Issues of Modernity in Russian and U.S. Southern Discourse: Literary and Cinematic Crosscurrents

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ABSTRACT

ISSUES OF MODERNITY IN RUSSIAN AND SOUTHERN DISCOURSE: LITERARY AND CINEMATIC CROSSCURRENTS

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This dissertation traces formulations of modernity, national and regional identity, and economy in the literature and film of Russia and the U.S. South from serfdom to the Second World War. Studying serf and slave narratives, Russian Realist and Southern Renaissance novels such as The Brothers Karamazov (1879), Demons (1872), The Sound and the Fury (1929), Tobacco Road (1932), and Wise Blood (1952), and American and Soviet films such as Volga, Volga (1938) and Cabin in the Sky (1943), this examination locates within Russo-Southern discourses a shared interest in striking out against Western or Northern epistemologies to assert a “peripheral” modernity in opposition to dominant modes. Alternately constructing each other as literary or cinematic forebears, spiritual siblings united against the hegemonies that divided them, or models to emulate or aspire to, authors and directors in these two regions constructed various discourses on their kinship with one another and used them to speak back to their own pre-industrial pasts and to the traditional centers of modernity at their borders. This dissertation studies both how their shared interventions in modern discourses are constitutive of the modernist response to industrialization and urbanization and the broader utility of studying regional writers and directors as participants in global counter-epistemologies.
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2020

ISSUES OF MODERNITY IN RUSSIAN AND SOUTHERN DISCOURSE: LITERARY AND
CINEMATIC CROSSCURRENTS

BY

ZACHARY KILLEBREW
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Doctoral Director:
Timothy Ryan
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INTRODUCTION

“[W]e do not amount to a thing in the intellectual order.”¹

“[W]e constitute a void in the order of reason.”²

Peter Yakolevich Chaadaev, from “First Philosophical Letter” (1829)

Before the emergence of their most celebrated literary traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writers in the U.S. South and Russia were troubled by their regions’ places within the schema of Western art and culture and their relatively late forays into industrialization. In an 1880 speech that later appeared in pamphlet form as “The New South,” Emory College president Atticus G. Haygood derided the South’s “intense provincialism,” “vast mass of illiteracy,” and “want of literature” and “educational facilities” (qtd. in Hobson 103). Ten years later, George W. Cable described America as “a giant with one arm in a sling. That arm is the South,” lamenting that the “whole country knows that because of the South, the whole country, great rich, free, and progressive as it is, is immeasurably less than it ought to be” (qtd. in Hobson 108). To Frank Lawrence Owsley, “for thirty years after the Civil War the intellectual life of the South was as sterile as its own rocky uplands and sandy barrens” (64). In her 1941 essay “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature,” Carson McCullers claims that, excluding “old romances,” the South lacked a distinct novelistic tradition “until after 1900” (257). At the

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¹ Translated by Raymond McNally in The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev (39).

² The same line as above, translated by Dale Peterson in Up From Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul (15).
same time, McCullers relates the South’s literary poverty to its socio-economic backwardness, noting especially the region’s reputation for economic sluggishness, low quality of life, and intense social stratification not unlike “that in old Russia” (254).

For the hyper-critical Russian philosopher Peter Chaadaev, Imperial Russia’s troubled relationship with modernity and backward socio-political structure suggested that for Russians:

> historical experience does not exist, ages and generations have flowed fruitlessly for us. It would seem that in our case the general law of humanity has been revoked. Alone in the world, we have given nothing to the world, taken nothing from the world, bestowed not even a single idea upon the fund of human ideas, contributed nothing to the progress of the human spirit, and we have distorted all progressivity which has come to us. Nothing from the first moment of our social existence has emanated from us for man’s common good; not one useful idea has germinated in the sterile soil of our fatherland; we have launched no great truth; we have never bothered to conjecture anything ourselves, and we have adopted only deceiving appearances and useless luxury from all the things that others have thought out. (37-38)

Both the socio-economic conditions and literary milieu to which Chaadaev and so many U.S. Southerners write fit the paradigm of what Dale Peterson calls an “abject home culture” (10), and their ruminations on economic and cultural poverty and local backwardness became, as David Herman says of Russian literature, a “metaphor” for their “perceived cultural position vis-à-vis Europe” and their “vexed attempts to assimilate Western achievements” (143).

The two translations from Chaadaev’s “First Philosophical Letter” that begin this chapter suggest two very different interpretations of these regions’ confused early-twentieth-century relationships with Western modernity. The first, from Raymond McNally’s translation, emphasizes Chaadaev’s frustration with Russia’s apparent want for artistic and cultural production and its inability to properly “assimilate all this European progress,” rendering it “one of those nations which does not seem to form an integral part of humanity, but which exists only to provide some great lesson for the world” decipherable only “to far-distant posterity” (41, 32, 38). Alternatively, Dale Peterson’s translation—“We constitute a void in the order of reason”—
suggests a disruptive potential, the presence of a blank rather than the absence of substance. Indeed, though Chaadaev chastised Russia for its apartness from Europe’s journey toward “the unity of human thought” wherein “every impulse arose from this powerful need to arrive at a universal idea, which is the genius of modern times” (39), it was the intense scrutiny of Russia’s apartness from “the vivifying principle of unity animat[ing] everything” that lent nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian cultural production its influential and transgressive power (39).

This disruptive potential emanating from modernity’s borders is the central focus of this dissertation, which traces cultural and literary exchanges between the U.S. South and Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to elucidate their co-creation of a “peripheral” challenge to Western epistemologies. Through close reading of both the similar genres developed within each region and the web of references that their creators made to each other, it expands the scope of transnational Southern Studies to account for the “interpenetrating” nature of “inside and outside, domestic and foreign, national and international,” attending, in Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s words, “to the ways in which these [local] spaces participate in global phenomena” (21, 24). The juxtaposition of Russian and Southern texts and contexts—the American and Russian slave and serf narratives, the Southern Popular Front and socialist realism, and the Southern imaginary’s role in the Soviet and Hollywood studio systems—draws attention to the myriad connections that Southern and Russian creators drew between their regions’ strivings with modernity, equality, and the hegemony of Western culture in support of a shared, continuously renewed opposition to dominant Western epistemologies. Such transnational dialogues became constitutive of the two nations’ varied responses to modernity and also underscore the fact that, despite their common exclusion from or opposition toward
modernization, these peripheral voices became a defining influence on Western modernity’s self-conceptualization.

This study focuses on modernity, economics, and the alternatives to Westernism that characterized much of Russia and the South’s most famous texts. Beginning as the peripheral regions to a dominant European cultural, military, and economic hegemony, Russia and the U.S.A. grew into vast and incredibly diverse empires within the span of just over one hundred years, and by the mid-twentieth century had formed their own tenuous counter-hegemonies on the eastern and western peripheries of the former empires of western Europe. Moreover, during these years each nation grappled with the solidification and eventual end of unfree labor—slavery in America and serfdom in Russia—with the social and economic uplift of an uneducated and impoverished people, and with the cultural invigoration of a nation previously maligned as backward, peripheral, and chaotic. In the United States, these issues are nowhere more apparent than in the South—whose unique cultural confluences with Russia have been overlooked in transnational literary studies.¹ Though historians have found much to analyze in the unique coincidences between these otherwise very different national narratives, so far literary studies have done little to interpret their echoes in the literature, film, and culture of each nation.

This is not to say that there is a single, thoroughgoing connecting line between Russia and the U.S. South; to the contrary, Russo-Southern relations throughout the past two centuries have been extremely mercurial. During the height of slavery, the democratic U.S.A. and Russian monarchy were linked culturally and economically through the American South in their

¹ Kolchin specifically makes much of the similarities in the two nation’s labor histories, observing that the roughly simultaneous timelines for the beginning, entrenchment, and abolition of unfree labor in each makes for a useful case study in the usual underlying causes of slavery.
dependence on unfree labor. During the early Soviet period and interwar years in which the two were uneasy allies, many American movements, including the Southern Popular Front, looked to the U.S.S.R. as a beacon lighting the way to a possible collectivist future. However, by the Cold War era, the South in general was so anticommunist as to become the butt of jokes, notably embodied in the image of the drawling Texan Major “King” Kong (Slim Pickens) riding a bomb toward a Soviet ICBM complex at the climax of Dr. Strangelove (1964). The rise of Vladimir Putin’s reactionary government and the possibility of increased political alignment between his regime and America’s similarly reactionary Southern base underscore the shifting nature of these relations as they persist in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, authors exercised a great deal of autonomy in reading the confluences between their regions differently, even using the same parallels to suit opposing political or artistic goals. The Southern Renaissance, the Popular Front, and the Twelve Southerners, for instance, could simultaneously claim Russia as the South’s literary forebear, ideal future, or greatest enemy, respectively, all based largely on their own immediate agendas.

However, all of these varied discourses find common purpose in attempting to define Russia and the South against a changing modern world, whether by positing them as its emerging leaders, its victims, or its most strident opponents. Chaadaev’s chastisement of Russia’s supposed congenital unproductiveness, for example, follows his lamentation over the country’s missed opportunities on the global stage. “[S]ituated between the two great divisions of the world,” Chaadaev writes,

between the East and the West, supporting ourselves with one elbow on China and another on Germany, we ought to have united within us the two great principles of
intelligent nature—imagination and reason—and incorporated the histories of the entire globe into our civilization (37).

Though far harsher than those of any other prominent writer of the era, Chaadaev’s words speak to a common enough criticism within nineteenth-century Russian thought. The Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky similarly claims that the “laurels of European civilization have served as the cradle of our culture; it has come into existence as other nations are already completing the course of their intellectual development, and where they are coming to rest we are just beginning” (qtd. in Peterson 41). Russian intellectual and former serf Aleksandr Nikitenko, too, despised the way that Russians “always extract the superfluous, the glitter, the inordinate splendor, and . . . begin with incredible haste to squander our own as well as our fathers’ fortunes” (Diary 300). Even Fyodor Dostoevsky, writing optimistically about Russia’s future following news of the serfs’ emancipation, questioned the fitness of the nation’s alternately backward and overly hybridized cultural tradition to the task of articulating any national ideal (Holland 27-28). These nineteenth-century voices find echo in the late formalists and socialist realists of the next century in their shared “belief that Russia, as a country that was part of and yet outside of both Europe and its intellectual traditions, was in a good position to formulate new definitions” (Morson 123), whether it had begun to do so or not. Moreover, these sentiments reflect those of some Southerners, who, like John Crowe Ransom, “wish[ed] that the whole force of [their] own generation in the South would get behind [their] principles and make them an ideal which the nation at large would have to reckon with” (2).

According to Chaadaev, Russia circa 1836 had not yet experienced the “interesting epoch” in “the adolescence of the people” which he observes in the histories of other nations. During such an age, Chaadaev claims, a people experiences “a time of violent agitation,
passionate restlessness, and activity without conscious motivation.” They “physically and intellectually” become “world-wanderers,” and their populations “are then vehemently aroused without any apparent object but not without benefit for their future descendants.” Such epochs are necessary to a nation because they “furnish it with its most vivid recollections, its myths, its poetry, all its strongest and most fertile ideas” and allow its people’s “faculties [to] develop most powerfully” (29). For Chaadaev, “the sad history of our youth” is that “Russia experienced nothing remotely similar to this age of exuberant activity, this exalted play of moral powers of the people” (30). His words echo Nikitenko’s hope that Russia’s current environment “is only a passing phase of our development and not a permanent one” (300), positing that, with the aid of such an interesting epoch, the nation might reach a higher stage of cultural and literary development.

Such an epoch resembles nothing so much as the period beginning almost immediately following Chaadaev’s death, during which his homeland saw the emancipation of the serfs, the development of a renowned literary tradition, and the rise of experiment after experiment in social reform. Several years after Dostoevsky’s rise to prominence in the Russian literary world, the author and his contemporaries took a revered place in Britain’s and America’s literary canons during the early twentieth century. The widespread influence of early Soviet films like Battleship Potemkin (1925) and Sergei Eisenstein’s revolutionary theories of montage turned Russian film into a powerful new voice and allowed Eisenstein and his protégés to travel the world as celebrities. Furthermore, the U.S.S.R.’s status as “the homeland for our [twentieth]

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2 For detailed studies of Dostoevsky’s influence on English-language literatures and relevance to literary modernism, see Helen Muchnic’s Dostoevsky’s English Reputation (1881-1936) and Peter Kaye’s Dostoevsky and English Modernism, 1900-1930.
century’s largest-scale experiment in ‘life-building’ or social engineering” inspired numerous movements around the globe (Erlich 5), making it clear that, by the middle of the twentieth century, Russia had managed to make several distinctive marks on the modern world.

Moreover, this span of years saw Russian thinkers reconceptualize their relationship to the Western hegemony that had previously over-spilled their borders and begin to see their work as constituting an important artistic and social project, though the nature of that project varied across time periods, ideologies, and individuals. In the same 1859 *Time* piece in which he criticized Russia’s divided past, Dostoevsky announced his belief that a newly united Russia would “ultimately offer Europe a great new ‘Russian Idea,’ an idea that would reconcile the disparate European nations, just as it had reconciled Russia’s own divided society” (Holland 28). In the world of cinema, while Eisenstein’s films garnered increasing global attention, their director went from analyzing his nation’s indebtedness to outside traditions to condescending to the “amazing (and amazingly useless!)” films of the United States (“Dickens” 204). Others went even further; Victor Erlich quotes a “spokesman for Russian Constructivism” who declares that “Art is finished,” having “no place” in the new schema of “Labor, technology, organization!” (5). Fulfilling Chaadaev’s earlier vision of the nation as a bastion between the world’s “two great divisions,” Russia, it seemed to many of its artists and thinkers, had finally reached a point at which it could, as Morson put it, “reverse its traditional role and become a cultural lender to the West” (128).

The South, too, experienced a period of cultural and artistic flourishing during the modern era even as it wrestled with its own troubled relationship with the industrializing world. Though she believed the Southern tradition to be young and without history, McCullers claims that “with the arrival of Caldwell and Faulkner a new and vital outgrowth began. And the South
at the present time boils with literary energy.” She specifically recalls W.J. Cash’s joke in *The Mind of the South* that “if these days you shoot off a gun at random below the Mason-Dixon line you are bound by the law of averages to hit a writer” (“Russian Realists” 257). “Southern writing,” McCullers claims, “has reached the limits of a moral realism” like that in Dostoevsky, and “One can only speculate about the possible course of its development or retrogression” (258). Erskine Caldwell predicted in 1933 that the South is “where the best writing is going to come from during the next several years,” noting that a “writer in the South has a future” with “everything to gain, nothing to lose; therefore he can cut loose and write like a damn fool” (qtd. in Cook, “Modernism from the Bottom Up” 63). William Faulkner, to whom a 1931 interview in the *New York Herald Tribune* attributed the title “Dostoevsky of the South” (19), suggested in another interview printed the same year that he could improve upon his Russian forebear’s works by injecting them with his own newly developed narrative style (Ibid. 18). Even the opponents of Southern modernization saw a similar shift in viewpoint; as early as the 1860s, Southern apologists such as Robert Lewis Dabney felt that the “South could show the way to a confused and fragmented world” and “was the only way to save Western civilization” (Hobson 4).

Southern creators of this period even became “world-wanderers” in Chaadaev’s sense, infusing their art and literature with global ideas and pushing Southern cultural production to a place of prominence on the world stage. Caldwell travelled Russia, Europe, China, and the United States chronicling not only the American South, but Europe and the Russian Front in the Second World War in *North of the Danube* (1939), *All-Out on the Road to Smolensk* (1942), and *All Night Long: A Novel of Guerilla Warfare in Russia* (1942). Through his global reputation, his “affinities with Caribbean New World plantation society, as well as with Africa and places in Latin America,” and his “depiction of colonial consequences in the global South,” Faulkner
achieved the status of a “world novelist” (Matthews 118). Among Southern African American musicians, “ramblin’” as a concept had “been long recognized as a fundamental theme in blues lyrics and lifestyles,” and travel—both locally and abroad—came to play a central role in blues culture and history (Lawson 81). Moreover, the massive migration of “millions of black southerners whose abandonment of the Jim Crow South resulted in what is remembered as the Great Migration” laid the groundwork for the birth of the Harlem Renaissance (Lawson 86), the rise of an international jazz culture, and a significant over-spilling of Southern or Southern-inspired art and culture into Northern and European markets.

These massive paradigm shifts in Russia and the South owe much to their artists’ determination that their regions’ previously limited participation in global modernity offered an important opportunity to intercede in the modern world from its own geographical periphery. In this way, many Southern writers shared with Russian writers “a conviction that, despite the tradition of Western aesthetic theory since Kant, the definition of literature and art was still very much an open question,” and that their very dissimilarity from the North and Europe “would also raise the crucial problem of the social and historical, not universal or God-given, nature of received definitions of literature, literary norms, and principles of literary evaluation” (Morson 123). In “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Mikhail Bakhtin claims that “[i]t is especially harmful to separate style from genre when elaborating historical problems. Historical changes in language styles are inseparably linked to changes in speech genres” (65). Furthermore,

[u]tterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language. There is not a single new phenomenon (phonetic,

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3 For studies of jazz’s influence in Europe—and, especially, Russia—see Frederick Starr’s Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1980 and Bruce Johnson’s “The Jazz Diaspora.”
lexical, or grammatical) that can enter the system of language without having traversed the long and complicated path of generic-stylistic testing and modification. (65)

The post emancipation years in the South and Russia saw not only the reconfiguration and attempted reform of their slave-based economies and the unprecedented intermingling of previously divided cultural, ethnic, and social classes, but also the flourishing of two regional/national cultures that would challenge Western norms of art, decency, and style. The increased integration of classes and sweeping economic changes created both internal clashes between previously isolated populations, styles, and ideas and external skirmishes between new, internally-hybridized forms—like Russian realism, Blues music, socialist realism, and the Southern Renaissance—and the outside expectations of Western cultures.

This dissertation provides a basis for comparative literary analysis of the “internal” region of the U.S. South, often previously treated as inseparable from the larger United States or as a local subsection of the global South. While identifying connections across great distances

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4 Examples of conflicts between Southern and Russian cultural production and standards of decency or artistic norms are myriad and highlight the conflict between their own regional milieus and dominant Western ones. McCullers comments that Dostoevsky and his contemporaries were frequently attacked by American critics “for their so called ‘cruelty,’” and “This same objection is now being raised against the Southern writers” (252). Caldwell’s early fiction, beyond its reputation as particularly susceptible to censoring, challenged critics with the author’s “complicated relationship to both modernism and political radicalism” and ambivalent use of the grotesque in “portray[ing] the poor as oblivious to ‘higher’ moral sensibilities” (Cook, “Modernism” 69, Fearnow 116). Paul McCann devotes the chapter “Mus[ic]ic of Corruption: Jazz as Social Threat in the Early Twenties” in Race, Music, and National Identity to discussing the extent to which many considered jazz and its related styles “as a vulgar artifact of African American musical tradition and its increasing popularity among white youth was a cause for some concern” (22), and later refers to its early reputation as a “savage, seditious, and sexually deviant assault on European values and existing class systems” (93). Socialist realism, furthermore, opposes the very notion generally accepted in Western art that literature includes a “function of criticism of prevailing social and political norms,” a notion so ingrained in Western art that, as Morson observes, critics commonly take its absence as “evidence that [they] are not reading literature at all” (127).
and markedly different cultures has become routine in transnational studies, until recently, transnational approaches to Southern Studies have remained largely hemispheric. John Lowe’s *Calypso Magnolia*, for instance, connects Southern writings to the Caribbean, Mexico, and South America through historical exploration of their shared cultures and values. Though Lowe eschews national borders to follow cultural ties, slave traffic, and the ironically unifying net of cultural and ethnic diaspora to characterize the U.S. South as a part of a larger, “circumCaribbean” region, his scholarship still works within the unifying realm of an observable historio-geographical nexus. Arguing for the permeability of national borders while still insisting on the primacy of geographical adjacency or shared populations, such projects illuminate the connecting lines between nations whose identities depend on cultural exchange with each other while leaving non-hemispheric or global avenues for research unexplored.

Other scholarly works that have examined Southern and Russian connections have mostly done so tangentially as a part of studies into slavery, serfdom, or Russian and African American ethnic identity. Among historical studies, Peter Kolchin’s *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* approaches serfdom and slavery’s centrality to both the American and Russian economies in the nineteenth century, though their impacts on culture in these regions is outside the scope of its project. Hannah Goldman’s 1963 essay “The Tragic Gift: The Serf and Slave Intellectual in Russian and American Fiction” begins to formulate a comparison between writers in Southern and Russian locales, but, at the time of its publication, none of the serf narratives now available in English had been translated, and Goldman’s analysis focuses only on representations of serf life by non-serf authors. John MacKay’s translations of the *Four Russian Serf Narratives* opened up new avenues, and his subsequent side-by-side analyses of serfdom and slavery through the lens of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s Russian reception suggest the
possibility of a broader comparison of Southern and Russian literary histories, though these projects’ limited missions confine them to mostly non-Southern writers. Peterson’s *Up From Bondage* explores Russian and African American concepts of soul and ideas for envisioning a national artistic project. This study lays a great deal of groundwork for Russo-U.S. Southern comparative studies, especially in its analyses of the ways that African American and Russian writers confronted their relationships with modernity, though again, considerations of “Southern-ness” or the South in general are secondary to Peterson’s mission of creating an ethnic rather than regional or national cross-cultural conversation. All of these literary studies also focus primarily on canonical authors and eschew film entirely, leaving unnoted the wealth of connections in fiction and film between the two cultures.

The literature and art of modern Russia and the U.S. South are shaped by and speak back to many of the same issues, but within vastly different cultures on completely different continents. Thus, this dissertation traces cross-cultural connections between two loci that are on the surface only minimally engaged with each other and that owe their shared circumstances not to any deeply shared cultural or ethnic ties, but to their relatable socio-economical positions and to their similar strivings within a Western modern hegemony. Indeed, the Southern and Russian creators who addressed the relationships between their regions often focused more upon specific discrepancies between the two locales than their general congruences. When William Wells

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Brown indicts the “hypocrisy” of Americans speaking against the injustices of the “Old World,” particularly Russia’s “poor, down-trodden serfs” (92), he implies as much distance as he does proximity. That unfree labor might unite Russia and the U.S. South is less interesting to Brown than the fact that this similarity disrupts national narratives; the New World should exceed the Old World in freedom and progress, and the fact that it might not challenges America’s self-identity. Similarly, when a Soviet critic of the second part of Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) said that the director “displayed his ignorance of historical facts by portraying the progressive army of the *oprichniki* [Ivan’s bodyguards] as a band of degenerates similar to the American Ku Klux Klan” (qtd. in Bordwell 30), he does not draw explicit comparison between the provincial South and Russia so much as use the South as a byword for an un-Soviet form of reactionary violence.

