army consists of "white slanting lines that filled the air like the cobwebs that float about in autumn," but these threads eventually became entangled "and it became difficult to move."[69] The philosophy of history that Tolstoy elaborates in

63 Tolstoy 2010: 1259. «Общество настоящих консерваторов …, джентльменов в полном значении этого слова». – Tolstoi 1940: 284.

64 Tolstoy 2010: 1259. «Никакого переворота не предвидится … вся опасность … находится только в его [Пьера] воображении». – Tolstoi 1940: 285.

65 Tolstoi 1940: 285.

66 "He [Nikolai] was fully convinced, not by reasoning but by something within him stronger than reason, of the justice of his opinion." – Tolstoy 2010: 1259. «Николай почувствовал себя поставленным в тупик. Это еще больше рассердило его, так как он в душе своей не по рассуждению, а по чему-то сильнейшему, чем рассуждение, знал несомненную справедливость своего мнения». – Tolstoi 1940: 285.

67 Tolstoi 1940: 287, 289.

68 Cf. Trigos 2009: 33.

69 Tolstoy 2010: 1268. «Войско это было составлено из белых, косых линий, наполнявших воздух подобно тем паутинам, которые летают осенью … Вдруг нити,

the theoretical digressions of his novel makes it clear that there can be no puppet master holding the threads that guide people in the real historical world; there are actually not even any threads in the first place.

Conclusion

The texts that I have examined here involved themselves in a field that is latently structured by the conspirational mode of reading. Literature is capable of capturing and mapping the complexity of the semiotic order in a public sphere that is dominated by this mode. But, apparently, it has no other means to step out of this mode than by simplification: Nikolai is clearly less intelligent and less well-read than Pierre, but he is still more right than his brother-in-law. Mr. G-v, the narrator of *Besy*, is naïve and a bit shortsighted, yet his chronicle seems to be the only means to reinstall political order. Though not concerned with the conspirational mode of reading induced by journalism and the press in the "epoch of an uncovering of all mysteries," Tolstoy, in the concluding pages of *Voina i mir*, devaluates conspiracy as a political strategy; he ultimately ridicules Pierre's desire for fame. The paradigm of individual heroism, evoked here through the mentioning of Plutarch and impersonated in the figure of Napoleon, is possibly the most effective conspiracy theory of the nineteenth century. The idea that a chosen individual, by some secret force, some inner "genius," could change the course of history left a deep imprint on the minds of the epoch—in historiography, in novels as well as in daily life. The motif of threads, guided by an alien force, often recurs in conspiracy theories. It is of course no accident that in Nikolen'ka's dream they are denoted in *French* ("le fil de la Vierge") by his tutor Desal'. Nikolen'ka's self-indulgent vision of greatness, inspired by his godfather's political speeches, is the dream of an adolescent who longs for recognition from his (dead) father.[70] What follows is the second, theoretical part of the epilogue, in which Tolstoy explains his views on history; he notably confronts the "ancients'" view on history with the nineteenth century's obsession with Na-

которые двигали их, стали ослабевать, путаться; стало тяжело». – Tolstoi 1940: 294.

70 Cf. the last sentence of the first part of the Epilogue (Nikolen'ka's thoughts): "'And my father? Oh, father, father! Yes, I will do something with which even he would be satisfied…'" – Tolstoy 2010: 1269. «А отец? Отец! Отец! Да, я сделаю то, чем бы даже он был доволен...». – Tolstoi 1940: 294.

poleon and ends up with the crucial question: "What force moves the nations?"[71] Against the backdrop of the ever-growing knowledge about factors that have an impact on historical events and which predetermine the acts of individuals, he then discusses the problem of freedom and necessity.The crucial argument in his discussion is less about the factual side and more about the problem of consciousness. It is "necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious."[72] That means that we have to opt for an (impossible) double-point of view: in our story of the world, we have to be narrators and characters at the same time. In order to be able to act, we have to assume that we are the sovereign masters of our actions, but we should nevertheless bear in mind that there are objective factors that reduce our freedom—virtually to zero, as Tolstoy, a child of his positivist era, puts it. Only novelists can deal with this problem; they are able to switch between points of view, between dream and reality, between the individual and the general. The stories' characters implicitly suspect that they are puppets in some puppet master's theater (which they ultimately are); this is why they are in constant danger of falling victim to self-deception, to paranoiac over-determination, to conspiracy theories.

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71 Tolstoy 2010: 1274. «Какая сила движет народами?» – Tolstoi 1940: 300.

72 Tolstoy 2010: 1308. «Необходимо отказаться от сознаваемой свободы и признать неощущаемую нами зависимость». – Tolstoi 1940: 341.

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Abstract

Literary fiction in Russia has been dealing with the problem of the transmission of news and information and its relevance for political communities since the 1820s. Faddei Bulgarin, in his novel *Ivan Vyzhigin*, stressed the importance of newspapers as a crucial feature of a modern, enlightened public sphere. It was up to literature to discuss the dangers induced by the widening of the scope of the individual's worldview—from the limited sphere of face-to-face conversations in villages and provincial towns to a situation in which people in a provincial backwater could apprehend news from all around the world. Some of them fall victim to "paranoiac overdetermination" (S. Boym); they try to make sense of the irredeemable complexity of the modern world by constructing conspiracy theories. Writers, such as Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy tried to counter this tendency by shedding light on the semiological and medial mechanisms underlying these processes.