For McCullers, one of the key similarities across Russian and Southern literature was the moral “attitude” of a universe in which

human beings are neither good nor evil, they are only unhappy and more or less adjusted to their unhappiness. People are born into a world of confusion, a society in which the system of values is so uncertain that who can say if a man is worth more than a load of hay, or if life itself is precious enough to justify the struggle to obtain the material objects necessary for its maintenance. This attitude was perhaps characteristic of all Russians during those times, and the writers only reported exactly what was true in their time and place. It is the unconscious moral approach, the fundamental spiritual basis of their work. (“Russian Realists” 255)

McCullers regards this approach as a stylistic acknowledgement of the “cheapness of life” in Russia and the U.S. South, two regions in which “Life is plentiful; children are born and they die, or if they do not die they live and struggle. And in the fight to maintain existence the whole life and suffering of a human being can be bound up in ten acres of washed out land, in a mule, in a bale of cotton” (254). Though the focus within both literatures, by McCullers’s estimation, is uniquely material, their “attitudes” are characteristic of a specific brand of peripheral modernism.
Sylvia Jenkins Cook posits that Faulkner, Caldwell, and other Southern regionalists “inevitably share some thematic common ground in their interest in the confrontation of the South with the currents of modernization,” and “Such conflicts between old and new ways were part of the central impetus of all literary modernism and particularly so for those regional writers who looked beyond nostalgia and local color apologetics” (“Modernism from the Bottom up” 69-70). Susan Hegeman further differentiates regional American writers from those presenting themselves “as enacting radical breaks from history” because they represent “a more historically embedded modernism in which its creators can be seen to have held the relationship between past and present, and center and periphery, in dialectic tension.” According to Hegeman, “these peripheral modernists” who “neither embrac[ed] the past in a decidedly unmodernist nostalgia nor celebrat[ed] the massified present—or future—uncritically” instead “registered the historical specificity of their moment” (24).

That Hegeman attributes her “peripheral” designation for American regional modernists to both their regionalism and their ambivalence toward purely progressive narratives of modernity is fitting given the significant overlap between geographical distance from the centers of Western modernity and perceived temporal distance from modernism’s achievements. When Chaadaev and Kireevsky wonder at the disparity between the Western ideas that pervade their society and the economic and social development of their nation, they participate in a form of chronotyping in which, as Peter Osborne notes, “certain people’s presents [are seen as] other people’s futures” through the constructed “non-contemporaneousness of geographically diverse but chronologically simultaneous times” (75). The South and Russia both exemplify this problem by highlighting the extent to which a radical break from history is also necessarily a radical break from geography, a sectioning-off of modernity behind national, regional, or even
personal boundaries. The work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian and Southern creators locates the real impetus of modernism at modernity’s outskirts, positing the South and Russia as alternative capitals of cultural production.

In the spirit of the regions’ challenge to the traditional loci of modern art, the four chapters in this project examine a wide variety of texts, including autobiography, novels, literary criticism, documentary nonfiction, and film by both canonical and extra-canonical creators. My comparative close textual analyses locate a variety of texts simultaneously within multiple historical, regional, national, and global contexts to capture the character of the texts as they relate to each other and as they engender the ideas and histories that most impacted the locales to which they speak. By placing well-known American slave narratives by Josiah Henson, William Wells Brown, and Austin Steward in a dialogue with obscure serf writers, for instance, this dissertation attends to the similarities in two bodies of antislavery writing which were never in communication with each other but which participated separately in global discourses on freedom, education, and humanity in the modern era. Juxtaposing the Southern Renaissance’s response to Dostoevsky against the Popular Front’s concurrent experimentation with emerging Soviet aesthetics likewise eschews prioritizing canonical works by Faulkner and O’Connor over little-read political writing and captures the diversity of the Russo-Southern comparisons made at the time.

Chapter one traces the roots of Southern and Russian considerations of modernity in American serf and Russian slave narratives. Increasingly, historical studies in slavery have come to understand forced labor in the modern era as the product of territorial expansion and labor shortages in the age of imperialism circa 1600-1750—in effect, as a symptom of, or even an
Much less explored is the potential for comparative studies of the serf and slave narratives, a pair of literary bodies which, as John MacKay notes, speak to a “very different but suggestively comparable situation” (“Introduction” 4). Close analysis of the narratives of the six translated serf authors—Aleksandr Nikitenko, Nikolai Smirnov, M. Vasilieva, Nikolai Shipov, Savva Purlevski, and Petr O.—reveals a wealth of similarities between serf and slave writings. This dissertation explores one such similarity in detail: the serf and slave authors’ shared interventions in dominant epistemologies of modernity, progress, and economy through their autobiographical writings. Like many historical scholars of the present day, slave and serf writers jointly identified global dependence on unfree labor systems as an ironic answer to the problems of capitalist expansion and industrialization and attacked them on the basis of their inconsistency with the new ethical and economic paradigms that they supported.

The second chapter analyzes the Southern Renaissance writers’ responses to Dostoevsky through their interventions in modernist discourses. The initial post-emancipation years which saw Dostoevsky’s rise to prominence in Russia also saw a retreat into nostalgia and apologetics in the South that would not be thoroughly challenged until the rise of the Southern Renaissance

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6 Kolchin stresses that the development of forced labor in both situations derives from a need to expand production for global and national markets. Serfdom in Russia owes much to the nation’s emergence as a strong, centralized modern state with growing urban markets for commercial farming (5); in a darkly humorous summation, Joseph Marshall noted of his visit to Russia that the peasants “are in general happy in proportion to the neglect under which the country lies” (27), as the development of Russian territory invited exploitive labor practices meant to increase the yield of valuable crops for urban markets. Kolchin also contrasts the family-managed “basic subsistence agriculture” practiced in early northern colonies with the mass farming and export-driven economies of the South, noting that the prevalence of slavery was roughly proportional to the extent to which a colony’s market was oriented toward efficient production for distant markets (20).
in the 1920s, some sixty years after slavery’s end. These new Southern writers were
influenced—as many Western authors were at the time—by the American “discovery” of
Dostoevsky following Constance Garnett’s English translations of his most influential works.7
Viewing him as a literary model for creating a counter-Western epistemology that prioritized
literary voices outside of Northern and European intellectual centers, many Southern authors—
including Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, McCullers, and Caldwell—sought to posit themselves
as heirs to Dostoevsky’s mission to revise the Western novelistic tradition and reconcile their
region with a rapidly modernizing world. At the same time, Southern modernists explored the
failures of Dostoevskian discursive models like confession and intellectual discussion to find
universal brotherhood in a world that increasingly understood its own subjectivity and tested
ritual, silence, and experimental anti-discursive models as substitutes by which marginalized,
disabled, or uneducated subjects may obtain Dostoevsky’s goals. These experiments attest both
to Dostoevsky’s literary legacy within the South and to the Southern writers’ eagerness to
reinvent themselves in opposition to Western and Russian forms.

The third chapter extends these considerations beyond literary studies and into the realm
of film, analyzing Erskine Caldwell’s wartime Russian book projects in the context of Soviet
film and propaganda of the interwar era. Southern socialist writers and Russian socialist realist
filmmakers shared a common narrative through their propagandistic exchanges following the
opening of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s: one which saw, on the one hand, the U.S.S.R. as
a possible model for a collectivist Southern future and, on the other, the provincial South as a

7 See Peter Kaye’s *Dostoevsky and English Modernism, 1900-1930*, Maria Bloshiteyn’s
“Dostoevsky and the Literature of the American South,” and Jean Weisgerber’s *Faulkner and
Dostoevsky: Influence and Confluence*. 
politically useful window into Russia’s pre-industrial past. To filmmakers like Eisenstein, the key component of this narrative lay in the filmography of D. W. Griffith, whose innovative films of the patriarchal, racist, and provincial South exposed the backwardness of Southern politics and left Russian filmmakers a template for building a more progressive and modern mode of narrative film. To Southern socialist writers, the films and propaganda of socialist realist creators offered their own form of template, a design for engineering a Southern society free of the backwardness, economic disparity, and prejudices that had so long characterized its dominant self-narratives. Caldwell, whose work spanned modernist fiction, documentary writing, and even screenplays, was one such Southern author, and his two Russian book projects, All-Out on the Road to Smolensk and All Night Long: A Novel of Guerilla Warfare in Russia, wed Southern social concerns with Soviet narrative techniques. That Caldwell so easily moves from modernism or quasi-modernism into unironic propaganda while still supporting the same social goals as his early novels Tobacco Road and God’s Little Acre speaks to the complex relationship between modernism, early twentieth-century political writing, and popular fiction and to the ways by which a utilitarian writer could navigate the three to suit his or her goals.

The final chapter in this project eschews literature entirely, returning to the milieus explored in chapter one but focusing narrowly on Soviet and Southern comedy film and their depictions of the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R.’s respective oppressed underclasses. Growing out of a minstrel tradition that tied urban, Jazz-Age Blackness to sentimentalized Southern slavery through primitivized or essentialized representations of Black characters, Hollywood’s fascination with Black subjects would give Black talent a prominent place on screen while also subordinating it to a studio system focused on its exploitation and to a national narrative which sought to confine Black identity to a select number of limiting modes. Critics have already
observed how films such as *Cabin in the Sky* did much to aestheticize popular images of Blackness in terms of Southern sentimentality or Harlem modernity, but, as of yet, nothing has been said about the similar goings-on in the Soviet film industry with Russia’s peasant population, particularly in the films of Grigorii Aleksandrov. *Volga, Volga* (1938) stands out specifically as indebted to American film, not only for its general style, but also for its aestheticization of the peasant. Already deeply entrenched in Slavophile mythology, Russian music, and Russian literature, the idea of “the peasantry,” like America’s Black population, was easily deployed on film as a national type that was both representative of and othered from the dominant culture. In *Volga, Volga*, Aleksandrov borrows this method from American film to unite periphery and center, using musical styles based in part on *samodeiatel’nost’* (amateur arts activities) of the U.S.S.R.’s interior regions to construct a comical aesthetic peasant that is at once part of and in opposition to the dominant Soviet culture.

However broadly this dissertation studies Russian and Southern exchanges, it is impossible for any single project to encompass the entirety of their expansive discourses, and thus, this work also suggests the wealth of connections that additional study will undoubtedly bring to light. The chapter concerning Dostoevsky and the Southern modernists focuses narrowly on the ways that Southern authors emulated and challenged Dostoevsky’s approach to novelistic discourse, but inevitably leaves other questions unanswered; indeed, an entire book could be devoted to comparison of Dostoevsky’s and O’Connor’s religious mysticism. The fourth chapter, dealing with Black and peasant subjects in Russian and American film, follows a specific line of inquiry concerning American and Soviet filmmakers’ use of the cultures of their respective marginal communities as a stand-in for the national self-identity while also briefly noting the possibilities that a further investigation of socialist realism and the Harlem Renaissance would
uncover. In this way, this dissertation explores a specific set of interrelated subjects in the Russian and Southern exchanges while also paving the way for future projects.

Even within the chapters included here, each new literary allusion from one locus to the other further tests their relationships, as conditions in the South and Russia evolved too rapidly and invited too many widely varying reactions to allow for any one cross-cultural narrative to dominate. Thus, this project cannot pretend to unearth a definitive, omnipresent line of communication pervading all Russo-Southern discourses. Instead, it traces several, sometimes countervailing discourses across more than a century to explore the diverse utility that creators saw in drawing connections between Russian and Southern histories while underscoring modernity’s thematic pervasiveness across these dialogues. In this way, it contributes a template for comparative studies of regions whose authors, despite positing varying degrees of connectivity between them, are interested in each other primarily for their shared marginal or oppositional positions in the geography of modernity.
CHAPTER 1

“TO LIVE AND WORK AT MY OWN RISK”: MODERNITY AND ECONOMY IN AMERICAN SLAVE AND RUSSIAN SERF NARRATIVES

Consistent with its aristocracy’s appetite for foreign literature, Russia eagerly received Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as fodder for the political discussion surrounding serfdom. As early as the 1850s, many Russians read the novel “as an allegorical attack on and description of Russia’s own serfdom-based society” and used it as the starting point for a reflection “upon their own society and that of the distant United States through the prism of bondage” (John MacKay, *True Songs* 9). Some were shocked by the Russianness that they observed in the Southern slaveholders themselves. Vladimir Engl’son wrote in a letter to Alexander Herzen regarding the character Augustine St. Clare that “[e]verything about him is Russian: his simple nobility, self-centeredness, elegance, indecisiveness (or laziness), and most of all a lack of all lust for power or money” (qtd. in John MacKay, *True Songs* 14). The Slavophile Alexei Khomyakov was also fascinated with the Southern slaveholder:

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1 Though some Russian reformers hoped the book would generate a movement toward abolition within Imperial Russia, others feared that the novel about American slavery risked localizing the issue within the U.S. South and “draw[ing] world attention away from the scandal of Russian bondage rather than generating the required global abolitionism” (John MacKay, *True Songs* 9). A semi-anonymous piece in the 1859 *Russian Messenger* shames Russian women for “weeping inconsolably over *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” but not “the real misery and poverty so often encountered in our villages,” concluding that “it’s not only in America that one finds Uncle Toms” (qtd. in 23). Publishing in England, Herzen writes that British readers should be aware that “nearer to England, across the Baltic, is an entire population the legal property of seigneurs, a population not of 3,000,000 but of 20,000,000” and notes that “these slaveholders of the North” travel unnoticed across Europe while its attention lies in the U.S. South (22).
He is like all of us in his elegant refinement, his artistic nature, the softness and gentleness of his disposition, his slothful philanthropy, his sybaritic egotism, the weakness of his ethical convictions and un-Christian indifference to the general good, which he skillfully justifies with deft sophisms. In his soul he casts judgment on evil, after all; and what more should he do? He is right before God and before himself. (qtd. in MacKay, True Songs 19)

Though Khomyakov argued “for national specificity” in Russia’s case (MacKay, True Songs 9), by identifying the Southern slaveholder with the Russian landlord, such writers tacitly place both in opposition to the Western or Northern model; brutal but indelibly refined, hyper-intellectual but terribly unaware of those they oppress, they share Russian graces and virtues bought at Russian costs.

In America, cross-cultural reflections of these sorts were considerably less likely to identify any cultural kinship between the two nations. John MacKay quotes an 1858 communiqué between American consul in Moscow Francis Claxton and Secretary of State Lewis Class stating that “remonstrances have been made that a translation into Russ [sic] of Uncle Tom’s Cabin now in press should not be permitted to be published,” as it “is looked upon as purposely incendiary and calculated to mislead the peasantry into the idea that they are no better circumstanced and treated than the slaves in America” (True Songs 14). This communication aligns with the common view in America at the time that serfdom, although unfair and undemocratic, was less so than slavery, and that it exemplified Old Russia’s outmoded political system rather than any form of unusual cruelty. This attitude confuses the feudal serfdom of Western Europe and the chattel serfdom of Imperial Russia, positing serfdom as simply outdated or medieval in contrast to the contemporary evil of American slavery.

However unclearly the precise comparability of the two systems manifests itself in the larger Russian public discourse surrounding Uncle Tom’s Cabin or American slavery, it is
evident in the serfs’ narratives themselves, which bear striking resemblances to those of American slaves. While the Russian literati were responding to outside representations of serfdom and slavery written by free writers with no inside experience of the system, a few Russian serfs had the opportunity to turn to politically motivated serf-narrative to give voice to communal serf knowledge and the rich but tragic mythology that serfs built around themselves to explain, alleviate, and sometimes make light of their servile status in much the same way that American slaves did. Although serfdom and slavery and the writings that they produced differed in several important ways, both the serf and slave narratives serve as incisive critiques of the economic systems under which their authors lived. Often considering unfree labor in the context of a modernizing world wrought with contradictions between its emerging liberal ideals and its dependence on slavery, both slave and serf narratives share a tendency to criticize unfree labor on the basis of its unfair subversion of expected modern economic rewards. Slave and serf alike discover within their internal economies the potential for some measure of success but are continually robbed of these successes by disparities made possible by their inferior legal status and the inconsistencies and inefficiencies of the system. From these outwardly anti-modern conditions emerged a similar impetus for both kind of unfree writers to analyze their place in the modern world, wielding communal knowledge, inside experience with unfree labor, and even their own “market value” within their respective economies against the systems under which they toiled.

Though American slavery and Russian serfdom were very different owing to the lack of a true racial component to serfdom, the two systems shared a similar place within the global

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1 Though there was no racial divide between serfs and serf-owners in Russia, semblances of racial divisions and discrimination did appear. After the westernizing reforms of Peter the Great
economy and several key commonalities. Unlike slaves, serfs commonly lived in peasant villages which formed a community called a *mir*, and families kept their own homes and saw to their own needs. A typical *mir* had a governing body that made decisions about the internal economy of the village and dealt with representatives of the landlord. Many serfs were allowed plots of land to cultivate. Those who paid *obrók* (“rent” to their owners for their farmland) could sell their crops for a profit, and those who were obliged by *barshchina* (essentially, *obrók* paid in the form of uncompensated work on seignorial land) could spend as much of their free time as they could manage raising their own food. The existence of serf villages with their own economies allowed some serfs to specialize their work or form their own businesses.² These differences, however, and Catherine the Great, the Russian nobility became increasingly cosmopolitan, European, and Francophone, distinguishing itself culturally and linguistically from their serfs. An outside observer watching a Sheremetev prince surveying the Ukrainian village where Aleksandr Nikitenko grew up might mistake the western aristocrat among his bearded peasants in eastern clothes and ornate headdresses for an Englishman visiting a Slavic village. Indeed, the cultural disparity did seem bizarre to many aristocrats, who used the serf’s newfound cultural “backwardness” to retroactively justify their enserfment, and Kolchin notes in his introduction to Nikitenko’s narrative that the common employment of such an “essentially racial argument to defend a ‘nonracial’ system of bondage underscores the subjective character of race in general and shows how Russians ‘made’ race just as Americans did” (3). Such claims notwithstanding, the Russianness and humanity of the serfs were generally not in question—in fact, the serf household would soon after be mythologized as the “patriarchal pre-Petrine national family” central to Slavophilism (Peterson 43). Attitudes toward serfs were more closely aligned with attitudes toward the desperately poor in Britain or France than were attitudes toward American slaves, and though nobles were sometimes generally skeptical of their intelligence and ability to function independently they were not obsessed by detestation of them.

² Among the serf writers, Savva Purlevskii and Nikolai Shipov become managers and businessmen, Aleksandr Nikitenko finds employment as a tutor and schoolteacher, and his mother makes a living as “a broker for the purchase of secondhand goods” within her community (14-15). However, the “rich” or privileged serfs described in some of the narratives were generally “not quite as impoverished as their neighbors,” and though the writers of these accounts include serf teachers, traders, and estate managers, these positions were far from the norm (xv). In contrast to serfdom, American slaves rarely saw opportunities to make money or work independently. Austin Steward recalls that slaves on his master’s plantation could earn extra food by performing extra work, “were occasionally permitted to earn a little money after
can easily obscure serfdom’s significant commonalities with slavery. Serfs were still subject to violent and demeaning punishments at their owners’ behest, and every serf narrative includes incidents of corporal punishment, unfounded imprisonment, torture, or even murder of serfs by their owners. Though not as systematic as under American slavery, rape and sexual violence by pomeshchiki (serf-owning landlords) were common, and likewise crop up in some form in every narrative. Like slaves, serfs were often sold individually, and the nostalgic value attached to the serf family as the backbone of traditional Russian culture was continually undermined by what Josiah Henson calls “the most odious and naked deformity” of American slavery—the separation of families (39).

Serfs raised their own food but had very limited land and resources; those who paid obrók were often pushed into abject poverty by excessive rent, but most, according to their day’s toil was done,” and were allowed to plant gardens “to provide themselves with many trifling conveniences,” but such things were “only allowed to some of the more industrious” (11-12). Though some like Josiah Henson were able to earn enough money to attempt to buy their freedom, their cases were very much the exception rather than the rule.

Moreover, serfs who escaped from such conditions had little recourse to discover safe havens or settle permanently, as there was no sectional divide on the issue of serfdom in Russia. A serf fleeing from his or her owner could often count on being dogged by pursuers indefinitely, as in the narrative of Nikolai Shipov, who escaped serfdom along with his wife only to be tracked for years by agents of his landlord all across Russia, even escaping for a time into Prussia before being arrested and sent home.

Often, the vastness of the landowners’ estates and the breadth of their financial dealings meant that serfs did not need to be sold to see their families torn apart. Nikitenko’s father was taken from his family as a boy and sent to St. Petersburg to perform with his master’s choir; Purlveskii describes an incident in which his landlords force their serfs to provide them four young men and women to serve them in their home in Moscow; Shipov’s father is constantly sent from one place to another on business for his landlord. Such separations were often economically disastrous, as serf families relied on their own labor to survive, and the absence of an able-bodied worker could push a family to the brink of starvation or exhaustion.
Aleksandr Nikitenko’s account, preferred this to *barshchina* (56). Due to a combination of these factors, serfs “had a material standard of living—measured by such criteria as life expectancy and mortality rates—that on average was worse than that of American slaves” (Kolchin xv).

The basis for historian David Moon’s contention that “the work of Western historians on the economic history of serfdom and the social history of peasant protest has been more fruitful than that of their Soviet counterparts” lies in the way that American scholars “have taken serfdom apart by focusing on the internal dynamics of peasant society in the villages of servile Russia” (485). Specifically, studies by American historians have zeroed in on the social and economic systems at work within the serf communities themselves that allowed Russian serfdom to strike an unequal “balance . . . between coercion and exploitation of the enserfed peasants by the ruling groups in Russian society and the ability of the subordinate group to maintain a viable way of life” (486). Although historians of serfdom now utilize an array of tools and methodologies derived from decades of intensive research into American slave narratives, slave culture, and the political economy of slavery, literary scholars have rarely applied these methods to serf writing. Fewer still have undertaken the task of setting the writings of serf and slave

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5 *Pomeschiki* who exacted *barshchina* often declined to plan work obligations according to a set schedule, instead forcing serfs to tend to seignorial lands on days with ideal weather and left them to their own land during subpar conditions, which, coupled with the unfavorable weather of the region, crippled the serfs’ own farming.

6 Dale Peterson’s *Up From Bondage* explores connections between Russian and African American concepts of a national soul but focuses for the most part on canonical Russian authors and free, post-bellum Black writers to the exclusion of serf and slave narratives and broader Southern contexts. Hannah Goldman’s 1963 study similarly compares Black and Russian experiences without comparing any real serf authors, instead using writings on or about serfs by Herzen and Pavlov. Others have made more direct attempts; John MacKay, a driving force in the translation of Russian serf narratives, discusses ideas of form, utopianism, and geographical imagery in serf and slave fiction in his essay “‘And Hold the Bondman Still’: Biogeography and Utopia in Slave and Serf Narratives” and “Form and Authority in Russian Serf Narratives,”
writers side-by-side in order to compare their descriptions of their conditions or explications of the systems to which they were subjected.

Nevertheless, scholars and translators like John MacKay, Peter Kolchin, and others have provided the foundation for a more extensive study of slave and serf responses to their own internal economies within the context of Russian and Southern history and slavery studies. Recent historical studies understand slavery and serfdom as “part of a general trend” toward unfree labor in the rapidly modernizing Western world resulting from the sudden “geographic and economic expansion of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Kolchin 1-2).

and his introduction and notes to Four Russian Serf Narratives comment briefly but enticingly on the possible fruits of further comparative work.

Moon identifies a broad tendency among historians of Russia (especially, he notes, in Britain) to focus narrowly on the periods of revolution and Soviet control and to denigrate serfdom “to one of the possible explanations for Russian ‘backwardness’ and part of the background of the revolutions” (483-84). In reality serfs performed a number of jobs in Russia’s industrial base including factory work, mining, metallurgy, and munitions making (492), and Russia’s vast peasant military, which enjoyed broad success until the 1850s, was the key to its rapid territorial expansion and transformation into a powerful empire (495-6). Moon argues that Russia’s “backwardness” owed less to serfdom than to its transportation problem, weak markets, and instability; serfdom rose in the modern era to answer these problems and persisted so long because to a certain degree it did (492, 515). Robert A. Margo similarly addresses the contention that slavery was “inefficient and unprofitable” because it directed “resources away from such economic sectors as manufacturing” by countering that more recent historical studies have found the system to have been both profitable (increasing the income of slaveholders at a higher rate than could be expected by farmers employing hired laborers) and economically viable (being capable of perpetuating itself indefinitely) (165). By the early industrial age the South had developed both non-slave agriculture and a small but developing industrial sector in Virginia and Alabama, but free farming lacked the “efficiency advantage” of forced labor and was thus less profitable (168), and manufacturing—even when performed by slave labor—was stunted as slaves were moved from the cities to plantations to take advantage of the more profitable business of plantation farming. Margo concludes that “free southerners would have been worse off economically (lower per capita income) if the South had engaged in a massive industrialization push prior to the Civil War because resources would have been misallocated”; the region’s “comparative advantage lay in agriculture, and that advantage was enhanced (in certain crops) with the use of slave labor” (167).
Following the law code of 1649,\(^8\) chattel serfdom formed the cornerstone of Russia’s largely agricultural economy, with at least two thirds of the Russian population reduced to servitude.\(^9\) The roughly concurrent importation of African slaves to the American colonies, beginning, according to Kolchin, “[a]s early as 1619,” created a new base for the American agricultural workforce, and between 1680 and 1730 this new form of slavery “became the backbone of the labor force in the South” (12). The nearly simultaneous end of these systems—serfdom with official emancipation in 1861, slavery with the conclusion of the Civil War circa 1865—left their regions reeling under the weight of modernization.

Such an understanding, however new it may be to literary or historical studies, was not unknown to some of those faced with the harshest realities of unfree labor. In his 1847 address to the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, former slave William Wells Brown defines slavery and serfdom in terms of modernity and national standing, reflecting both America’s growing awareness of its status as an ideologically and economically modern state and the divide many Americans saw between its status as a bastion of freedom and an exploiter of slave labor.

But what will the people of the Old World think? Will they not look upon the American people as hypocrites? Do they not look upon your professed sympathy as nothing more than hypocrisy? You may hold your meetings and send your words across the ocean; you may ask Nicholas of Russia to take the chains from his poor down-trodden serfs, but they look upon it all as nothing but hypocrisy. (92)

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\(^8\) Faced with serious labor shortages, the central government aided the pomeschiki by slowly restricting the mobility of the peasantry beginning in 1497. The 1649 law code dissolved the time limit for recapturing fugitive serfs, effectively binding them to their land as chattels of their landlords.

\(^9\) Formal slaves (khолопy) had existed in Russia for centuries before the 1649 law code, forming roughly ten percent of the country’s population, but it was not until the latter half of the sixteenth century that Russia came to have “an economy based on slave labor” (Kolchin 2-3).
Brown’s reference to the “Old World” connotes a degree of backwardness, framing Russia’s serf-reliant monarchy as both spatially and temporally distant from the modern, democratic United States. However, if America’s understanding of its own modernity and freedom are undermined by slavery, the nation’s ability to project its self-image across the Atlantic is imperiled. In this way, Brown challenges the “othering” at the center of the abolitionist notion of slave economies as “aberrant places in need of metropolitan intervention” (Bohls 2), as well as the contemporary notion of an easily identified “slave world’ aberration” standing in opposition to a “free world’ norm” (Davis 81). Contrarily, some Southerners credited much of the industrialization and modernization of Britain and the United States to the economic success of slavery. A writer for the Charleston Mercury in 1852 claimed that, just as “the serfs of Russia produce by far the cheapest wheat in Europe,” it is “the efficient organization” of the Southern plantation that lent cotton its profitability, and Louisa S. MacCord claimed that the South proved that it is “free trade, not free labor” which fuels the development of modern industrial powers (qtd. in Karp 37, 44, 46). Indeed, it was challenges to notions of South’s backward or aberrant nature that allowed later apologists like Herman Clarence Nixon to claim that the Southern slave system was “One of the greatest economic achievements in the world between 1800 and 1860” (185). Thus, American writers drew comparisons between slavery and serfdom not to identify a worldwide trend toward abolition or modernization, but to trouble the commonly accepted distinction between New and Old World approaches to freedom and modernity.

This is not to say that the Southern gang system or Russian serfdom were well-oiled machines perfectly integrated into the schema of global industrialization. As Gerald Jaynes observes, “factories that recruited an involuntary and pre-industrial workforce to an alien culture were not without disadvantages” (98), and the criticism of the efficiency of such “factories” by
their involuntary workers resounds throughout both slave and serf narratives. Rather, these perspectives suggest the tension between the industrial and pre-industrial within the forced labor systems of the South and Russia, acknowledging the modern impetus that led these societies to organize themselves around the systematic exploitation of slave classes while simultaneously identifying the stagnation and hypocrisy within them. Furthermore, considering these systems as non-ideal responses to modern market demands reveals their resultant social hierarchies as similarly modern products wrought with all the contradictions of the modern world. Leigh Anne Duck warns, for instance, that “understanding racial oppression strictly through the framework of cultural patterns inherited from the past configures it as a problem against which liberal politics—historically wedded to the time of capitalist modernity—cannot easily intervene” (5).

Rooted in unfree labor systems that are themselves surprisingly modern and in tensions owing to the modern diversification of local spaces brought about by the increasing fluidity of geographical boundaries, these systems were less a collection of pre-modern conceits persisting into the modern age than a series of new reactions to modernization built partially, as is modernity itself, on structures held over from the pre-modern. While much of the previous scholarship on slavery and serfdom tends to view them as holdovers from or reversions to feudalism, slave and serf voices react to them as responses, albeit quickly aging ones, to the rise of modern states and economies.

However similar the serfs’ and slaves’ analyses of unfree labor were, sociopolitical differences in Russia and the United States shaped their responses into different literary modes. Ironically, the “expansion of print culture” in the late eighteenth century, which was in part responsible for the rise of “the ‘modern’ nation-state” and the demand for unfree labor that accompanied it, also strengthened movements aimed at abolishing slavery in America and
Britain (Swaminathan 12). A combination of the Northern demand for abolitionist texts, the tradition of Southern proslavery fiction, and the politicking of white abolitionist “sponsors” all helped to propagate the American slave narrative and shape it into a distinct and recognizable genre that served as a personal complement to the political campaigning of abolitionists. In the North, the “narratives had an appreciable market” (Davis and Gates xv), and their wide circulation translated into widespread recognition as a distinct literary genre. James Olney argues that “conventions of content” in American slave narratives are “clearly determined by the relationship between the narrator himself” and the “sponsors (as well as the audience) of the narrative,” as the reader and publisher alike have “certain clear expectations, well understood by themselves and well understood by the ex-slave too, about the proper form to be followed” (158). Such conventions, including everything from novelistic plot structures to front matter proving the authors’ identities, also evidence a shared familiarity with the genre of English autobiography, contemporary British drama, proslavery fiction and prose, and in later instances, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in particular (Del Guercio 151).

Russian serf narratives, by contrast, never formed a distinct genre. Rarely written, never widely disseminated, and in some cases only published or “discovered” after emancipation, the

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10 As one 1849 reviewer said in response to Henry Bibb’s narrative, “[a]rgument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry. But narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men” (Davis and Gates 28). Others openly prescribed a generic form for the narratives. The *New Englander*’s review of Peter Still’s autobiography calls it “simple and lucid” just “as it should be,” crediting it for lacking any “offensive attempt at fine writing” (31). In either case, publishers accepted a preponderance of slave narratives as a necessary accompaniment to abolitionist tracts.

11 Many factors contributed to the narratives’ rarity. Russia had no free North, and with no sectional divide on the issue, it did not develop a regional market for either pro or anti-serfdom literature. Moreover, Imperial Russia’s undemocratic features also contributed toward the narratives’ suppression. Government censorship in Russia was the norm throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but for seven years after the formation of the Buturlin Committee in
serf narratives did not find an audience and did not influence each other directly. Only a select few have been unearthed since serfdom’s end, and thus far only six have ever been translated into English. There are no archetypical serf narratives or any precise “formula” to their content or organization, and the six translated narratives currently available demonstrate the diversity of serf experience in Russia and attest to their authors’ entirely independent engagement in a sustained reaction to the economic system under which they toiled. Aleksandr Nikitenko’s *My Childhood and Youth in Russia 1804-1824* (completed in 1863, published in 1888) is a highly literary and introspective work reminiscent of Frederick Douglass’s autobiography. The stories of Savva Purlevskii (written in 1868, published in 1877) and Nikolai Shipov (1785) detail the history of their business ventures and the conditions that led them to flee their landlords’ estates. Nikolai Smirnov wrote his brief autobiography in 1785 as a deposition following a botched escape attempt which resulted in his recapture and sentencing to torture and hard labor in Riga. M.E. Vasilieva’s “Notes of a Serf Woman” (published in 1911) is the most like an American slave narrative in content, speaking mostly of her abject living conditions and the cruelty of her owners, whose abuses she characterizes in detail. Most unusual of all, the semi-anonymous 1848, censorship became much more extreme; as Aleksandr Nikitenko—himself a government censor—wrote, “terror gripped everyone who thought or wrote” during the period (qtd. in Jacobson xvii). Following a series of military setbacks in the 1850s, Alexander II announced well in advance that liberation and reform had become a necessity for the modernization of Russia; however, fearing rebellion and harboring a dislike of “literary men,” even the Tsar Liberator was not willing to tolerate much grumbling in print (Moss 37). The government censured screeds against serfdom; radical reformers could circulate materials among themselves, but major public forums for the airing of serf grievances were rare indeed. Most of the serf narratives studied herein were written or published only after serfdom’s end, and even among those written before emancipation, Nikolai Smirnov’s was not made public until it was rediscovered after emancipation, and the poem “News About Russia” was rejected by the noble to whom it was submitted and was later deemed “blameworthy” (MacKay *Four Russian Serf Narratives* 39).
protest poem “News About Russia” (written in 1849, published in 1961 for the centenary of the serf emancipation) eschews autobiography almost entirely, instead following the author—known only as “Petr O.”—as he journeys across Yaroslavl’ collecting narratives of serf life from his fellow bondspersons.

Despite their differences, the serf narratives are steeped in the folk and oral tradition that formed the backbone of Russian culture for millions of peasants in Imperial Russia, and the features they share with each other and the slave narratives evidence, if not generic tendencies, then a comparable grappling with issues of modernity and unfree labor’s toll on the spirit of the bondsperson. “News About Russia” continually laments the serfs’ life under “thralldom, in ignorance” where “Enlightenment will not pierce through to us” (Petr O. 48), Smirnov attributes his desperation to escape to the disparity between his intellect and ambitions and his unfree status, and Nikitenko considers suicide when faced with the fact that his serf status may preclude him from furthering his education. Serf businessmen Purlevskii and Shipov are critical of the waste of talent inherent in serfdom and are eager to escape to pursue their business on their own terms. Their recurring hunger for knowledge and realization of the weight of their bonds echo many slave narratives. As editor Boris Gorshkov observes of Nikitenko’s narrative in particular, the author shares with Douglass a keen interest in the “way in which the peculiar combination of unusual privileges and arbitrary restrictions bred in their authors an unquenchable thirst for freedom” (xix).

These parallels across texts written in isolation over the course of nearly one hundred years cannot imply any direct mutual influence, as the serf narratives’ obscurity, independence, and late publication dates precluded any of the authors from reading each other’s work and prevented their narratives from crossing the Atlantic until quite recently. Composed in separation
but drawing upon a communal tradition of serf knowledge (and, importantly, *ways of knowing*) and thus less explicitly tied to any solid literary tradition or genre, the serf narratives were motivated by a variety of influences but not by considerations of genre or the demands of a free market or a specific political movement. Like the slave narratives, which “presented complex literary articulations of the culturally hybrid consciousness of the black diaspora” and “strategic endeavours to counteract cultural and historical obliteration,” serf writings offer an account of the authors’ “emergence into the social and linguistic order of the west” (Thomas 157).

However, because the serfs’ literary emergence so closely resembles slave narratives divorced from market conventions, truths universal to both cannot be mere products of market demand. Thus, the fact that slave narratives so closely align with the serf narratives evinces their participation in a broad, separate dialogue against Western epistemologies beyond the scope of their sponsor’s or market’s socio-political intentions.

While the study of the internal economy of slavery benefits from the side-by-side analysis of slave and serf texts, at the same time this comparison uncovers in Russian serf narratives a distinct success ethic based on a clear work-reward paradigm. Robin Winks identifies this paradigm as “one of the United States’s chief messages to the world”: that “hard work, clean living, education, and an eye for the main chance would bring a man, at least a free man, even if black—and unless flawed by character or caught by bad luck—to the top” (vii). That this cautiously phrased take on the American Dream is even more commonly and strongly expressed within Russian serf narratives written within an aristocratic society in which birth, rather than industry or merit, determined social status indicates that such ideas, when present in slave narratives, were less concretely American than scholars have tended to realize. Instead, they mirror a more universal counter-epistemology to that of unfree labor and participate, as
John MacKay notes, “in a very broad emergent discursive context in which modernization and territorial expansion were coming to be thought of as inextricably linked to bondage, with all of its complex, violent history and manifold consequences” (“Introduction” 6). The serf and slave, better even than the economists and historians who followed them, understood themselves as unwilling participants in a system that exploited their labor so that the controlling class might enjoy the fruits of an otherwise liberalizing modernity. Their narratives analyze the irony of a modern economy that frequently enriches the unindustrious by exploiting serf and slave work ethic and wield their authors’ own “market value” as commodities within unfree economies as proof of their utility within the modern world.

The serf and slave writers display a particularly strong tendency to emphasize their own skill, intelligence, and industry even under the bondsman’s yoke. The slave narratives of Austin Steward, William Wells Brown, and Josiah Henson celebrate the ingenuity, dedication, and accomplishments of slaves even within the narrow confines of the internal economy of slavery, criticizing the limitation put on them by demonstrating their capacity for success beyond their social station. This same emphasis on labor and its proper rewards appears in most of the serf narratives, which often take the form of success stories in which their authors gain useful knowledge and skills, demonstrate a natural talent for business, and rise in status on the strength of their merits and the fruit of their industry. Shipov is a talented businessperson who aims to buy his family’s freedom; Purlevskii’s life’s goal is to regain his grandfather’s wealth after a series of setbacks left his father desperately poor; Smirnoff and Nikitenko become educated and aspire to creative careers. The apparent naturalness of an individual’s rise to prominence through perseverance, intelligence, and education underlies each of these narratives, evidencing a common adherence to what readers typically consider a singularly American doctrine of success.
Moreover, these narratives define serfs and slaves as their countries’ “producing class,” attributing to them the ability to “revitalize [their] nation” should they be permitted to escape the rule of the “parasites” and “turn to generally useful labor” (Nikitenko, Diary 12).

During his lifetime, Josiah Henson’s fame as the supposed real-life inspiration for Stowe’s Uncle Tom overshadowed a very clear distinction between Henson and his post-hoc fictional counterpart: his successes as a participant in the American economy. By latching onto Henson’s status as a heroically loyal slave and semi-illiterate preacher in the vein of Uncle Tom, many of Henson’s contemporaries overlooked his own focus on his ability and intelligence. An exceptionally able worker entrusted by his masters with significant managerial authority, Henson’s responsibilities during his years on his master Riley’s estate “were to superintend the farming operations, and to sell the produce in the neighbouring markets of Washington and Georgetown” (32). Due to his indispensability and myriad occupations, Henson was “trusted with considerable freedom of movement” (Winks x), and the narrative shows Henson fulfilling the American aim of providing for himself and accumulating wealth through industry. However, Henson’s good deeds “seemed only to enhance [his] market-value in [his masters’] eyes” (58).

Henson’s story mirrors many points in those of the serf writers, whose talents earn them success but also make them more valuable as servants. In The Story of My Life, serf businessman Nikolai Shipov’s early life in Vyezdnaia is relatively privileged owing to his father’s skillful management of their master’s estate, but misfortune befalls the family when their landlord begins to exact impossible obrók from the village. Shipov’s father dutifully pays extra to cover for those who cannot afford their rent but loses his position and much of his own wealth, and Shipov’s attempt to buy freedom for himself and his wife are thwarted when his landlord, still upset that another former serf has made a fortune and owns “a vast factory in the city” (135), jealously
vows never to risk releasing another. Similarly, when Aleksandr Nikitenko impresses Prince Golitsyn with a speech he submits to the Bible Society of Russia, his “value in the eyes of the arrogant noblemen” who own him increases along with “their desire not to let [him] out of their hands” (194).

When Henson and Shipov determine that they must escape, their rationales articulate a keen understanding of the economic factors determining their conditions. Henson knows that his family’s plight stems from the perceived economic necessities of his owners, who depend upon his skills for solvency, either by exploiting them or putting them on the market for sale. In order to preserve his family, Henson turns “[his] thoughts to [himself] and [his] own energies” (58), resolving to leave with his family and using the same intellect which made him valuable to his master to affect his own escape. Similarly, after the stress of unmanageable debts proves fatal to Shipov’s father, Shipov determines “to try [his] luck in some alien land” (138), travelling across Russia and even into Prussian territory while conducting trade and doing managerial work to support his flight. Both agree in spirit with Nikitenko’s declaration that he wished to “live and work at [his] own risk” (195), and like Henson’s, Shipov’s solution—using his contacts to help him escape with his wife and utilizing his skills as a trader to deal profitably in oil and wine during his travels—repurposes his abilities to achieve his freedom.

That slaves and serfs could manipulate their own market value into a justification for their freedom and argue convincingly that they could find success even when in servitude signifies a great awareness on their part of the economy into which their work played. Before managing to escape, William Wells Brown does hired work for publicans, steamboat captains, and even St. Louis Times editor Elijah P. Lovejoy. Though his justifications to the reader for his attempted escape are moral and personal, when confronted by his master upon recapture he
simply “told him that as [he] had served him faithfully, and had been the means of putting a number of hundreds of dollars into his pocket, [he] thought [he] had a right to [his] liberty” (33).

Most likely, Brown’s intention was not to convince, but to critique; by acknowledging the futility of moral arguments to his master and instead reminding him that he has already paid more than his market value, Brown counters his master’s claim that he has been treated fairly and posits his own viability as an actor in free society. Purlevskii, Shipov, and Nikitenko echo this sentiment, as their success even under serfdom lends them a singular credibility as critics of their economic system and potential contributors to a free economy. That several such writers find in the unfree labor economy a definite measure of their own economic successes to wield against the system itself further evidences their ability to analyze and repurpose the rhetoric surrounding their enslavement, turning the modern ideals of their societies into weapons against the economic practices that support them.

These authors accompany this attention to their own abilities with a parallel attention to their flawed and weak-willed masters. In contrast to the industry of his slaves, Austin Steward recalls that Captain Helm “was not a good business man, unless, we call horse-racing, fox-hunting, and card-playing, business” (16).12 His initial sarcasm is uncharacteristic of his generally sympathetic picture of Helm; to Steward, the Captain’s status as a slaveholder renders him pathetic, as his disastrous incompetence and complete lack of regard for his own “pecuniary interests” result in his own ruin and the misery of countless slaves (33, 72). A slaveholder who

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12 Steward’s criticism here is actually very generous when one consider that Helm’s habit of “sometimes betting very high and losing accordingly” places the business of gambling even further beyond his talents than plantation farming (16).
“prospered on the unrequited toil of slaves” (33), Helm was never “brought up to honorable industry” and thus cannot succeed in the American economy (72).

Befitting the disparity in ability between the authors and their former owners, the narratives of Steward, Henson, and Nikitenko all end in a complete reversal of fortune between master and slave which reaffirms the justice inherent in the work-reward paradigm that they espouse. The first third of Steward’s narrative is a dual biography, contrasting his own search for freedom and individual success with the slaveholding Captain Helm’s descent into poverty and disgrace. Beginning the narrative as a wealthy Virginian with more than one hundred slaves, Helm’s mismanagement of his estate and massive debt forces him to move to New York and auction his property for forty thousand dollars—“a pretty sum in the hands of a man who had been accustomed to look after his own interests,” but “of little account” to the incompetent Helm, who “acted as if there could be no end of it” (33). Helm is wasteful and often swindled, paying the highest prices for supplies during his trip. The initial move to Sodus Bay circa 1801-02 turns to disaster when Helm purchases forested land and quickly runs out of provisions; the underfed slaves are unequipped to clear the trees, and “it was useless to consult the Captain, for he knew still less about matters of that kind” (35). When Steward seeks the aid of the abolitionists Moore and Comstock in securing his liberty, they inform him that the ignorant Helm has helpfully given him the legal ground he needs by hiring him out illegally and accidentally granting him freedom13 (68).

13 As of 1788 the sale of slaves in the state of New York was illegal, and any slave sold in violation of the law was legally free. The 1800 case Fish v. Fisher interpreted the act to extend to cases in which slaves were hired out to work for other masters, as such hiring was considered “evasion of the act” and therefore also illegal (71).
Having weathered a financially disastrous divorce and failed in his business, gambling ventures, and even a scheme to kidnap his former slaves and sell them in the South, Captain Helm, who “had for some time been far from prosperous” is now “quite poor” (72), and is soon reduced to living “with one of his slave women, and was supported by public charity” (89), while “[m]any of the slaves . . . were getting their liberty and doing well” (57). Jealous of Steward in particular, who had purchased land on Main Street for five hundred dollars and kept “a few hundred dollars” in savings (81, 89), Helm attempts to sue his former slave for his property. The suit—which, owing to the Captain’s death, never goes to court—is an ironic reversal, as the once wealthy slaveholder is reduced to trying to secure his former slaver’s house and savings. To Steward, however, little has changed beyond the narrowing of the captain’s power. By dying under the care of one former slave and suing another for the fruits of his labor, he is continuing to live “on the unrequited toil of slaves” as he has always done (33), though circumstances now better illustrate the nature of his parasitism.

This same reversal appears in Henson’s narrative when the author revisits the plantation of his youth after the Civil War. The respectably dressed former slave contrasts sharply with the ruined plantation, “now but a wilderness; the most desolate, demoralized place one can imagine,” untended by the “idle family” of “modern pharaohs” who were “visited with the Almighty’s wrath because they refused to let His people depart out of their bondage” (159). Though Henson roots his initial remarks in Biblical allusion, he focuses the majority of his description on the economic causes of his masters’ dissolution. His now elderly former mistress, whom he meets inside after “the very door sprang ajar as [he] drove up and stopped before it,” explains that the plantation collapsed after the war because she “never could pay niggers for work, so [she] let ’em all go” (160). He corrects her when she observes that he has become a gentleman, saying
that he “always was” (159); after this, she calls him “rich” and immediately asks, “What have you brought me?” (160). Henson’s presentation of his former mistress, from its emphasis on her bad manners and comparatively unrefined speech to the inclusion of her flippant dismissal of her former workers, studiously evidences her unfitness to manage an estate. Just as in Captain Helm’s case, without the skilled labor and careful guidance of their former slaves, the family could never keep the plantation functioning, and now the economic fortunes of the slave and master have reversed.

Aleksandr Nikitenko’s story contains a similar criticism of both the moral character and economic capability of the Russian pomeshchik. Born the eldest son of an impoverished serf clerk and a near-illiterate serf woman, Nikitenko, due his father’s connections, his own intelligence and charisma, and sheer good fortune, makes personal friends of military officers, government officials, and aristocrats, mingling among them roughly as an equal, although considerably poorer and more shabbily dressed. In an unlikely series of events, the young Nikitenko and his father manage to impress nearly every stratum of Russian society, including a successful petition on his father’s part to the tsarina herself. From their collection of letters and legal documents to Nikitenko’s own status as a prominent scholar and educator, the two amass a documentary chronicle of their unusual success within the system.

Having found freedom and risen to the station of a university professor and respected government censor, Nikitenko recalls that his father’s master Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetev, who inadvertently started the family’s uplift by forcibly sending Nikitenko’s father, Vasilii, to St. Petersburg to pursue a musical education, is “not innately evil but terribly corrupted by his wealth” (6). Accustomed to having anything he desires and entirely unfamiliar with work, Nikolai Petrovich falls to such a state of corruption that Nikitenko claims that he became an
object of disgust even among other nobles. In 1811, the family relocates to the estate of Marya Fyodorovna Bedryaga, a noblewoman whose peasants “suffered beneath the yolk of serfdom”\(^{14}\) (54). “Many called her cruel, and indeed she was,” Nikitenko says, “but only to the extent that ignorance and unlimited power made most Russian nobles behave cruelly in those days” (59). Unversed in managerial work and easily misled, their new mistress relies on dishonest advisors and sues her neighbors and serfs so often and so frivolously that Nikitenko jokes that “[a]cquaintance with her rarely ended without a summons to court” (59). As Bedryaga’s estate manager, Vasiliy constantly fights to save her serfs and land from mismanagement; in the end, he becomes absolutely indispensable but so exhausted by his work that he flees to another estate. Government officials fair no better in Nikitenko’s estimation, as the post-War of 1812 administration “displayed a mania for imitating German customs” and beautification based on their campaigns in Europe (110), and Governor-general Balashov (whom he meets while living in Ostrogozhsk) in particular forces the townspeople to forgo necessities in order to decorate the village in a manner that he had “admired abroad” (110).

After educating himself and working from the age of fourteen as a teacher for both noble and serf children, Nikitenko writes to Count Sheremetyev, a young relative of Nikolai Petrovich, to petition for his freedom, asking himself, “[W]hat financial loss would he suffer from the release of one insignificant boy out of 150,000 people in his power?” However, “as [he] learned later, Count Sheremetyev was a very narrow-minded person” and sends a reply that reads “Not

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\(^{14}\) Among Marya Fyodorovna’s eccentric cruelties, Nikitenko especially notes her employment a serf named Stepan Stetska as “a master and enthusiast of flogging, especially of girls” (60), her misogynistic attitude toward her housemaids, whom she disallows from ever marrying or engaging in sexual activity (60-61), and a instance in which she has Vasiliy briefly arrested on false charges as a petty act of revenge (94-95).
worthy of attention” (170, 171). Nikitenko is infuriated by the revelation that he may be “fated forever to remain in the power of another person who was intellectually and morally worthless” and refuses the prince’s counteroffer to become his secretary (195). Though Nikitenko reasons that he could have easily exploited the prince’s offer to “do deals behind his back” that “could be lucrative,” and thus make a fortune off of his control of the prince’s business affairs, he cannot abide the idea of being “kept on a short leash” by “the narrow-minded son of a nobleman” (172, 195, 171).

Mirroring Steward’s relationship with Helm, Nikitenko sees a reversal in his relationship with Count Sheremetev whereby “[he] had become [Sheremetev’s] despot” by the time of his release (199). Despite his great wealth and control over tens of thousands of serfs, the young count is “accustomed to following orders” from his family and friends and “not having strong feeling one way or the other about anything,” which makes him incredibly susceptible to pressure from his peers. In order to affect his manumission, Nikitenko befriends a group of military officers, government officials, and aristocrats (some of them future Decembrists) to bother the young count. Nikitenko’s friend Ryleyev convinces Sheremetev’s army fellows to pressure him; society ladies take interest in his cause and pester the count whenever they have the chance; and after Sheremetev promises Nikitenko his freedom only to later renege, one noblewoman pretends not to have heard about his change of mind and makes a scene at a society gathering, causing him a good deal of embarrassment when she calls the supposed manumission “a wonderful deed, before which pale all [his] other good deeds.” Humiliated, Sheremetev complains of the burden Nikitenko has become, and Nikitenko feels that the “tables were turned” (199). Similar to Steward’s case, Nikitenko’s freedom accompanies a reversal of fortunes, as the author finds himself occupying a more respected place in his master’s sphere than his master
does, and his freedom becomes, in his view, the inevitable outcome of his superior qualifications. Nikitenko’s claim that “the tables were turned” echoes Henson’s declaration when his young master falls ill during a trip south that “the tables were utterly turned” (56).

Underlying such reversals, in which the rightful order is at least temporarily restored, is a deeper criticism of the viability of unfree labor economies. Though the serf and slave authors acknowledge the staying power of their unfree economies as cultural and political institutions, they observe in them discrepancies, inefficiencies, and a high degree of arbitrariness that lends them stability at the expense of innovation and progress. Savva Purlevskii’s narrative follows the fortunes of village of Velikoe (population: 1,494 “male souls” [Gorshkov 13]), the center of the largely non-agrarian Yaroslavl’ province in east-central Russia. Unlike the villages described in other serf narratives, only 6.2 percent of the serfs’ annual income in Purlevskii’s region came from farming; Velikoe was the center of one of the finest linen-producing businesses in the world, and during Purlevskii’s time as bailiff in the 1820s the village expanded into “secondary industries producing tools and equipment for the linen industry,” becoming one of the “proto-industrial villages” whose growth and prosperity “underlay much of Russia’s urban development” (Gorshkov 13). Gorshkov’s introduction to the narrative observes that Purlevskii “describes the peasants’ profound abilities to exercise various economic and social pursuits with relative freedom from the landlords” and demonstrates “how the serfs, often portrayed in history as ‘backward’ and ‘isolated,’ proved capable of transforming their ‘traditional’ villages into ‘modern’ urban, industrial areas” (18).

15 By 1835 (the year before Purlevskii’s escape), the village of Velikoe was producing 117 thousand yards of fine cloth annually, and later won a prize at the 1851 Crystal Palace Park International Exhibition (Gorshkov 12-14).
Despite his village’s successes, Purlevskii is critical of serfdom’s viability and considers Velikoe’s industry to be the result of the serfs’ attempts to escape traditional serf roles and subvert the expectations for serf work and behavior. Gorshkov attributes his critique primarily to moral indignation, arguing that Purlevskii’s writing “reflected” how the “dominant language of the period . . . denounced serfdom’s oppressions and humiliations,” as “[r]elative economic freedom aside, Purlevskii views serfdom as a harsh bondage, a condition unjust and unacceptable to humankind” (18, 19). Gorshkov further claims that serfdom “continued to prove its economic and social viability,” but “[i]n the eyes of most nineteenth-century Russians . . . had become a culturally outmoded and morally unacceptable institution.” However, while Purlevskii does attribute “all social grievances and economic problems” to serfdom (19), he continually undermines the notion that serfdom was still a viable institution with a history of his landlords’ poor economic planning, which he blames for the village’s past failures and eventual decline, his own decision to escape, and the generally poor conditions endured by serfs everywhere. To Purlevskii, the success of the village depends upon certain values—industry, honesty, and unity—that rarely flourish under serfdom, and the village’s heyday comes when the serfs manage to embrace these values while pitfalls appear wherever serfdom successfully crushes them.

Industrialization is still relatively new to Velikoe by the time of Purlevskii’s rise, and his narrative recalls the village’s recent history of pre-industrial oppression. Purlevskii’s story begins during the time of his grandfather, when the Iakovlev family first purchased Velikoe in 1780 from Anikita Repnin, a kind but shiftless military man under whom the estate had failed. Purlevskii’s family remembers these as difficult times. The people were extremely poor, and the landlord built a cotton mill “and forced everyone who could not pay the designated rent to work there—in other words, almost the entire estate” (32). Working essentially as proto-industrial
slaves, the serfs answer to a corrupt German-bailiff who demands bribes and punishes men by making them clean his floor with their tongues and beards, and the estate is managed by a non-serf steward who “enjoyed the unquestioned confidence of [the village’s] lord,” turning a profit on everything that the village produced (36). Such stories, Purlevskii says, “made little impression on me” at the time, but “When I remembered them later, they reinforced my belief that our peasant dependence was bitter!” (34). Under this system, “[e]veryone began to care only about himself, resorting to any small-minded calculations and any means to get money” (32). Just as Brown uses an incident in which he tricks a free man into taking a whipping meant for him to demonstrate how slavery “makes its victims lying and mean” (22-23), Purlevskii attributes the suspicion and competitiveness among the serfs to the harshness of serfdom.

The village’s fortunes change due in large part to Purlevskii’s grandfather, Petr Petrovich Purlevskii, who worked in Moscow and studied “Muscovite trading habits and other things” and thereby brings new knowledge and organization to the village (46). Petr Petrovich tells the people of Velikoe that though “Almighty Providence” has made them serfs, they “have not been deprived of the means to better [their] way of life”; they are “the cause” of their own “disastrous situation” because there is no “accord among [them],” and “[o]ther people make a more profitable use of [their] own market than [they] do.” His solution is krugivaia poruka (collective responsibility); to put an end to the “unfairness and deception among [them]” they must “all bail one another out for such and such an amount of money, according to each person’s ability and behavior,” thus limiting debt and saving the villagers from ruin (44). Petr Petrovich is, to Purlevskii, the perfect model for what a serf should be—pious, industrious, intelligent, and concerned with the wellbeing of the entire mir—and his narrative identifies all of the successes of the village with these ideal serf attributes. After Petr Petrovich’s success, the family takes on
leadership of the community, with Purlevskii’s father representing the landlord “in courts and judicial institutions” in St. Petersburg, and Purlevskii himself eventually acting as the village bailiff (63).

Stories such as Purlevskii’s in which serfs display the potential to rise in the world despite their serf status are common but also demonstrate the unfairness and unfeasibility of serfdom, as these successful serfs’ superficial obliteration of class boundaries, illuminates their imperviousness and reach all the more clearly. As a writer and tutor with great aspirations, Nikitenko often brushes shoulders with the elites of Russia, but no matter how closely his manners and way of thinking come to theirs, his status as a serf prevents his assimilation and stifles his quest for formal education. This irony is exemplified in one of his declarations on the condition of humankind:

> the main role in our moral and intellectual development is played by the stock with which nature has endowed us. The influence of external conditions is secondary and subordinate to our natural abilities. (105)

Though Nikitenko is outwardly convinced that genetic makeup decides character, his narrative is continually troubled by the pressures and limitations that serfdom place on the serf’s moral and intellectual development. Nikitenko’s dear friends in the surprisingly cosmopolitan village of Ostrogozhsk are intellectuals, artists, and reformers by nature; however, “[n]ature, having endowed them generously with intelligence and sensitivity, neglected to place them in an environment befitting their inclinations” (120). As Nikitenko begins to move among the officers of the Moscow regiment visiting the village, he finds himself enmeshed in a new and more intellectual social class that stirs his aspirations for freedom, but while his “castles in the air grew higher and higher, [his] thoughts of suicide grew stronger and stronger. [His] castles were destined to collapse, and [he] would perish beneath the ruins” (136). The author finds himself
leading a “double life” among the soldiers, appearing among them as “a carefree youth” while privately living as “a despairing one” (135).

The tragic serf father is a common thread throughout the serf narratives, as Nikitenko, Purlevskii, Shipov, and Petr O. all allude to their fathers’ ruin, each attributing it to the degrading economic conditions of serfdom. Nikitenko’s once-proud father Vasily dies young after periods of dissoluteness, abdication of his responsibility as breadwinner, and a passionate and open love triangle with his best friend’s widow. In direct contradiction to his statement on the primacy of genetics in determining personality, Nikitenko laments his father’s inability to overcome his circumstances: “Poor, poor, father! His talents, the nobility of his feelings, the honesty of his deeds—what good did they do him? All these things were distorted in Father, crushed by the environment and circumstances.” He then asks, “[c]an he be blamed for not overcoming his fate, for letting his passions run away from him at times?. . . . No, let people look for heroes where they please, but not in the Russian serf, for whom every asset in his character was a curse, a new reason for his downfall” (148). The tragedy of his father’s life exemplifies the larger tragedy of unfree labor. Like many American ex-slave writers, Nikitenko identifies in serfdom a system that commodifies serf talent to the exclusion of the serf’s own interests and quashes humanistic ideals. Vasily, “to his last breath, retained so much respect for his trampled human dignity that despite the ignominy of his position, he did not disgrace himself with any dirty business or a single dishonest thought” (148); this high moral standard renders him tragic in light of Nikitenko’s narrative, as his simple honesty is never rewarded.

Despite Nikitenko’s stated claim that “people look for heroes where they please, but not in the Russian serf, for whom every asset in his character was a curse, a new reason for his downfall” (148), he does characterize Vasily as an ideal serf in the vein of Petr Purlevskii, who
is capable of continually proving his superiority to his masters through his moral bravery and unimpeachable work. When Vasily is able to successfully petition the tsarina to grant him freedom to leave his master’s property and to seek employment elsewhere, he achieves something of a legendary status as a legal writer and negotiator and takes on the role of manager and legal representative for the despotic Marya Fyodorovna Bedryaga, working to restore order to her estate and help her badly treated serfs. His crowning achievement comes when he literally saves his mistress from mortal peril; having previously married her daughter off to a Cossack general who in time grew weary of her verbal abuse and “thought up a purely Cossack approach to bridling his mother-in-law and his wife,” Marya Fyodorvna finds herself and her daughter unlawfully imprisoned and surrounded by armed guards (83). Vasily, in a move that echoes Henson’s charitable decision to nurse his young master back to health, dutifully seeks out his employer and bribes the guards to set her free. Upon returning her to her estate, “she announced for all to hear that she owed her reappearance on God’s earth to [Vasily] alone” (84); however, she soon forgets her debt and attempts to sue him to prevent his leaving her estate to seek a better position.

The figures of Vasily Nikitenko and Petr Petrovich Purlevskii find an echo in the archetypal figures of several slave narratives, who are able to maintain a sense of pride and autonomy in spite of their status as chattel. William Wells Brown relates the story of a slave named Randall who is “considered the most valuable” slave on his plantation owing to his “great strength and power” (2). Randall’s story is one of pyrrhic personal victory over the impersonal system of slavery; the brutal overseer Mr. Cook dislikes Randall for his proud declaration “that no man should ever whip him—that he would die first” [3]), but he is unable to find fault with Randall’s peerless work. When Cook gives Randall an impossible task and threatens to whip him
for failing it, Randall argues that it is not his work ethic, but the task, that is problematic. His eventual punishment comes only after much embarrassment at Cook’s expense, as the heroic slave bests group of Cook’s white friends in a fight and survives a gunshot before being subdued. As Gerald Jaynes suggests, figures like Randall, whether real or mythologized, represent the ideal slave from the slave’s perspective—they “worked not from fear, but from a freely made choice not to die,” and “accommodated not to the owner’s authority, but to physical reality” (106, 107). Diligent, intelligent, and exuding their own “value” as powerful workers or efficient planners, these characters embody the dream of overcoming the yoke of slavery to create success, and their punishments expose their masters’ weaknesses and underscore the ironic inefficiencies of the system.

Such analyses of unfree labor are a chief concern for several slave and serf writers, and though no market for such materials existed in Imperial Russia, individual serf writers forwarded them nevertheless. For “News About Russia” author Petr O. in particular, the lack of serf writings is symptomatic of the purposeful suppression of the visibility of the serf’s economic challenges to their enthrallment; limited by government censorship and the absence of a market, serfs, the poem repeatedly suggests, suffered all over Russia without receiving significant exposure among Russia’s nobility. While the reading public was growing less and less favorable toward serfdom as time wore on, the question of serfdom’s continued existence was

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16 Nikitenko reflected Petr. O.’s sentiments on censorship in his diaries. Though firm in his belief that censorship was necessary to the maintenance of order in Russia, Nikitenko wrote that “keeping learned ideas from being advanced through the printed word” constituted a “crusade against knowledge,” and that sentiments not recorded in “censorship and decorum” in print would inevitably be spread with undisguised “bitterness born of irritation and indignation” by “word of mouth” (xix). Such is the case in “News About Russia,” which attempts to take the “bitterness” of peasant oral culture to the tsar in print.
not to be decided by any electorate, but by the tsars. Petr O. attempted to circumvent the law, the opinion of the literate elite, and the social barriers between serfs and the ruling class by submitting “News About Russia” directly to Prince Petr Georgievich Ol’denburgskii, a liberal aristocrat and relative to the tsar, with the ambitious instructions that it be read personally by the tsar on the condition “(1) that he read everything contained in the manuscript; and (2) that after reading it, he not prosecute the writer” (38). That the crown did not accept “News About Russia” and later dismissed it as “blameworthy” only serves to underscore the poet’s assertion that serfdom was sustained by Russia’s unwillingness to observe the institution critically (39).

However, the poet’s efforts represent an attempt to bypass the immediate authority of the pomeshchik and appeal to what he sees as a higher order of morality in the character of the nation currently obscured by the evil of serfdom. Rhetoric pertaining to blindness and perception pervade the poem; the narrator’s story begins as he travels home to his village in Yaroslavl’, his mind crowded with idyllic images of his serf village and “the sight / Of green fields! And the clear stream / With its pools, where in childhood we swam” (42). As he embarks on the ferry these nostalgic “images grew dim” as his “weary eyes” fall upon the people of Yaroslavl’, drunken, unhappy, and “Paying no heed to nature’s / Magnificence” (43-44). The poet calls upon the reader to “Look at everything with more perception! / See how the Almighty in heaven / Watches over nature’s kingdom! . . . then look at the decrepit settlements, / At the life of the ill-fated muzhiks (serf men), / Observe the dominance of earthly powers / And the false splendor of their homes” (46). Though nature in Yaroslavl’ “has come alive,” none “from among our people . . . feast their eyes upon her. / The Poor slaves in the village live lives / Half-senseless, superstitious, and crude, As though in expectance of destruction” (46-47). The poet’s journey is characterized throughout by such juxtapositions of the natural beauty of the province and the
desolation of serf villages plagued with famine and overwork; the current situation under
serfdom is at odds with Russia’s natural potential and hides the underlying beauty and humanity
of the nation.

Despite continued claims that “The people’s minds, like some ragged weather vane, / Spin round in lies like foul weather, / And they wander further into the darkness” so that “not one ray of enlightenment / Penetrates that burden through to us” (50, 56), the poem regularly demonstrates a collective intuition and understanding of their condition on the part of the serfs. As the poet continues his journey home and engages with the serfs of Yaroslavl’, all demonstrate a deep moral and economic understanding of the root of the problem of serfdom. The poet, wondering if the serfs’ “lives of poverty” could be “due to sloth,” asks an elderly cart driver to identify the source of the local serfs’ desperation (47). The driver responds that the “source of all our poverty” is “billeted to our homes . . . by the custom of the nobles”; the “vices of the governors / Have waxed beyond control,” “the place is governed stupidly,” and the serfs are worked too hard and are taxed so heavily that even the driver, “already seventy years old,” is ordered “to work alongside young men (The sweat pouring down [his] face like a river)” (48).

Worse than the burden of hard labor is the fact that the driver must watch all the fruit of his labor disappear under the greed and mismanagement of the nobles: “We laymen have to work, it’s true, / And labor is useful to everyone on earth. / But what a pity: the nobles’ robbery And waste take everything from us!” (49). The serfs “work and work” but have “nothing,” including any ability to receive education or improve their lots (48). “All our talents perish with us,” the driver laments, and “Slave labor is our inheritance” (56). Another serf, Stepan, later expresses a similar sentiment, saying that if securing basic necessities was all the serfs struggled with, “Enough we’d find, and through our labor find / Enlightenment,” but serfdom makes this
impossible (84). “Poverty” consumes whole towns “like a fire,” and it is always “the manorial estate” that “scorches the peasants” (53). According to the driver, the serfs “knew long ago / That [their] lords are the cause of [their] poverty / And Stupidity,” and “Already long ago, we should have made it known / That the people here are suffering / Under slavery” (49-50).

Time stands still in Petr’s Russia as generation after generation of serf suffers invisibly, the only possible solution being to confront the tsar with serf knowledge. As he travels through the “wasteland” of “half-ruined” villages, the poet “noticed a murmuring against poverty, / Expressed to the world. But the world did not perceive / Their half-muted whispers” (53). Because the world ignores the serf’s mutterings and “silently / But firmly . . . sustains” their “ignorance,” Petr’s father, “a man of ambition” whose inevitable failure under serfdom left him to “To dissipation, drunkenness” like so many other serf fathers (40), advises him never to “shine / With intellect.” “Don’t brag about your money,” he tells his son, “Don’t build a fine, a well-made home . . . don’t sew / Yourself good clothes,” “just live as simply as / You can, in just the very way that all we / Ignorant people do.” Most importantly, he must learn how “to seem like an idiotic / Beggar, but hide from [his master] your mind and actual / Condition. / Hide everything each time you’re asked / The reasons why we’re living as we do— / Hide it till the day you die!” (70-72). Disregarding his father’s warning that the tsar will not listen to the “dull and colorless words” of an uneducated serf and might banish him “to a place where not even ravens / Bother to carry off the bones,” Petr submits his poem “taken from the life of the mir, from the deeds and words of the people” to “approach the tsar” directly “And advise him on how all might be free” (75).

Petr’s petition to the tsar echoes the fairly common idea among serf writers that “fate might oppress you, but God And tsar are always with you!” (64), and, while mobilizing what may seem
like a simple pro-monarchical statement, such writers locate an inherent support for freedom not in an elected body or pro-capitalist economy, but in liberal ideals inherent to the modern world. References to the tsar in “News About Russia” are at once critical and deferential, attributing to the tsar both the same blindness that characterizes the rest of Russia and a morality and justness owing to the liberalizing legacy of Peter the Great. Petr eulogizes the deceased tsar as a man “taken into the skies, like a god” because he acted as “a father to his children” and “Worked miracles until he reached the grave.” The liberal Peter alone “Saw everything with his luminous eyes,” and though “the wise one left” long ago, his modernization of Russia and supposed care for his serfs “bestowed” “his light . . . upon the ages” (44). “News About Russia” explicitly calls upon the tsar to realize his potential as Peter the Great’s successor and become “like the tsar of tsars in ancient times, / And greater still than Peter was great” (87), and enthusiastically begs the tsar to ensure his apotheosis by becoming an emancipator—“Our great tsar—let your new law / Rain down upon us!” (74).

Nikolai Smirnov, too, appeals directly to the authority of the sovereign when pleading his case, in essence begging for clemency in the face of a barbaric system. Having been captured after fleeing his master’s property with a large sum of stolen money, Smirnov finds himself sentenced first to death, then to “public flogging with a knout, accompanied by the slicing-off of his left ear and exile to his masters’ estate” (23), and finally to “be given ten blows with the knout, have his nostrils ripped open, be branded . . . and sent in shackles to perpetual hard labor in Riga” (7). Outwardly, his plea appeals primarily to his ignorance of the law and poor health;

\footnote{Smirnov’s sentence was changed “in response to an old decree” made on Sep 30 1754 that technically abolished the death penalty.}
he claims to have acted irresponsibly and to have been unaware of the magnitude of his crime and observes that his chronically bad health would quickly turn any harsh physical punishment into a death sentence.

Underlying this plea is a clear intellectual appeal, as Smirnov addresses his audience not merely from the position of a subject addressing his monarch, but as one enlightened intellect to another. Despite being disallowed from formal registration by his masters, Smirnov managed to study privately at Moscow University under Russian legal theorist and critic Semyon Efimovich Desnitskii, who instilled in him a love of knowledge and a desire to become an architect. Smirnov learned quickly, and between jobs helping “to carry out various plans having to do with wastelands and settlements” owned by his masters, he found time to study draftsmanship, painting, architecture, geodesics, and the fundamentals of mathematics,” as well as English, French, Italian, history, geography, mythology, iconology, chemistry, and physics (25-26). Troubled by his inability to further his studies after being forced to do menial census work and frustrated by the irony of living with the “degrading name of slave” while becoming increasingly familiar with the finer points of modern philosophy, Smirnov comes to find serfdom “utterly hateful” and suffers a nervous breakdown during which he intentionally neglects his health in hopes that he will die (26-27). During this time, he writes his master a letter petitioning for release and describing his “total detestation of and incapacity for slavery”; predictably, this only “incurr[ed] the wrath and disdain of [his] masters,” leading him to swear in his “innermost soul that [he] would either succeed in obtaining [his] freedom or perish” (27, 28).

18 Fittingly, the rebellious serf’s idol and mentor was himself a one-time student of Adam Smith who attended his lectures on “moral philosophy” and may have known him personally (25).
Smirnov’s references to his own knowledge, sensitivity, and sense of justice unite him with the nobility through the values of their shared liberal education; such enlightened persons, his deposition suggests, would be naturally appalled by any system that would sentence such an individual to “the most painful and dishonorable death” (33). After his arrest, he claims that he “began to see just what a terrible labyrinth [his] unreasonable temper and youthful inexperience had led [him] into” but was still unable “to predict even the smallest part of that terrible and painful punishment that [he] deserved in accord with the full justice of the law” (32). His reference to the law’s “full justice” is edged in irony; though he admits guilt, he also implies that his serf status is a considerably greater wrong than the crimes that he committed to escape. His plea for the tsarina’s intercession defers to the fairness and justness of the law in principle while also implying that a just government would stay the execution of such laws on the grounds of their unfitting brutality.

Smirnov and Petr O.’s pleas to the tsar link the ruler and his serfs through their shared moral clarity, but also through their common ability to revise and reinvent Russia’s social structure. Nikitenko wrote in his diary that “Our present emperor knows how to rule,” as he “works tirelessly, reviews everything himself, and tries to understand everything.” His problem, however, is that his government lacks anyone else of “independent mind and noble spirit” and is packed with “courtiers, but not ministers.” The remedy to the government’s corruption and stagnation lies in the serf “producing class”; “if only our emperor would devise some means of breaking the chains of our ten million slaves,” Nikitenko reasons, “How it would revitalize our nation!” (Diary 12). Like Smirnov and Petr O., Nikitenko attributes to the tsar a humane interest in the nation and a rational desire for reform, but, even more explicitly, his secret writings announce the Russian serf as the key to the country’s future. Were the tsar to take away the
authority of those “whose existence consist solely in their eating, drinking and sleeping peacefully at the expense of a producing class” and grant the serfs freedom (12), the problems that Nikitenko observes in the tsar’s government would disappear.

Though the serf authors were relatively unknown in their time, their writings against serfdom gave voice to sentiments that were far from uncommon among serfs and former serfs, and it was businesspeople, writers, and intellectuals like themselves who would come to comprise late Imperial Russia’s economically mobile classes. As different as these serfs’ pleas for change may sometimes be from their counterparts in American slave narratives, the substance beneath them is much the same: whether looking to the authority of the tsars or the sympathy of Northern abolitionists, the unfree writers of Russia and the American South argued for emancipation based on a variety of similar economic critiques. By resisting the epistemologies which supported unfree economies, these writers participated broadly in a global narrative that acknowledged emerging work-reward paradigms and the systems and values of Western modernity but focused them inward, understanding both unfree labor and liberal democratization as countervailing regional approaches to modernization. While some slaveholders took an essentially reverse-Marxist approach to economic theory by heartily embracing the idea that “All society settles down into a classification of capitalists and laborers,” the latter category being sometimes “nominally free” but always “virtually slaves” (Brown 76, 75), serf and slave writers continually challenged both the fairness and efficiency of such a system, arguing in essence that free labor is necessary to the economic development of their nations and their positive participation in the global economy.
CHAPTER 2
MORTGAGED HEARTS AND INVENTORIED SOULS: DOSTOEVSKY AND SOUTHERN MODERNIST INTERVENTIONS

It is a well-established fact that many writers of the Southern Renaissance looked to Russian authors—most especially, Fyodor Dostoevsky—as important literary models for their depictions of their own milieu. The letters and catalogued personal libraries of the Renaissance writers nearly always include some address to the expected tomes of the Great Russians, Dostoevsky’s four masterworks *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), and *Demons* (1872) among them. Flannery O’Connor wrote of her great appreciation for Dostoevsky (Kinney 2), and William Faulkner spoke frequently and plainly about the Russian author’s influence. Most notably, Carson McCullers’s 1941 essay “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature” posits the two traditions as close literary analogues and identifies nineteenth-century Russian authors like Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy as the forefathers of the shared tradition in which the South and Russia unknowingly cooperated. Following just six months after the publication of her essay “Look Homeward, Americans,” a call for U.S. writers to avoid looking to the foreign for material and “turn inward” to “be

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1 *Demons* is alternately titled *Devils of The Possessed* depending on the translation for the Russian Бесы (Bésy, literally, “demons”). The Southern modernists, being familiar with Constance Garnett’s translations, would likely have known it as *The Possessed*.

homesick for our own familiar land, this land that is worthy of our nostalgia” (213), McCullers now paradoxically posits that literary substance may be borrowed from the Russian Realists.

McCullers unites these two seemingly contradictory literary missions through what she sees as their shared goal of revising Western and Northern narratives and proposing oppositional literary forms. Indeed, from the time that the fifteen-year-old McCullers discovered “Dostoevski, Chekhov, and Tolstoy” and turned her thoughts toward the shared experiences of the South and Russia (251), she began to envision both a cultural kinship between the two regions and a literary strategy by which she might unite them against the accepted Euro-American tradition. “Southern literature,” McCullers wrote in 1941, “can only be considered to have made its start during the past fifteen years” (257), and without the advantage of an appealing literary history of its own, the South, McCullers believed, was in danger of succumbing to American “homesickness” unless an association with another oeuvre could challenge its assumed parochialism.¹

McCullers fixates especially on the “duality of experience” in the Russian society of Dostoevsky’s fiction, seeing the same duality in the American South (Holland 33). The South itself was internally divided, not only by segregation, but also, as McCullers observes, by “a division of classes” so extreme that it forms “a definite peasant class” much like the one that existed in “old Russia” (254). On the national level, the provincial South was so distant from the North that “Economically and in other ways,” the South “has been used as a sort of colony to the

¹ For McCullers, Ellen Glasgow’s Barren Ground was the “first real novel” produced in the South and “marked the beginning of an uncertain period of development” in the early twentieth century which blossomed more fully with the influence of Faulkner and Caldwell in the 1920s and 1930s. Before Glasgow, the novels of the South were restricted to “old romances” that celebrated the plantation era, a political and sentimental literature that does not fit McCullers’ proposed Southern canon (257).
rest of the nation,” having “interests and a personality distinctly its own” while suffering poverty “unlike anything known in other parts of this country” (254). Thus configured, the two regions’ shared position in the geography of modernism allowed the South to also share in Russia’s “unique ability to completely understand Europe”—or in the South’s case, America—“while remaining outside it” (Holland 30), and the similarities between Russian and Southern literatures become not only a consequence of their peripheral status, but a reaffirmation of Southern literature’s mission to revise Western narrative forms.

Though the numerous studies2 of Southerners’ “discover[y]” of the Great Russians as “forerunners” of “existentialism and literary ‘modernism’” have identified the sociopolitical and cultural ties between them (Morson 128), in reality coincidences in the history between “Old Russia” and McCullers’s “Georgia rooms” were actually fewer and less significant than many Southern authors and the scholars who studied them have suggested (“How I” 251).3 Nevertheless, Dostoevsky’s very foreignness made claims to literary and spiritual kinship with him all the more tempting to a literary movement loosely united by a desire to strike out against

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2 See Tatiana Morozova’s “Faulkner Reads Dostoevsky” and Maria Bloshteyn’s “Anguish for the Sake of Anguish” and “Dostoevsky and the Literature of the American South” for prominent examples. For an extensive if dated study of Faulkner’s relationship with Dostoevsky’s fiction, see Jean Weisgerber’s *Faulkern et Dostoïevski: confluence et influence* [Faulkner and Dostoevsky: Influence and Confluence, translated by Dean McWilliams] (1968).

3 Though characterized historically by a tradition of unfree labor and deep socio-economic divides, the “Old Russia” to which McCullers imprecisely likened the American South was undemocratic, militarily active, and, by comparison to the current order of the U.S. South, incredibly old (“How I” 251). While often worried by its perceived cultural indebtedness to Western Europe, Russia was neither isolated nor considered internal to a greater power as was the South, and it was famous in part for the borders that it shared with myriad cultures. Furthermore, Russia’s size rendered it polyphonic to a much greater degree even than the Mexican and Caribbean-influenced South, making it much more difficult to nail down a precise Russian character than the novels of the Russian moralists would suggest.
the hegemony of national and European models and create a distinctly Southern literature. The idea of confluence or kinship, even to a greatly diluted degree, with a predominantly non-Western oeuvre could allow Southern writers to conceptualize a new literature that owed little to the prevailing Euro-American tradition to which it had generally been appended. In re-evaluating the Russians—particularly Dostoevsky—as participants in this singular counter-Western tradition, Southerners could posit newer authors like McCullers, Faulkner, O’Connor, and Erskine Caldwell as part of a global literary movement that had already made great strides toward formulating its own canon.

In so doing, Southern authors did much to illuminate Dostoevsky’s oft-overlooked determination to resist the westernizing impulses of his contemporaries and create a distinctly Russian oppositional voice on the periphery of Western modernity. Dostoevsky’s literary response to the confusion of borrowed Western ideas and fervent nationalism that so vexed the Russian Realists offered a template for constructing a literary philosophy for a region commonly considered “a section apart from the rest” in American discourse (McCullers, “Russian” 254). Like Dostoevsky’s own work, however, this new literary mission was as much about reconciliation as revolution. To Southerners of the first half of the twentieth century, as to the Russian Realists of the late 1800s, chief among the issues facing the modern world was the

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4 Non-Southern authors who noticed the distinction between Dostoevsky and the European tradition tended to understand his originality as divorced from any strict literary mission. Peter Kaye observes that Northern and British modernists including Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, “along with most of the audience for Constance Garnett’s translations, read Dostoevsky as if he were a literary virgin, untainted by influence or knowledge of novelistic traditions.” In “disengaging him from his literary heritage” (6), such authors turned Dostoevsky into a potential model for a modern literature that owed little to existing Western models without considering his participation in a broader Russian tradition or his intentional, active engagement with the European models that he opposed.
question of the relationship between individual and collective, whether that collective is represented in another individual, an uncaring state, a church, or a larger tradition like Westernism, modernity, or a Dostoevskian “universal brotherhood.” Like their Russian forebears, many Southern authors viewed their work as a new novelistic paradigm that was both influenced by and critical of the Western novel, and which could represent the new “Southern Idea” to the world at large and reconcile not only people and ideas, but categories of speech and methods for discourse, allowing North and South to meet again as equals.

The Russian and Southern calls for reconciliation find echo in The Brothers Karamazov’s dialogue concerning the fate of the foreign and local criminal. When Ivan Karamazov and the elder Zossima discuss the subject of Ivan’s recent article—a largely facetious call for the integration of state and church written by an avowed atheist—the two agree that “the real punishment, the only effectual one, the only deterrent and softening one, which lies in the recognition of sin by conscience” is to be cut off spiritually and physically from the universal body in the form of excommunication from or disavowal by the Church, or, in Ivan’s theoretical new order, the nation (69). The “foreign criminal,” on the other hand,

rarely repents, for the very doctrines of to-day confirm him in the idea that his crime is not a crime, but only a reaction against an unjustly oppressive force. Society cuts him off completely by a force that triumphs over him mechanically and . . . accompanies this exclusion with hatred, forgetfulness, and the most profound indifference as to the ultimate fate of the erring brother. (66)

Russia and the South very much resemble this “errning brother,” isolated in a largely indifferent modern world but possessing the ideological tools to justify their own separation as an inevitable result of alien forces conspiring against them. Such a reading certainly aligns with the underlying missions of Russia’s Slavophile movement and the emerging postbellum South’s bend toward glorifying its plantation past and racial oppression, each of which configures the national crime
of slavery/serfdom as a positive and the resulting cultural and economic backwardness as a consequence of interference by the outside world. A large part of the literary mission of the Southern Renaissance and the Russian Realists, then, is to reconcile these “foreign criminals” with the modern world, overcoming indifference and finding kinship through the recognition of both patterns of errant behavior (slavery and serfdom, resistance to democracy, premodern labor practices, and terrorism) and uniquely Russian and Southern contributions to ideology and culture.

The foreign criminal’s worldview is characteristic of many of Southern fiction’s most famous literary characters. Jeeter Lester, the lazy and self-serving protagonist of Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* (1932), is not entirely wrong when he envisions a world grown indifferent to the plight of poor Southern planters, and he justifies his backwardness by dwelling on his landlord’s abandonment of the local farmers. By Jeeter’s estimation, the reason he “ain’t got no snuff and rations no more” is simply that his landlord, Captain John, “said there wasn’t no sense in trying to run a farm no more—fifty plows or one plow. He said he could make more money out of farming by not running plows” (31). Abandoned by the modern world, Jeeter sees his own abdication of responsibility and descent into petty theft as inevitable outcomes. Whereas Ivan Karamazov believes that a criminal could hardly claim that in a united Christian society “All men are mistaken, all in error, all mankind are the false Church. I, a thief and murderer, am the only true Christian Church” (66), Jeeter easily responds to his son’s disapproval with exactly such a statement: “God’s on my side, and He don’t like to hear people talking about me in that manner” (54). A reactionary Slavophile and Southern apologist alike might carry the same sentiment: indeed, Jeeter resembles nothing so much as John Crowe Ransom’s “unreconstructed Southerner,” who “persists in his regard for a certain terrain, a certain history, and a certain
inherited way of living” and “is punished as his crime deserves. He feels himself in the American scene as an anachronism, and knows he is felt by his neighbors as a reproach” (1). Thus, to a Russian or Southern author, it is only once the world echoes The Brothers Karamazov’s refrain, “we are all responsible for all,” that such divisions may be excised (675).

Hope for such a possibility was common in the landscapes of post-emancipation Russia and the U.S. South. Following the end of serfdom and slavery in the 1860s, both found themselves thrust from one politically and economically tumultuous era into another, and, as is often the case, the changing times were accompanied by a shift in the art and literature of the two regions. Now technically if not practically free of forced labor and faced with new challenges brought on by modernization, the literatures of Russia and the South faced the task of navigating the social, economic, and cultural divides between their ruling elite and rural poor, as well as the historical and linguistic divides that characterized their relationships with their modern neighbors (Europe in the case of Russia and the North in the South’s case). Faced with the possibility of a more integrated and egalitarian society, the Russian realists sought to create a new Russian literature that could bridge these gaps while also affirming the existence of a unique Russian national character. Russian serfdom’s less violent end—described by Dostoevsky as a reform “equivalent to the most outstanding events in our history” brought about “peacefully and with the consent of our entire nation” (qtd. in Holland 27)—created a new swelling of Russian nationalist fervor, and with it, a strong, albeit brief, sense of optimism regarding the country’s future as a participant in the modern world.

For Dostoevsky and his associates in the short-lived periodical Vremya (Time), the span of years between the Petrine reforms of the late eighteenth century and the great reforms of the 1860s had been an era of national disunity. The educated elites, spurred on by the examples of
Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, had become increasingly Westernized and estranged from traditional Russian culture, while both free and enserfed peasants had turned their eyes inward, becoming more and more ingrained in their cultural “connections to the Russian soil” (Holland 28). This idea is consistent with criticisms of colonialism, reasoning that the importation of culture among the ruling elite had transformed Russia’s governing class into a Western imperialist body incommensurate with the culture of the native Russian people.

A comparable national divide had existed in the United States between the North and South: a divide which, in addition to its political and economic ramifications, carried a similar edge of Westernism versus nativism. Both Russia and the U.S. South fit Mikhail Epstein’s definition of a province or locus for the provincial—a place whose “own center has been taken out of itself and transferred to some other space or time” (22-30). The anti-Semitic Jason Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) sees Yoknapatawpha County as dominated by distant New York financiers; Jeeter Lester watches as the center of his community moves to the mills in Augusta; Hulga in O’Connor’s “Good Country People” (1955) laments that “we are not our own light” (276). In all these cases, too, Southern identity is located in the region’s past: the Civil War, nostalgia for the plantation era, and other ideas threatened by the march of time and the outset of modernity. It is, as Anne Lounsbery observes of the provincial Russians in *Demons*, “only ‘there,’” within the past or the outside world, that “they locate fullness of meaning that approaches the real,” and never “‘here’ (where one actually is)” (218).

With the new reforms of the latter half of the nineteenth century came the opportunity to reconcile outside ideas with internal traditions, and thereby also address the schizoid nature of the regional and national characters of the South and Russia. To Dostoevsky, the elites’ Westernism could combine with the Russianness of the masses to form a new “Russian Idea”
which could reshape and unite both Russia and the West. Not coincidentally, this new Russian idea of “complete integrity, complete universality and complete reconciliation” aligned with Dostoevsky’s own literary agenda: the achievement of “universal brotherhood” (Holland 36, Matzner-Gore 421). Russian authors and critics of the late 1800s, Gary Saul Morson notes, came to “identify the tendency towards philosophical speculation in Russian literature as a defining characteristic of their tradition,” and, accordingly, having so identified that tendency, they exaggerated it. It was routine to point out that in Russia the most influential and original metaphysical, aesthetic, and historicistic theories were elaborated not in universities and academic journals, but in fiction or in criticism of fiction. (127)

In Russian literary discourse, fiction had the distinction of being not only a space for representing the issues facing a modernizing Russia, but also the most viable forum available for the reconciliation of distant peoples and discourses.

This political and literary optimism did not persist unaccompanied however, as the same reforms that heralded a reunification of the peasant class with the Westernized ruling elite nevertheless allowed the old regime to continue mostly unhindered until the revolutions of the early twentieth century and uncovered as much previously unacknowledged Western influence as it attempted to correct. Considering the Russian novel to have emerged from Westernism and been coopted by radicals with little connection to Russian traditions, Dostoevsky, though he “continued to maintain faith in the idea . . . of Russia’s ultimate ability to withstand the storms of modernity,” soon “retreat[ed] into a conservative critique of modernization” (Holland 30). “By the time of the serialization of *Demons* in 1871,” Kate Holland observes, “Dostoevsky also seemed to have lost faith in the ability of Russian literature to respond to and represent the contemporary sense of crisis” (29), and it seemed an even newer tradition was warranted. In the South, too, the end of Reconstruction saw the old regime solidify itself once more, providing
strong continuity with the pre-war South and creating a backward-looking literary culture which would not be thoroughly challenged until the rise of the Southern writers of the twentieth century. Initial forays into conciliatory Southern literary discourse were, to a great extent, reactionary rather than unifying. The culmination of this new tradition, exemplified in *The Clansman* (1905), which vilified the enemies of the Old South to enshrine its most reactionary supporters, and *Gone with the Wind* (1936), which glorified the Old South to support a new popular portrait of wronged Southern beauty, stood in opposition to the Southern modernists, who took this tradition as one of its many antitheses.

Any comparison between Southern and Russian literatures, however, is by and large a temporally lopsided one, as the Southern writers whose work responded to comparable conditions in their own region did so long after the fall of “Old Russia” and the rise of the Soviet state. To quote Morson’s paraphrase of the Russian formalists, “to borrow means to integrate into a new system and to alter what is borrowed in the very process of translating, understanding, or imitating it” (130). Those Southern authors whose work harkened back to Dostoevsky reinterpreted or redefined their Russian model to speak to their own twentieth-century contexts, especially by rejecting his reliance on discourse. Dostoevsky, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, “asserts the impossibility of solitude, the illusory nature of solitude” (287), and, in the tradition of his genre-melding tomes, the author asserts that the schisms of the modern world can be

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5 As an example, Weisgerber claims that “Faulkner gazes in a direction diametrically opposed to that of Dostoevsky,” as “the past with which” he “was so taken is approximately the present or near future” for Dostoevsky. Furthermore, unlike the Russian “prophet” who was concerned with the future, for the Southern writer, the “milieu as well as the writer’s own temperament” had “destined him to turn to the world of the past and confront it with that of today” (xiv).
remedied through successful discourse, be it confession, intellectual discussion, or even exposing lies or half-truths.

The Southern Renaissance, however, was ever skeptical of discourse, and consequently, its author’s approaches to Dostoevsky’s philosophizing operate on different planes. Rather than depicting political and philosophical exchange by educated or pseudo-intellectual minds, writers such as McCullers, Faulkner, O’Connor, and Caldwell often focused upon the poor, uneducated, or uninitiated, portraying similar moral or philosophical strivings through the absence rather than the superabundance of articulate philosophy. Having come to prominence roughly concurrently with the Great Depression and the rise of the Popular Front and taking, to some extent, Tolstoy’s claim in *Confessions* that “The meaningless absurdity of life . . . is the only incontestable knowledge accessible to man” as a central conceit (qtd. in McCullers, “Russian” 256), Southern literature departed from Russian realism in its newfound determination to reconcile not only the ideologies of their disparate subjects, but their voices and languages, forsaking overt philosophy in favor of more unhindered sound and fury. Works such as Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, and O’Connor’s “The Partridge Festival” (1961), “Parker’s Back” (1965), and *Wise Blood* (1952) demonstrate a deeper interest in the roots of poverty, disability, and marginalization, and with it, an aversion to the unifying narrative device of the enlightened author acting as translator for the otherwise inarticulate subject.⁶ Their

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⁶ For studies of specific Southern writer’s engagements with issues of poverty or impoverished subjects, see, Sylvia Jenkins Cook’s *Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty: The Flesh and the Spirit*, Jay Caldwell’s *Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Bourke-White, and the Popular Front: Photojournalism in Russia*, or Richard Godden’s *William Faulkner: A Complex Economy of Words*. Taylor Hagood’s *Faulkner, Writer of Disability* and Timothy Basselin’s *Flannery O’Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity* speak to these authors engagements with disability.
characters occupy a world that is unversed or uninterested in abstraction, too impatient to listen, and too secretive to confess, and thus the fiction of the Southern Renaissance is invested in exploring the means by which Southern subjects may approach Dostoevskian reconciliation without access to his methods of articulation, working to reveal the same manner of truths by testing ritual, narrative irony, and even silence as substitutes for articulate philosophy.

During the brief scene in which a grieving peasant mother comes to Zossima seeking solace, *The Brothers Karamazov* has the following to say about the conditions facing the peasant classes:

There is a silent and long-suffering sorrow to be met with among the peasantry. It withdraws into itself and is still. But there is a grief that breaks out, and from that minute it bursts into tears and finds vent in wailing. This is especially common with women. But it is no lighter a grief than the silent. Lamentations comfort only by lacerating the heart still more. Such grief does not desire consolation. It feeds on the sense of hopelessness. Lamentations spring only from the constant craving to re-open the wound. (49-50)

Dostoevsky addresses this “long-suffering sorrow” and the resulting “wailing” by giving both a clear articulate form; subsequently, the peasant mother states her grievance, Zossima responds with his solution, and though the larger matter is not settled, an individual case has been fairly well resolved. Thus, in Dostoevsky, the peasant’s moment of enunciation is displaced by the act of re-articulation as author and characters both adopt the tone of intentional essayistic discourse, reframing the peasant mother’s plight into an intelligible parable in which a clear summation of the issue at hand (grief) can be answered by the reasoned response of a learned (and male) elder.

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7 Consequently, one of McCullers’s central criticisms of Dostoevsky is his characters’ tendency to achieve a “subjective state of grace” through forms of “personal expiation,” thus leaving “only a collateral issue [. . .] resolved.” McCullers likens this approach to “trying to reach the Q.E.D. of a geometrical problem by means of primer arithmetic” (“Russian” 256).
Such a scene of confession and realization offers Dostoevsky an opportunity to demonstrate the utility that he sees in conversation as a means for developing understanding, but it also tacitly posits his own literary form as a necessary interlocutor between the Russian peasant mother and the Russian reader, as it is only discourse that can render her “wailing” intelligible. If all feeling could only be made articulate, this technique suggests, reconciliation would be a matter of exchange, and it is in this way that the Russian novel can become a vehicle for reunification. Dostoevsky’s exchanges are usually not so simple—the author is famous for the complexity and vigor of his characters’ discussions, as well of the artfulness with which his characters evade or misconstrue the truth—but the act of articulation mediated by the author’s or narrator’s own style is the foundation on which spiritual and social progress is made, and errant brothers may be reconciled through discussion, confession, and the act of listening.

However, McCullers argues that this “analytical approach” by which Dostoevsky intercedes to take on “the supreme responsibility” of solving “the riddle of life itself” ends in a “contrivance,” as he “demands magnificently,” but his solution “does not answer” (“Russian” 256-57). By contrast, his Southern heirs strive to avoid the articulate form, and their literature attempts to deal with the “wailing” as close as possible to its original manifestation. In a 1931 interview, Faulkner claims that The Brothers Karamazov could be cut by two-thirds by eliminating its “exposition” and focusing on the perspectives of individual characters. Faulkner classifies the voice of the author, the perspective of a single narrator, and any outside description as “dead weight” that is “exclusive of the story” and thereby unnecessary; the “future novel” will have “no straight exposition” and will instead rely on “objective presentation, by means of soliloquies or speeches of the characters” (qtd. in “Interview in New York Herald Tribune” 17). Unsurprisingly, this description matches Faulkner’s own style in The Sound and the Fury and As
*I Lay Dying*, in which he abandons the authorial practice of synthesizing events and ideas into a unified whole in favor of allowing the characters, no matter how inarticulate, to relay their own thoughts. That Faulkner chooses Dostoevsky as the focal point for his discussion of the “future novel” attests to his appreciation for the Russian writer but also to his determination to break with him stylistically.

Furthermore, the universal reconciliation that Dostoevsky’s characters seek is as much a reconciliation of ideas—self and collective, nation and world, progress and tradition—as of persons, and each of his significant characters tends to carry both a narrative and interpretive burden. In *Karamazov*, the wise Zossima falls into a low bow at the feet of the prophetically doomed Dmitri, prompting Fyodor to demand, in place of the reader, “What did he mean, falling at his feet, like that? Was it symbolic or what?” (78). Later, the cynical Rakitin correctly predicts that “All the pious people in the town will talk about it and spread the story through the province, wondering what it meant” (82). Fulfilling Dmitri’s claim that “all true Russians are philosophers” (672), the novel’s characters, themselves symbolic representations of the ideas and attitudes alternately working to heal and destroy late Imperial Russia, are quick to interpret themselves and their actions in symbolic terms, and this fixation on determining meaning through the articulate analysis of symbols is evident throughout much of the author’s work. It is primarily for this reason that Dostoevsky’s novels lay, as Morson claims, “in the interstices between recognized European genres” (127); part novel in the contemporary European sense and several parts religious or philosophical treatise, they borrow from and reinvent both genres.

This is generally not so within the context of the Southern Renaissance, which tends to feature characters who care little for ideas and instead explore ritual or the absence of discourse
as a substitute for philosophy. This distinction is summarized in a passage that O’Connor marked in her personal copy of Mircea Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion*:

> Indeed one of the major differences separating the people of the early cultures from people to-day is precisely the utter incapacity of the latter to live their organic life (particularly as regards sex and nutrition) as a sacrament. . . . For the modern they are simply physiological acts, whereas for primitive man they were sacraments, ceremonies by means of which he communicated with the force which stood for Life itself. (qtd. in Kinney 78)

While Dostoevsky toils over the ideological obsessions and discourses by which characters first lose sight of and then seek out these sacraments, Southern authors such as O’Connor, Faulkner, McCullers, and Caldwell seek to give voice to the modern confusion of uneducated subjects by tapping into these sacraments in “primitive” characters, acknowledging the failure of nineteenth-century philosophy to address even the concerns of its own era and testing the absence of articulate philosophy in its place.  

This shift in focus between Russian and Southern fiction finds further echo in Smerdyakov’s question to Alexei in *Brothers Karamazov*: “Can a Russian peasant be said to feel, in comparison with an educated man?” (250). To the aloof Smerdyakov, who believes that

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8 This contrasts sharply with the view of many modernists outside of the South, whom Kaye describes as seeing in Dostoevsky “a new primitive whose coarse strokes and jagged lines bespoke a tortured soul who expanded art’s domain” (6). For O’Connor, in particular, spiritual awakenings tend to render conscious action” nearly irrelevant” while focusing on a “return to a prior, ideal state” (Gentry 5). In some of these cases, “the religiosity of the characters’ experience need not be translated into religious terminology to be understood” (70). Though a devout Catholic, O’Connor herself claimed that “a dogma is only a gateway to contemplation and is an instrument of freedom and not restriction,” and that “there is not blueprint the Church gives for understanding” that everyone is “a participator in the Redemption,” but it is simply “a matter of faith” (Cash 155-56). Such cases parallel O’Connor’s chronic “concern with the limitations of human knowledge” and utilization of characters who are either lost in a “thoroughgoing empiricist epistemology” or entirely suspicious of learning and dependent on faith or unconscious knowledge (Hardy 3-4).
the peasant “can’t be said to have feeling at all, in his ignorance,” a layperson’s inability to grapple with philosophical abstraction renders one inadequate to the task of formulating complex feelings, and thus, he implies, beneath the consideration of Russian literati. Ivan assents to this idea, telling Alexei that the peasants are “stupid,” and that “The stupider one is, the clearer one is. Stupidity is brief and artless, while intelligence wriggles and hides itself. Intelligence is a knave, but stupidity is honest and straightforward” (262). Ivan, whose intellect threatens to supplant his capacity for faith, feels an ironic appreciation for this manner of “stupid” honesty. Indeed, within a body of novels in which the confusion of the Russian intellectual takes center stage, the simplicity of the peasant class appears as a sentimental escape from existential conundrums. It is within this locus of uninformed blankness, after all, that Dostoevsky’s novels locate much of their unhampered morality.9

This approach to the provincial or backwards is a common target of O’Connor’s satire. Not unlike Smerdyakov, Calhoun and Mary Elizabeth, the protagonists of “The Partridge Festival,” are both condescending agitators with little appreciation for parochial or uneducated subjects. Hoping to expose Southern social oppression in the town of Partridge, they make it their mission to study the titular festival and “finish it off with one swift literary kick” by writing the story of Singleton, a local outcast and murderer (434). 10 In a manner not altogether

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9 For example, the infirm peasant Marya Lebyadkina’s ravings prophesize Stavrogin’s fall in Demons and mirror the fate of Marya Shatova, and her murder at the hands of the criminal Fedka signals the depth of Stavrogin’s moral decline. In Brothers, Alexei and Ivan’s mentally and physically ill mother prefigures their spiritual journeys during spells of religious fervor, and the oblivious audience of the peasant Sofia Matveevna offers Stepan Verkhovensky the opportunity to craft his greatest lie and find his truest redemption.

10 Singleton killed six people in revenge after being imprisoned following a mock trial over his refusal to purchase a badge from the town’s Azalea Festival, and the two writers immediately sympathize with him due to his disregard for the city’s norms.
dissimilar from the banter of Dostoevsky’s fictional thinkers, the two writers immediately step into the role of interpreter of symbolic meaning: Singleton is something of a “scapegoat” or “Christ-figure” crucified for the crime of exercising his “right to be different”—essentially, for opposing the backward ways of the South—and driven mad by his humiliation (435, 429). Calhoun meets every criticism he hears with assured appraisals of Singleton’s character; he is “an individualist,” “not a materialist,” and a “man who would not allow himself to be pressed into the mold of his inferiors” (431-32). At one point, he humorously interrupts Mary Elizabeth’s assessment of Singleton, presumably cutting short a lengthy digression on the prisoner’s significance as a symbolic representation of Southern ills.

The two writers’ discussion of the small Southern town is awash with metadiscourse. After Mary Elizabeth observes that the “whole place is false and rotten to the core,” Calhoun claims that it “takes no great mind to come to that conclusion. . . . What requires insight is finding a way to transcend it.” Mary Elizabeth counters that he really means to find “a form to express it in,” to which he responds that “it comes to the same thing” (434). Their game of intellectual one-upmanship aims to give the South a new literary form and to “transcend” it by using literary exposé as a vehicle to separate Southern identity from self-identity. Despite Calhoun’s insistence that the “novelist is never afraid to look at the real object,” the “suggestion [of actually meeting Singleton] was appalling to him; for some reason he could not at the

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11 As Marshall Gentry observes, Calhoun’s identification with Singleton is complicated by his attempted disavowal of his family, and thus of the festival which began with his great-grandfather, whom he physically resembles (71). His appreciation for Singleton, whom he sees as the victim of his family’s backwardness, explicitly mirrors his own denial of his place within Partridge and involvement in the proceedings there.
moment understand, it struck him as unthinkable” (435-36). Even more unthinkable than engaging with the real South is writing to rather than about it. “It would be ridiculous to tell them,” Calhoun thinks; he “would have liked to start, in Socratic fashion, a street discussion about where the real guilt for the six deaths lay,” but as he walks through Partridge, “he saw no one who looked capable of any genuine interest in meaning” (424, 426). Though confident that his eventual novel may sway an intellectual audience, he does not think that his ideas hold any interest for the South itself.

This is not to say that Southerners rejected Russian Realism as empty intellectualism or self-serving ideology; however, it does mark a key difference in Southern modernist revisions to their Russian model’s approach to poor or uneducated subjects. According to Dostoevsky’s theories of universal reconciliation, truth and unity exist in the contact between the provincial simplicity of peasants and the intellectualism of scholars, but the intellectual must extract and reprocess it. Although some Southern characters are similar to their intellectual Russian molds, Southern modernist fiction exists in part to humble the analyst, making itself more inscrutable the longer and harder that one looks and always conspiring to thwart anyone attempting to force it into a discursive model. Faulkner asserts that Dostoevsky “may have achieved [his] goals,” but that he himself has “outgrown” the “delusion” that “Russia was producing work of lasting merit” and wishes to “produce something which will excel” the works of his forebears (qtd. in “Interview in New York Herald Tribune” 17). Having praised Dostoevsky for his “compassion”

12 Faulkner’s Quentin Compson, O’Connor’s protagonists in “Good Country People,” “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” and “The Partridge Festival,” among others, are at least semi-educated men and women whose lofty queries into Southern identity and politics end in confusion or pain, not unlike those of Prince Myshkin, the Karamazov family, or Stepan Trofimovich.
and “insight into people” (74), Faulkner begins his attempts to exceed him by looking more deeply into the interior lives of the South’s desperate poor, a characteristic he shares with many of his Southern contemporaries.

Several of the Southern Renaissance’s most enigmatic impoverished characters scoff at articulate discussion—or any manner of spoken language—altogether. *As I Lay Dying* and *Tobacco Road*, for instance, are conspicuous for their silent women, whose absent voices alternately demonstrate their lack of autonomy and their understanding of the subversive power of silence. Addie and Ada, the similarly named wives of Anse Bundren and Jeeter Lester, are largely unvoiced, as are Jeeter’s unnamed mother, his daughter Ellie May, and his youngest child Pearl. Jeeter’s mother has been silenced by futility; uncared for by her family, she darts quietly through the fringes of their land, picking up scraps of food and recoiling from her younger relatives. Briefly eulogizing her death, Lov observes that “she never complained of the treatment she received. Even when she was hungry, or sick, no word had passed her lips” because she knew that “it was useless to try to protest” (240). The conditions under which the Lester family suffers and the power dynamics within the family itself have created an atmosphere in which frank discussion is impossible, and thus Jeeter’s mother is reduced to skirting silently around her family, ritualistically gathering sticks to keep a fire going in the kitchen and in the hope that her son will provide something to cook over it.

As Jeeter’s mother demonstrates, contrary to Zossima’s reconciliation with the grieving serf mother in *Karamazov*, women in Southern fiction routinely find discourse to be poorly suited to their purposes. In *As I Lay Dying*, Dewey Dell’s inner monologue concerning her pregnancy is evasive and hedged on all sides by tabooed language; despite the commonplace nature of birth and death in her community, there is no place for pregnancy in the discourse of
her family. Thus, she must formulate a new discourse, likening her body to a “little tub of guts” with something “else important” inside which shares her partner “Lafe’s guts” (60), the existence of this something else known to her only because “God gave women a sign when something has happened bad” (58). The irony is not lost on the drugstore clerk MacGowan, who mocks her indirectness, thinking that “Them country people . . . don’t know what they want” half of the time and “the balance of the time they can’t tell it to you” (243).

Unable to communicate, Dewey Dell feels that she is “alone,” but also theorizes her pregnancy as an unutterable “process of coming unalone,” and feels that if she could only confide in Dr. Peabody and seek an abortion, she “would not be alone” and at the same time be “all right alone” (58-59). Her wording echoes her mother Addie’s later description of the violation of her “aloneness” (172), as well as her general feelings about motherhood. Though the two never exchange words on the subject, they silently agree with the assertion that pregnancy is “something bad” so long as their discourse has no place for it. It is by this method that Faulkner approaches his stated goal of revising Dostoevsky’s style with a new form that expresses and represents without reordering or rearticulating. Dewey Dell’s surreal “tub of guts” metaphors or thoughts on becoming “unalone,” while ambiguous, half-formed, and hemmed in by her limited vocabulary, nevertheless communicate not only the ideas they represent, but also the character of the mind that grapples with the idea. Dewey Dell’s discourse is so inarticulate that it realizes a new form of articulation, approaching the concept with unexpected clarity.

Dewey Dell’s mother Addie understands her daughter’s linguistic dilemma well and chooses strategic silence as a form of “revenge” against language itself, though this revenge is complicated by the very nature of her status as character in a written work who depends on words for communication. When Addie first discovered that she was pregnant with her oldest
son, Cash, she “learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at” (171). Though women “didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not,” the term “motherhood” was “invented by someone who had to have a word for it” (172, 171). The same is true of “pride,” “fear,” and “love,” all of which are “just a shape to fill a lack,” and “when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word.” To Addie, words can never reconcile individuals, as humans using words are “like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam,” swinging from webs without ever touching one another, only ever able to meet when “the blows of the switch” turn them inside out, allowing their blood to “flow as one stream” (172). Doing and saying form lines that “are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other,” and words are a “sound” to represent what someone “never had and cannot have until they forget the words” (173-74).

“My revenge” against Anse and his words, she says, “would be that he would never know I was taking revenge” (172-73); silence allows her to confound her husband and language itself in the same inaction. However, as Stephen M. Ross notes, Addie’s voice “demonstrates the irony of human existence in language, for by voicing her need and her deed Addie belies her own claim for ‘reality’ over words,” and “Nowhere is Faulkner’s comic-tragic irony stronger” than in Addie’s conundrum (129). Though Addie’s narrative break from her silence “enshrines her subjective ‘self’ in a mere dead echo of a voice” (129), it also reaffirms her distaste for discourse by avoiding direct communication with her family or society. Addie, Ross notes, “enter[s] the novel’s discourse” (129), but she does not enter her family’s discourse, and her chapter, despite its reliance on the words that she disavows, is all the more poignant because her voice and insights are absent throughout the rest of the novel. It is only in the space of her internal monologue, in which no other “spiders” may attempt to swing close with their words, that she
gives vent to her bitterness, her reluctance to accept motherhood, or her affair with Reverend Whitfield. Such silences retaliate against discourse by eschewing it, denying its utility to the project of universal reconciliation.

Dewey Dell’s inability to divulge her relationship with Lafe and Addie’s dismissal of the act of confession are anathema to Dostoevsky’s emphasis on the necessity of confession to one’s spiritual life. Bakhtin observes that Dostoevsky uses confession “in order to show the interdependence of consciousness that is revealed during confession. I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself” (287). Karamazov’s narrator announces from the onset that Alexei is the novel’s “hero” only because he “carries within himself the very heart of the universal” from which “the rest of the men of his epoch have for some reason been temporarily torn” (xv), and the act of revealing oneself to Alexei symbolically reconciles the individual with the entirety of the species. Of course, this emphasis on the power and utility of confession for good or ill presupposed an eagerness to confess or an objective worldview which posits the necessity of

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13 Successful confessions are a “sacrament” in the author’s fiction, though not all confessions in Dostoevsky are true enough to approach the sacred (Contino 67). When Madame Hohlakov confesses her inner turmoil to Zossima and falls into a “paroxysm of self-castigation,” exclaiming, “You have crushed me!” (59-60), she announces a desire, on the part of herself and several other characters, to simply be “crushed”—to be forced to abandon falsehood by the insights of another and to see and thereby become their true selves. Contino describes such characters as “bereft of a prosaic sense of self,” a condition that leads them to “fall into just such a pattern of pathological human relationship” by seeking “evaluation from another” (66). Such pathological confession characterizes many of the author’s most infamous liars, who use artful confession to destructive effect. Contino notes that Dostoevsky uses the shame that his characters confess to implicate “us in their lives and thus entangles us in their ethical and metaphysical dilemmas” (2), and in the case of his namesake Fyodor Karamazov, this same tendency offers a means to implicate the polite company of Father Zossima and the monastery elders into his own misdeeds.
confession, neither of which is abundantly apparent in modern Southern literature, where subjectivity is able to creep even into “universal” concepts. As soon as Whitfield—who secretly fathered Jewel Bundren—determines to “repair to that home in which [he has] put a living lie” and confess his transgression (177), “It was already as though it were done. [His] soul felt freer, quieter than it had in years; already [he] seemed to dwell in abiding peace again.” After failing to confess, he decides that God “will accept the will for the deed, Who knew that when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse I spoke them, even though he was not there” (177-78). Though Whitfield is relieved, confession by thought alone brings him no closer to reconciliation or universal salvation—he has only entered what Addie describes elsewhere as the “dark land” where “the words are the deeds” (174).

The perils of this “dark land” are further evidenced in *Tobacco Road*, where the culture of empty talk that characterizes the Lester household makes meaningful confession impossible. Ralph Ellison likens Jeeter to “a poor-white version of the ‘great sinner’ on the order of Dostoevsky’s elder Karamazov . . . with a similar vitality and willfulness” (181). Jeeter is, like Fyodor Pavlovich, given to chasing “materialist schemes yet suffer[ing] anxiety about the afterlife” (Martinsen 135), and seeks absolution through confession multiple times. Having stolen a sack of turnips from his son-in-law Lov, Jeeter attempts to confess his guilt to Sister Bessie, who interrupts and summarily forgives him in exchange for some of the stolen turnips. Later, having become conflicted over his attraction to Bessie and recalling her suggestion that he “cut [himself] off” to avoid temptation, Jeeter again seeks her advice only to be ignored, once

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14 As Stephen M. Ross observes, the fact that Addie’s metaphor is “bracketed between Cora Tull’s and Whitfield’s sanctimonious hypocrisy” amplifies their dishonesty (129).
again because her own parallel interests (in this case, her amorous attentions to the youngest Lester son, Dude) distract her. Despite Jeeter’s assertion that his sinfulness is “worrying his soul,” Bessie allows him to continue to rationalize his behavior because he “is a religious man” and “nothing ought to bother [his] conscience” (140). The materialism and self-justification that fills so much of the novel’s dialogue becomes a trap from which even real spiritual dialogue cannot escape; Jeeter’s honest thoughts are lost amid the noise, and his audience is uninterested in his confessions.

For Pearl, silence in the face of the sand hill’s culture of empty talk is an acknowledgement of the futility of words not unlike Addie Bundren’s, representing her ideological departure from the norms of her family and her resistance to discourse. Pearl “had never talked. . . . Not because she could not, but simply because she did not want to.” Her mother Ada, who herself “had begun to talk voluntarily only during the past ten years,” is the only person with whom Pearl will communicate, and even then, she “had never used more than the barest of negatives and affirmatives” (3). Consequently, Jeeter believes that there is something “queer” about his youngest daughter, and Lov, to whom her father essentially sold her into marriage at the age of twelve, reasons that Pearl’s behavior “was something to do with her mind,” as is the case with Dude and “one or two” of the others. In reality, Pearl “had far more sense than any of the Lesters” and harbors an ambition to run away to the mills in Augusta (40), where she has seen “girls who were laughing and carefree” (40-41). Her refusal to participate in the culture of the sand hill prefigures her later rejection of the static inaction in her community, choosing decisive action (leaving for a new life in Augusta) over the quiet capitulation of her mother and grandmother.
Among the most dominant recurring themes across O’Connor’s fiction are the significance of rituals or icons to spiritual practice and the ways by which characters with no real means to grasp such concepts nevertheless arrive at them through sudden epiphanies. As O’Connor herself put it, her fiction follows “The action of grace in territory held largely by the devil” (qtd. in Gentry 3). The “devil” in O’Connor’s work comes in many forms, among them being the same confusion, secularism, and materialism that so often appear in Dostoevsky’s critiques of modernity. Additionally, O’Connor’s devil often works through ignorance, and characters with no understanding of or appreciation for spiritual life find themselves suddenly attacked by experiences for which they are unprepared. This process, as Marshall Gentry observes, involves an “a physical annihilation” or an act of “annihilating the self” so that the “unconscious” may find redemption in “a momentary state in a process that has no natural end” (4-5). Whether represented in a drowning death that mirrors a baptism, a debilitating illness, or a sudden cultural shock, these annihilations introduce characters to “freedom in the communal” (5), reconciling them with O’Connor’s vision of God.

The titular character in “Parker’s Back” for example, is a thoughtless and mostly uneducated drifter trapped in a sudden and inexplicable marriage to a humorless religious zealot named Sarah Ruth, a preacher’s daughter who insists upon an absolute separation between the material and spiritual worlds. When a near-death experience involving a tractor convinces Parker to tattoo his back with an image of God, his attention is arrested by “a flat stern” image of a “Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” staring at him from the pages of a tattoo book (522). Parker’s heart, which had been “roaring inside him like a great generator,” suddenly “appeared to cut off” before the image causes it “to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power” (522). Having mirrored death and resurrection by the power of the icon, Parker
undergoes an angry and only half-conscious religious awakening, wishing to forget “all his sensations of the day and night before” as “those of a crazy man” but unable to escape the look of the figure’s eyes (524). Though his soul is nothing to him but “a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important,” it “appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion,” as the “eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed” (527).

This spiritual journey is all but thwarted by Sarah Ruth’s philosophy, which rejects any material aspect to spiritual life. Parker’s tattoos are “vanity of vanities,” churches are “idolatrous,” and, “except in total darkness, she preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves rolled down” (518-19). When Parker returns with his new tattoo and feels “the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees, and birds and beasts,” his wife refuses to acknowledge the image as God, accusing Parker of idolatry and insisting that God “don’t look. . . . He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face” (528-29). Despite her confessed religiousness, Sarah Ruth’s worldview rests upon the denial of the sacred, elevating God by separating him from the material world and rendering everything else, including most religious practice, idolatrous. Outside of his wife, Parker’s only interactions are with others who see no sacrament in the everyday, not because of any religious ideology, but because of a secular sensibility. In order to arrive at his spiritual awakening, Parker can only rely on an intuitive ritual, and despite his lack of encouragement from others and his complete inability to understand the concepts that arise within his mind, he reaches much the same end as Dostoevsky’s characters come to through sophisticated discourse. Though O’Connor herself was an accomplished amateur theologian, her characters need not replicate her erudition to replicate, at least to some degree, her religious findings.
Religious or spiritual journeys of this variety are not uncommon in O’Connor’s fiction, as evidenced by the two protagonists of *Wise Blood* Enoch Emery and Hazel Moats. Enoch, in whose veins flows the titular wise blood which supposedly provides him unwanted spiritual guidance, is driven by a series of epiphanies, first to steal the “New Christ” (a mummy from a local museum) for Hazel’s church, then to meet Gonga the gorilla (actually a man in a suit), and then to overcome the isolation that he feels after moving to Taulkinham by stealing the suit and using it to shake hands with the city’s people. Enoch’s usurpation of Gonga’s identity follows his failure to communicate verbally; the people of Taulkinham have no patience for his clumsy attempts at conversation, and Gonga’s promotional appearance provides him “the first hand that had been extended to [him] since he had come to the city” (181). Having become the gorilla whom Taulkinham’s citizens have lined up to meet, Enoch feels that he has overcome the barrier between himself and others and found reconciliation in the ritualistic exchange he saw in Gonga’s promotional appearance. Hazel, by contrast, takes up self-abnegation, recognizing the failure of his preaching to approach spiritual truth and adopting ritual (blinding himself, wrapping his body in barbed wire, and giving up material pleasure) to find absolution. Where words fail, ritual is able to claim a pyrrhic victory.

*The Sound and the Fury* prominently displays the necessity of ritual, as Faulkner’s experiments with inarticulate discourse form moments of spiritual clarity. Conversation in *The Sound and the Fury* is the domain of Jason Compson and his father and namesake, who provide the rationalizing voices in bits and pieces throughout and more thoroughly in the novel’s penultimate section. The younger Jason’s “once a bitch always a bitch” philosophy of pithy, self-justifying one-liners, which he proudly declares that he “never had to go to Harvard” to learn, is comparable to the constant flip-flopping of Dostoevsky’s greatest liars in its transparent
superficiality (235, 180). However, Faulkner exposes his “unfavorite” character’s depthless philosophy not only by juxtaposing him with more honest thinkers in the vein of Dostoevsky’s Alexei Karamazov (qtd. in Grenier 225), but also by positioning his discourse after Quentin’s and Benjy’s narratives. Both are partially dislodged from the chronology of the events in the novel; Benjy, especially, transposes past and present events, jumping between his life in 1928 and his earlier relationship with Caddy and drawing attention to the continuity between past and present. By the time the reader comes to Jason’s section, the novel has already exploded the narrative techniques by which Jason attempts to process characters and events into a rational discourse, thus exposing the artificiality of his narrative.

The illiterate and nonverbal Benjy is the point-of-view character for the first portion of the novel, and it is his disordered recollections that delineate for the reader the weight of the family’s past. Though Benjy’s moaning is as inscrutable to his family as many of their actions are—or seem to be—to him, his free transposition of past and present events by association (the smell of leaves and the golfers’ call of “caddie,” for example)\(^{15}\) establishes the overarching issue in the novel: the Compson family’s loss of Caddy and the ideas, including sexual purity, family continuity, traditional Southern identity, that they invested in her. During his own section, Quentin recalls Dilsey’s claim to Caddy that Benjy “smell what you tell him when he want to. Don’t have to listen nor talk” (89). The use of the term “smell” is unusual but consistent with Benjy’s own narration, in which smell is important to his understanding of the world around him.

\(^{15}\) Taylor Hagood posits that Benjy’s specific response to “caddie” introduces “the possibility that Benjy is more prescient” than his family perceives, as his distress may stem not from confusion but because the “signifier itself” has “a much more complex set of meanings that are equally and just as deeply troubling and sad to him” (103).
Moreover, this terminology for discussing Benjy’s manner of communication mirrors his disordered but still coherent narration; Benjy’s different understanding of events necessitates a different narrative configuration in which ritual and association do much of the heavy lifting in conveying thematic significance. Benjy may only be able to “smell” what others are saying and interpret the world through sensory associations, but he never fails to recall the significant events leading to the family’s fracturing even without the use of discourse.

Because of his tendency to moan or cry when upset, Benjy’s ritual is adjoined to a household ritual meant to keep him quiet. For the most part, Benjy seems indifferent to or unaware of his own voice; not only does he never speak, but he never acknowledges his own nonverbal communication with others. Though the novel opens on his perspective as he watches the golfers through the fence, it is only through Luster’s chastisements—“Listen at you, now. . . . Hush up that moaning” (3)—that the novel informs us that Benjy is not silent. This continues throughout, as telling Benjy to “hush” becomes one of the most oft-recurring refrains of the novel (5). However, at no time does Benjy ever acknowledge his own contribution to the chatter of his household; ironically, his narration, which by nature of its chronological discontinuity serves to establish the narrative significance of events rather than their narrative sequence, does not also account for the narrative significance that his moaning lends. His “bellering,” described as “the grave hopeless sound of all voiceless misery under the sun” (316), accompanies the ritualistic repetitions of the past throughout. To Benjy as to the Drake/Stevens family in Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (*Requiem* 73), and his moaning at reminders of Caddy establishes the thematic unity that ties the disconnected events of the novel together. Jason and his mother Caroline, who are especially consumed by their own narratives, are disturbed by Benjy’s voice and do their utmost to quiet him. These
characters’ attempts to suppress his disruptive wails of narrative significance create traps by which the past and present continue to align with everything “in its ordered place” (321).\footnote{\textsuperscript{16} Characters like Benjy Compson are not at all uncommon in Dostoevsky’s novels, and Dostoevsky’s infirm women (and the rare male examples, including \textit{The Idiot}’s Prince Myshkin) fulfill the Russian paradigm of the holy idiot, whose infirmity is a mark of holiness and whose ramblings are considered insightful. However, such characters are useful as counterpoints to or motivations for more “normal” characters rather than as narrative focal points (Lizaveta’s probable rape by Fyodor Pavlovich in \textit{Karamazov} becomes the moral lightning rod which eventual leads to his death at her son’s hands; Sofya Ivanova, also abused by Fyodor, is configured as the mystical source of her son Alexei’s spiritualism; in \textit{Demons}, Marya Lebyadkina’s innocence and preternatural insight disarms the guilt-ridden Stavrogin, leading him to murder by proxy and eventually suicide). Their disruptions are necessary to undercut the self-deception of characters like Stavrogin and Fyodor Pavlovich, but, with the notable exception of \textit{The Idiot}’s Prince Myshkin, are not much explored themselves.}

The manner of discursive or anti-discursive inventiveness that characterizes Benjy also appears in \textit{As I Lay Dying}, a novel concerning a physically isolated family of nevertheless psychically distant individuals. Among the most enigmatic of these characters is war veteran and probable PTSD sufferer Darl, whose narrative space in sections of \textit{As I Lay Dying} is among the most formally experimental precisely because it strives to articulate what he and his siblings are unable to say. To the other Bundrens, Darl embodies a wordless, abstract form of communication which lends his interactions a mystical quality at odds with the materialist plotline. When Darl catches his brother Cash’s eyes at the ford, he describes the moment:

he and I look at one another with long probing looks, looks that plunge unimpeded through one another’s eyes and into the ultimate secret place where for an instant Cash and Darl crouch flagrant and unabashed in all the old terror and the old foreboding, alert and secret and without shame. (142)

The two speak afterward, but their “voices are quiet, detached.” The significant moment in their communication comes in a sudden jolt of unstated understanding, a brief moment in which the two are connected without the impediment of language. Furthermore, Darl’s ability to understand
and communicate with his family members aligns in part with his growing dissociation from his own identity. The same Darl who can look in his brother’s eye and immediately surmount the barriers between them eventually comes to view himself from the outside, his final narration as he is taken away by train seeming to follow himself as another person.

Cash observes this oddity in his brother’s personality as well, most notably in his assertion that Darl and Dewey Dell “kind of knowed things betwixt them” (237). Dewey Dell affirms this, recalling that Darl once looked at her and “said he knew [about her pregnancy] without the words like he told [her] that ma is going to die without the words,” and she “knew he knew because if he had said he knew with the words [she] would not have believed that he had been there and saw.” This short section of the novel, overwritten to the point of confusion, highlights the dichotomy between the spoken and unspoken for these characters, as what they can feel and know surpasses their ability to articulate. Dewey Dell asks—again “without words”—if Darl is “going to tell pa” or “kill” Lafe, and Darl silently asks her “Why?” This understanding is the only communication that Dewey Dell has with any of her family members about her pregnancy, and it is only because of Darl’s ability to know and understand “without the words” that she “can talk to him with knowing with hating” (27).

Discussing As I Lay Dying, McCullers claims that Faulkner details the Bundrens’ “confusion of values but takes on himself no spiritual responsibility” (“Russian” 254), instead pushing no further than the characteristically Russian and Southern “emotional composite” of

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17 Hagood specifically identifies the extent to which Darl’s “very nonnormate status literally allows him to see things that other characters do not” and to “fill in blanks and draw connections.” Because of this, Darl serves both the other characters and the reader in a “prosthetic role” through his interpretive importance, but at the same time his “disruptive capabilities allow the novel to be disruptive” (120).
“farce and tragedy” that “brought about the accusations of ‘cruelty’” in both milieus (253). Her comments speak to a tension within the Southern and Russian literary project between the power of a “peculiar and intense realism” that juxtaposes “the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy” and the need to pose solutions and offer answers (252-53). Though McCullers speaks disparagingly of those “confused and offended” readers who are “used to having the relative values of an emotional experience categorized by the author” (253), she also laments what she considers a “rejection of responsibility” stemming from the relative “naïveté” and “infantile quality” of the young Southern canon (257). “If and when this group of writers is able to assume a philosophical responsibility” on par with or exceeding the Russian Realists, McCullers hopes, “the whole tone and structure of their work will be enriched, and Southern writing will enter a more complete and vigorous stage in its evolution” (258).

However, McCullers also observes that a “writer has the prerogative of limiting his own scope, of staking the boundaries of his own kingdom” (257). Southern literature of the modern era makes it its mission in part to push Dostoevsky’s conception of reconciliation into the twentieth century, and its apparent rejection of the role of interpreter or moderator is its own answer to the questions the Russian Realists ask. The new, untampered voices of the Southern Renaissance penetrate barriers between individuals, social strata, and regional divides through their tacit critiques of the constructions that create them, and the characters’ own discourses, half-formed and uneducated as they are, challenge traditional notions of discourse’s role in literature while offering new paradigms. Furthermore, the Southern focus on representing new and unusual voices at the margins of society, be they uneducated farmers, nonverbal or misunderstood mental patients, or alienated women, creates a series of literary synecdoches by
which the alienated South may reconcile with the modern world through the reconciliation of reader and marginalized character.
CHAPTER 3

SOUTHERN PASTS AND SOVIET FUTURES: ERSKINE CALDWELL, SOVIET FILM, AND THE POPULAR FRONT

“This is not going to be a soft-soaping job, but a fair and square depiction of our great ally [the U.S.S.R.]. The purpose of this picture, as of the book, is to promote mutual understanding and confidence between our two nations and so aid the Allied cause. . . . The screen is the greatest medium for the promotion of international understanding and amity. One picture is worth a thousand words, and the screen speaks primarily through images. A motion picture transcends the barriers of language and culture that divide the nations. The exchange of films among the Allies is an invaluable instrument of propaganda” (qtd. in Goodman 33).
—Erskine Caldwell (on Mission to Moscow), 1942

“Propaganda is one thing; you have evidence of it in Russian literature, which is propaganda. I don’t think Western life is in the frame of mind to accept writing as propaganda” (qtd. in Collins 48).
—Erskine Caldwell, 1958

The vast ideological gulf between these two very different statements by the same author demonstrates Erskine Caldwell’s awareness of the shifting dynamics of U.S.-Soviet relations immediately before and after the Second World War. In 1942, when Caldwell returned from his visit to the U.S.S.R. to publish his accounts of the German-Soviet War in All Night Long: A Novel of Guerilla Warfare in Russia and the non-fiction All-Out on the Road to Smolensk, the United States and the Soviet Union were entering into an alliance against the Axis: an alliance which, as the first quotation alludes, a string of books, interviews, and major studio films all sought to legitimize for the American public by providing sympathetic portrayals of the Russian war effort. By 1958, this relationship had long been reversed; just four years after the infamous Army-McCarthy Hearings and anticipating the Cuban Missile Crisis by another four years, a
1958 interview by a celebrated American novelist could hardly embrace either Russia or the supposedly Soviet notion that art should—or even can—serve a primarily political purpose.

Of particular interest to Caldwell, however, was the fact that the early Cold War era saw a reversal in Southern-Soviet ideological relations during which Southern writers abandoned the Popular Front and the pro-Soviet attitudes that accompanied it to become, in Leigh Anne Duck’s words, “reliably anticommunist” (4). Since the early 1930s, much of Southern literature had concerned itself with the social ills that befell the Southern poor, including limited education, technological backwardness, and increasingly unjustifiable living conditions. The Southern Popular Front attacked these issues with a political literature aimed at exposing the systems at work in the maintenance of Southern poverty, and this agenda borrowed much of its form and strength from ideas inherited in spirit from the new Soviet state. The suddenly increased visibility of the Soviet Union in the mid 1930s—both encouraged and strategically limited by Stalin’s regime—briefly flooded the U.S. in a deluge of pro-Soviet messaging that gained special traction within the South. Like America’s loose friendship with Stalin, this artistic kinship did not survive the post-war period, and, as Caldwell’s ambivalence toward Russia after the war’s end demonstrates, many were quick to disavow the movement for fear of political scrutiny.

Nevertheless, the brief friendly period in U.S.-Soviet relations allowed for a new exchange of ideas between Southern and Soviet creators, tying the output of Soviet film giant Sergei Eisenstein, American film pioneer D.W. Griffith, and even the American Popular Front through the media of propagandistic literature and film. Russian filmmakers hoping to validate the narrative that the U.S.S.R. had pressed beyond the rest of the world into a post-capitalist future found an ideologically useful portrait of their own past in Griffith’s nostalgic American films of the South. Such influences aided in the forging of a new national epic that posited Soviet
history and ideology as constitutive of a Russian national character that departed radically from the reactionary West. Subsequently, Southerners who had seen in Old Russia a reflection of their own present could now look to this new, sanitized representation of the U.S.S.R. as a map of their possible future—a future in which the South could modernize rapidly, end poverty and hunger, and claim a place in the modern world. Caldwell especially took this mission to heart, as his tributes to the Soviet Army and Stalinist collectivization in his Russian books and interviews read as much like a veiled call for a Sovietized South as an endorsement of the U.S.-Soviet alliance.

Central to this new paradigm was the U.S.S.R.’s concurrent rejection of Russian realist literature and development of socialist realism. Gary Saul Morson observes that “[p]erhaps the greatest irony of Russian cultural history is that just when the West began to approach traditional Russian formulations, Russia itself rejected them and distanced itself from the West again” (128). Under a new system of government that was increasingly immersed in an ideology that saw all forms of media as vehicles for the reinforcement of totalitarian indoctrination, the confused and ambiguous œuvres of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy no longer made for politically useful sources, necessitating a new literary and cinematic form. That form, socialist realism, understood fiction as the dramatization of a prefigured history and strove to subvert Western novelistic conventions into a new hybrid mode to prove that all of the novels of the past were but “one literary tradition among many past and possible literary traditions” (Morson 122). Thus, Russia’s writers, Morson continues, “chose to follow its great writers and critics not in their formal experimentalism but, instead, in their defiance of whatever Europe defined as high culture.” (128). Even as Southern writers of the 1930s began to find literary and cultural kinship with nineteenth-century Russian sources, the dominant literary narrative of the U.S.S.R. was
propelling the nation “ahead” of the West and putting distance between Russia and its Southern admirers.

Despite the widening gap that Soviet creators saw between the East and West, the threads of Russian and Southern literary and cinematic ideology became increasingly intertwined in the 1930s and 1940s, as Southern writers and Russian filmmakers looked to each other for methods by which they might reconstruct their own national narratives. Though broadly dismissed by much of the Western literary world, Russia’s new cultural formulations did not go unnoticed in Dixie, and at the same time that many Southern writers looked back at their Russian literary forefathers, others—especially among the Popular Front—also looked across the ocean at the current trends in Russian politics. Few if any of the Popular Front novelists were likely to have read a socialist realist novel, but the values espoused in such novels were already present in the U.S.S.R.’s propagandistic self-representation in film, news media, and the cult of celebrity that surrounded Eisenstein and his contemporaries in the Soviet film industry, and thus the same ideas that pervaded socialist realism could work their way into American socialist texts. In their flirtation with Soviet modes, writers such as Caldwell tested not only appropriated Soviet literary forms but also the feasibility of Soviet collectivization as an answer to the national apathy toward Southern poverty. Such experiments spilled over into American film as well, as Southern writers moved onto the global stage to lend their voices to the mission of improving U.S.-Soviet relations. Though largely abandoned after the end of the Second World War, this complex web of links between the two regions would help to shape the Southern literary discourse on poverty throughout the 1930s and into the early 1940s.

Consequently, Carson McCullers’s vision of a direct line connecting Southern modernists and Russian Realists partially collapses in the face of the more complex reality of the Southern
literary oeuvre. Specifically, categorizing the South’s exploration of Russian themes, as McCullers attempts to do, into any single tradition following a straight line of inquiry and emulating a set group of models is bound to exclude some significant part of its actual history—in this case, contemporary exchanges between Russian and Southern creators. Caldwell, especially, stands out as at least equally indebted to contemporary trends in Russian literature and politics as to the Great Russians of the nineteenth century. During the later 1930s and into the early 1940s when the fervor of war was reaching its height, Caldwell turned his attention to the American war effort, taking special interest in the Soviet example he had witnessed while traveling abroad. At the same time, his literary impetus became more and more concretely political.

In 1932, *Tobacco Road* briefly touched upon the possibility of improvement for the Lester family, claiming that “intelligent employment of his land, stocks, and implements would have enabled Jeeter, and scores of others . . . to raise crops for food, and crops to be sold at a profit. Co-operative and corporate farming would have saved them all” (83). Jonathan Dyen goes so far as to call Caldwell’s subsequent novel *God’s Little Acre* (1933) proletarian and its author “a revolutionary novelist, interested not purely in documentation, but also in shaping the minds of his readers,” citing Will Thompson’s ideology to claim that “Caldwell forecloses the possibility of social reform based on bourgeois ideas, and leaves us only with the option of revolution.” (151). Caldwell’s proletarian focus was such that the “massive popularity” of *Tobacco Road*’s stage adaptation “led to a congressional investigation of conditions in the rural South and was often credited with prompting the laws enacted during the depression to improve the credit status of tenant farmers” (Farnow 121).
However, while Caldwell’s early novels address large-scale solutions to the South’s economic problems, their primary focus is the psychology of their characters, and much of their popular reputation stemmed from their grotesque physicality and humor rather than from their messaging. By contrast, Caldwell’s 1942 novel *All Night Long* all but abandons psychology to embrace collectivization and state-run agriculture, more closely mirroring the Soviet move toward literature as a political tool than modernist experimentalism. This change owes much to the approach of World War II, which Caldwell credits as the primary reason for his visit to the U.S.S.R. (*All-Out 3*), and around which he wrote both *All Night Long* and *All-Out on the Road to Smolensk*. It owes just as much, however, to Caldwell and much of the Southern Popular Front’s fascination with the “Soviet Experiment” and its potential to spark a “Southern Experiment” by exporting Soviet ideas as a solution to their shared economic issues.

Thus, Caldwell—whose output in the 1930s and 1940s spans Southern modernist literature, pro-Soviet journalism (*All-Out on the Road to Smolensk*), propagandistic screenwriting (his work on the screen adaptation of former Ambassador Joseph E. Davies’ *Mission to Moscow*), and even flirtations with socialist realism (*All Night Long*)—serves as a link between Southern literature and the Soviet and American film industries of the second quarter of the twentieth century. His mixed successes aside, Caldwell was everywhere, simultaneously hailed as a natural ethnographer of the poor South and “Hollywood’s foremost authority on the Soviet Union” (“Caldwell Returns” 32), and his work married America’s film industry and war correspondence with his more prestigious career in Southern fiction. Outwardly focused only on the Russian war effort, his two Russian book projects unite these varied fragments of his literary identity, creating a narrative that is as much a call for reforms in the U.S. South as it is a
chronicle of the U.S.S.R., and that specifically aims to pitch itself to Hollywood as a profitable and persuasive revision to America’s popular vision of the Soviet Union.

For these reasons, Caldwell’s Russian projects speak both to his ambiguous relationship to the more “canonical” American modernists of the 1930s and to the shift that critics have traditionally recognized in his literary output during the 1940s. The title of Sylvia Jenkins Cook’s article “Caldwell’s Fiction: Growing Towards Trash?”—itself borrowed from Faulkner’s opinion of Caldwell as expressed in a 1955 interview (“Interviews in Japan” 119)—embodies one of the most common critical perspectives on Caldwell’s later work. “If there has been any critical consensus about Erskine Caldwell’s long career as a fiction writer among his admirers and disparagers alike,” Cook claims, “it is that there was a definite change in the nature of his work by the mid-1940s, at a time of some consequence in his life,” and this change led to critical “disappointment, frustration and ultimate neglect” (49). As Cook notes, Caldwell’s early style “interrupts the flow of the story and the reader’s engagement in it by the extremity of its banality.” His most celebrated fiction arrests and retards the action, qualities that perhaps do not insist that ‘the plain reader be damned,’ but nevertheless suggest a design on Caldwell’s part beyond the requirements of mere easy access for his audience. (“Modernism” 65)

However, between Trouble in July (1940) and his return to the American novel in Tragic Ground (1944), Caldwell seemed to move from “scrutinizing the work of his fellow contributors to experimental, modernist and radical magazines,” so as to find “What was vital, honest and new in the fiction of the 1930s,” to “spelling out in bluntly naturalistic terms his meanings and morals, without the complicating contexts of strangeness and unpredictability that marked the earlier work” (“Trash” 49, 55).
Even excluding these later “disappointments,” Caldwell’s status among the great modernists or Southern Renaissance writers of his day is still a point of critical contention. Discussing Caldwell’s “stagnating regional grotesque” in *Tobacco Road* and *God’s Little Acre*, Duck suggests that Caldwell’s exclusion from “the annals of literary modernism” owes much to the “broad audiences that embraced his works” because of their “prominent display of sexuality” (85, 92). However, Duck also claims that the fact that Caldwell “reveled in the burlesque” attests to his “typically modernist desire to challenge dominant sexual norms and renew attention to the body” (86-87).¹ That the same choice could simultaneously cement Caldwell as a modernist and divorce him from the main body of literary modernism suggests the tension within modernism between the popular and the artistic, as well as Caldwell’s practiced ambiguity regarding “his aesthetic and ideological alignment” (Cook, “Modernism” 62). At once formally experimental, socially engaged, and accessible to popular audiences, Caldwell’s most famous works blur the lines demarcating common literary classifications.

Thus, reading Caldwell’s earlier and more popular fiction alongside his Russian projects reveals the author’s distinctly utilitarian employment of both “modernist” and “popular” elements, and offers a new explanation for the gap between his early successes and his later political writings.² By borrowing from Soviet themes and styles, Caldwell adapts to a new and

¹ Specifically, Duck cites Malcolm Goldstein’s study of the mostly-faithful Broadway adaptation of *Tobacco Road* and its critical reputation for its “much discussed frankness of language and sexual display” (Goldstein 136), as well as Michael North’s summation of the centrality of the burlesque in “the alliance of artistic young men of the 1920s with the comic, the indecent, and the impractical against the deathly conformity of the old order” (North 151).

² Critical explanations for Caldwell’s move into more didactic, less popular writing have varied greatly. Cook identifies a broad spectrum of contemporary critics—including his ex-wife Margaret Bourke-White, who suggested that he had lost his touch, and a *Time* writer who claimed that Caldwell had been deceived by “party-line critics and earnest sociologists” (qtd. in
different mission, one which demands a less grotesque or alienating approach, and instead of substituting a familiar modernist aesthetic for a newly acquired socialist realist one, Caldwell’s Russian works adapt the writer’s previously demonstrated familiarity with American mores to the task of identification rather than othering. Though grotesquery was a common style—or even a central fixation—in literary depictions of Southern milieus, its alienating and socially critical nature rendered it an unwieldy tool in the hands of a would-be propagandist. Appealing to shared values of nationalism, patriarchy, and sexual purity, All Night Long instead inducts readers into a familiarized, idyllic Russian milieu free of the socioeconomic issues affecting the U.S. South. That this mission runs so far afield of his more successful works while still supporting the same political missions and economic reforms suggests the convenient rather than ideological use the Southern proletarian writer had for modernist and popular ideas of the grotesque or sexual burlesque, alternately harnessing them to challenge or reinforce audiences’ notions of societal norms as necessary.

Cook, Erskine Caldwell’s Fiction 50). Others suggested commercial reasons, including his desire for “good financial returns” on his literary output (50). More dismissively, Harvey Klevar devotes his essay “Caldwell’s Women” to arguing that the change stemmed from Caldwell’s “essential dependence on women” and desire for “Their love and approval” (15).

3 For further studies of Caldwell’s reputation of the sexual grotesque in depictions social realities, see Mark Fearnow’s The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque or Duck’s chapter on Caldwell in The Nation’s Region.

4 Jeanne Campbell Reesman notes that “marginality gives rise to the grotesque,” as “the degree to which Old South society was built on oppressive race, class, and gender designations is the degree to which it is grotesque” (39); thus, the presence of grotesque elements inevitably suggests societal ills. Patricia Yeager goes so far as to claim that the grotesque is “is central to the southern experience” because “when a southerner writes in the mode of grotesque realism, the body is metaphorized in a way that expresses a character’s or author’s troubled relation to his or her social formation” (183-84).
To the Soviet thinkers who so influenced Caldwell after his visit to the Russian Front, the power and scope of American capitalism proved something of an enigma, as the question of how best to represent the country that stood simultaneously as the U.S.S.R.’s strongest economic adversary and greatest cinematic influence was unavoidable. In particular, Griffith’s influence was felt throughout the Soviet film industry, and much of the propaganda that American writers like Caldwell eventually acquired secondhand from Russian media was based in ideas borrowed from Griffith’s films. Jay Leyda emphasizes the “tremendous aesthetic and technical impetus given to all young Soviet film-makers” by *Intolerance* and Griffith’s subsequent films, noting that, supposedly, Lenin personally invited Griffith “to take charge of the Soviet film industry” (142–43). Eisenstein’s contemporary Vsevolod Pudovkin was “one of Griffith’s greatest admirers” (Tsivian 96), and according to Harry Alan Potamkin, he even demonstrated a “psychological resemblance to Griffith” (qtd. in Leda 174). Eisenstein’s battlefield scenes in his 1938 epic *Alexander Nevsky* draw inspiration from those in *The Birth of a Nation* (Leyda 210), and critics noted his use of the “Griffith touch” in *Strike*’s emotional appeals and referred to the “Griffith-Eisenstein tradition” of camera “as active observer rather than mere spectator” (Leyda 236, 184, 210).

To Eisenstein, however, Griffith’s “good old provincialism” held the key to countering the portrait of America as a futuristic industrial powerhouse (“Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today” 196), as Griffith’s films represented “an America made up of more than visions of speeding automobiles, streamlined trains, racing ticker tape, inexorable conveyor-belts. . . . America, the traditional, the patriarchal, the provincial” (198). Furthermore, as an early film pioneer whose greatest successes were already behind him and as a Southerner whose films were immersed in a racist nostalgia, by the early 1920s, Griffith was already a figure to look back
upon. Eisenstein’s writings on Griffith embody a measured and sometimes condescending positivity, acknowledging him as the “patriarch of cinema” (“Help Yourself!” 217), the very “patriarch himself” (“However Odd” 72), and the “Great Old Man of us All” 5 (“The Dynamic Square” 228), while declaring that he supports “a social purpose that is hostile to us” and therefore is more useful as a model than for his own merits (“The Montage of Film Attractions” 44). 6 This paradigm contradicted many Russian filmmakers’ earlier sentiments, 7 but permitted Eisenstein to place the Southern patriarch in a pre-Soviet era and posit him as an example of how the science of film was developing in Russian. This framework aligns in part with Duck’s characterization of America’s self-identification as a “collection of communities moving at different rates in trajectories characterized by different customs, goals, and belief systems” (4). While Russia had moved into a Marxist future, the past still endured in pockets outside of the U.S.S.R., and America’s tendency to hierarchize communities based on their similarity to or divergence from the modern American “chronotype” placed the South within the same timeframe as imperial Russia (Duck 4). Such a formulation appealed to an ideological narrative that charted the development of regions as a straightforward progression from pre-capitalist

5 His labels echo his own familiar moniker (“the Old Man”), suggesting a direct line of descent; if Eisenstein is Russian film’s Old Man, then Griffith is an older, universal founder of the global cinematic tradition. Unlike Griffith, Eisenstein earned this nickname due to his age; by 1924, the twenty-six-year-old director was comparatively old among the unusually young society of Soviet filmmakers.

6 In “Griffith, Dickens, and Film Today,” Eisenstein goes so far as to call Griffith’s films “amazing (and amazingly useless! [204]).”

7 In 1919, when Griffith’s Intolerance (1916) first premiered in the U.S.S.R., several artists were already attesting to the fact that Griffith’s film was “less a source than a vindication” for “a style already evolving in the hands of Soviet artists” (Kepley 52).
feudalism to a post-revolutionary end time, and thus contemporary developments in film science outside of Russia were easily incorporated into the Russian film tradition as forebears to the more advanced or socially useful Soviet cinema.

This attitude toward Griffith extended to his films and filmmaking techniques as well, as Soviet propagandists used Griffith’s work to bolster new Soviet theories of film science and serve as examples of the pre-Soviet past that still existed in America. The episodic *Intolerance* was screened in the U.S.S.R. accompanied by a lengthy playbill that acknowledged it as anathema to Soviet ideology but excused it as an artefact from a bygone era, thus ironically demonstrating the progress of Soviet society by displaying the wonder of a non-Soviet screen innovation. Viewing the film, the apology suggests, is like “looking back across the threshold, remembering the road that mankind has taken” through “the mire and slime and rottenness, from which we emerged with pain and torment towards the radiant Soviets” (qtd. in Kepley 59). 8 Though three of *Intolerance*’s four story arcs really do depict events in humanity’s distant past, the fourth arc, a modern story of poverty, morality, and the clash between capitalism and organized labor, creates continuity between ages past and present. To the Soviet playbill, however, even Griffith’s contemporary tale is behind the times; the modern arc of *Intolerance*’s plot is only “modern” when viewed within a pre-Soviet chronotype. As Vance Kepley, Jr. notes, “By insisting that the stories of *Intolerance* represent some dreadful past, the Soviets could fit the film into a Marxist schema which promises a glorious future,” and thus “it was as important to them for its flaws as for its virtues.” (57, 58).

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8 Jay Leyda suggests that *Intolerance* “must have given life to every slogan they had heard about the sympathies of foreign workers with the revolution in Russia” (143).
The Soviet cinema’s propaganda machine reached Caldwell during his 1941 trip to the U.S.S.R. and left him temporarily sold on both Soviet politics and the efficacy of Soviet film as a vehicle for influencing public opinion. Caldwell attributes *All-Out* and *All Night Long*’s depictions of the Russians’ inborn hatred for Germany—and thus, much of his general opinion of the Russian character—to incidents in the time of Alexander Nevsky, whom he labels “The Russians’ greatest national hero” (qtd. in Bond 30). His knowledge of Nevsky’s life is based almost entirely on misremembered bits of Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky*, which the director screened privately for Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White during their time in Moscow. “A film was [made] of this great event [Nevsky’s defeat of the Germans] and launched with much pomp and ceremony,” Caldwell told an interviewer from *The New York Herald Tribune*. He openly praised the film’s propagandistic utility in his 1942 interview for *The Boston Herald*, in which he specifically claims that “When the Germans became their allies,” *Alexander Nevsky* was strategically withdrawn from theaters. “When you see this in theaters,” he continues, “. . . you will know that the pact no longer exists” (qtd. in Bond 30). Despite his acknowledgement of the film’s use as propaganda, Caldwell still attributes the current animosity between Russia and Germany to the events fictionalized in the film—events which he misdates by some five-hundred years and places in Ukraine rather than the Baltic⁹—and this ancestral rivalry carries over into his novel. Discussing his two Russian book projects and his work on the upcoming film *Mission to Moscow*, Caldwell admits his admiration for Eisenstein and the Soviet film industry, calling

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⁹ It is possible that Caldwell confuses Alexander Nevsky (1221-1263) and Peter I (1672-1725). This may also explain why a subsequent interviewer refers to Eisenstein’s “new production on the life of Peter the Great” (“Caldwell Returns” 33), which does not exist.
the Russian cinema “powerful and realistic, rooted in an earthy tradition” (“Return to Hollywood” 33).

Hoping for an American film option for *All Night Long*, Caldwell aimed for his Russian novel to meld the “power” and “realism” of Soviet propaganda films with the common tropes of Hollywood screenplays, creating a book that embeds the political utility of an Eisenstein production into a typical American war story. His praise for Russian film mirrors his endorsement of the Soviet state’s readiness for war, and, coupled with his initial work on *Mission to Moscow* and glowing endorsement of the “exchange of films” as “an invaluable instrument of propaganda” (“Return to Hollywood” 33), evidences a desire on his part to move American film production closer to the Soviet model. Apart from its political content, the primary difference between Eisenstein’s oeuvre and that of a traditional filmmaker of Classic Hollywood is the Russian director’s employment of his theory of montage to provoke politically desirable responses from his audiences. Observing trends in American action films of the early twenties, Eisenstein enthused that such films contained a “boundless temperament and tempo” that might be useful if “a profound, intelligent, class-directed use of this wonderful tool” could be found (“Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today” 204). *All Night Long* unites this traditional Hollywood “tempo” with the “class-directed” purposefulness Eisenstein hopes for, melding the two into a would-be-film that uses Hollywood tropes to sell Soviet ideas.

Completed after the relative financial failure of his autobiographical account of the Russian war effort, *All-Out on the Road to Smolensk*, *All Night Long* is a straightforward call to arms in novelistic form. Its main character, a tractor driver and partisan in the village of Ivanovka named Sergei Mikhailovich Korokov, is plainly based on the stories Caldwell heard while touring the Soviet Union, especially those related to him by a guerilla fighter and
collective farm chairman that he met during his visit to the warzone. After being separated from his wife, Natasha, during a daring escape from his village, Sergei contacts a Red Army officer named Pavlenko, who sends him on a series of missions against the Germans with his young orderly Vladimir and the revenge-seeking Fyodor, whose daughter and pregnant wife were brutally killed by Germans. The ensuing series of raids sees German spies unmasked, convoys destroyed, enemy installations blown to bits, and the German army thoroughly embarrassed at every turn. Sergei’s mission conveniently aligns with his concern for his lost wife when he learns that she is being held in a German brothel nearby, and after a climactic battle with the guards in which Fyodor is mortally wounded, Sergei and Natasha reunite to continue the war together.

All-Out and All Night Long’s receptions in the American press were alternately glowing and lukewarm. Moreover, they embodied many of the nation’s prevailing attitudes toward the South as a social problem and took keen, sometimes mocking interest in the idea that a Southerner might understand Soviet politics, seeming to revel in the apparent oddity of a provincial writer from Georgia becoming a pitchman for Soviet themes. The press “billed

10 Many of the partisan leader’s embellished stories feature directly or indirectly in All Night Long, including his successful raids on enemy infrastructure, his easy destruction of German tanks and other heavy machinery, the willingness of civilians to hand over food to support the partisans, and even the utility of being a “tractor expert” in tank combat (192-193). Caldwell later meets a ten-year-old boy who wishes to join the partisans, who is probably the inspiration for the young partisan Vladimir.

11 The ease of the Soviet victories in All Night Long also owe much to Caldwell’s limited exposure to the front. In All-Out, Caldwell reacts quite credulously to official statements from the government about its military successes, noting specifically that official communiques “gave the impression that the Red Army was composed of ten million superhuman individuals who spent twenty-four hours a day killing Germans and destroying tanks, and as time went on this impression proved to be based not wholly on wishful thinking” (44-45).
[Caldwell] as an expert” on Russian life and politics (Jay Caldwell 244); a feature in the *Boston Herald* notes the number of icons “from Russia and Ural Mountain wooden bears” in his cozy New England home while giving him room to dwell on the quirks of Russian culture (Bond 26). The same 1942 interview in the *New York Herald Tribune* that lauded Caldwell as “Hollywood’s foremost authority on the Soviet Union” also consistently emphasizes his Southern-ness (“Caldwell Returns” 32). Caldwell is a “tall, bronzed Southerner with a shock of corn-yellow hair and a slow drawl,” still “as indigenously American as his novel Tobacco Road” (32). Aside from the sensationalism inherent in advertising the author who only briefly toured Soviet warzones as an expert on Russian affairs, the draw of such stories is the incongruence between the Southern man with his drawling speech and provincial American ways and the foreign enigma of Soviet society that he means to represent.

In his interviews during the war, Caldwell was extremely outspoken about his determination that the United States should defeat Germany at any cost, even if it meant drastic political reforms. In a 1942 interview in *PM’s Weekly* entitled “Erskine Caldwell’s Lesson From Russia: America May Lose War,” Caldwell claims that “lackadasical Americans” must be mobilized at any cost and that “it’s the duty of the government to wake them up if they don’t wake up themselves” (23). Because “[w]e won’t have a democracy, in the end, anyway, if we don’t wake up,” the “means” by which the government acts “can’t be too harsh”; “If the President isn’t strong enough, we ought to have a dictator do it” (23). He supports his bold claims with still bolder sensationalism, suggesting that “Hitler and the Japs” will “try to come up through Mexico and down through Canada” and that American needs “strong guys like MacArthur” to “haul guys like me out of civilian clothes and put us on a drill field” to create “an army of 10,000,000 men, like the Russians have” (24).
Caldwell’s words echo his high praise of the Soviet response to German aggression in *All-Out*, an attempt at journalistic non-fiction marred by his reliance on reports from Soviet propagandists. Living in Moscow when the war breaks out, Caldwell marvels at the speed with which the Soviet government takes “full control of the situation” and remarks that Soviet citizens frequently volunteered “a day’s labor to the state” (78-79). Caldwell is tolerant or even supportive of Stalin’s omnipresent propaganda apparatus and is especially fond of the Soviet people’s titular “all-out effort to win the war,” observing that their dedication is “probably unique in the world’s history.” “All non-essentials were removed from life” (78), he observes appreciatively, and just as he argued in his interview that Americans “need an immediate halt on non-essential production” to support the war effort (“Lesson from Russia” 24), “all essentials” in the Soviet Union were “placed at the disposal of the fighting forces” and mobilized toward the country’s defense (78).

Though cut from the same material as Soviet propaganda stories, including government issued statements, sanctioned interviews with war veterans, and state-run tours of the front, *All-Out on the Road to Smolensk* is a clearly Americanized version of this propaganda, and Caldwell is careful to preemptively defend himself against accusations of political radicalization. The book is, among many other things, an ode to Stalinism, but unlike a Soviet writer, Caldwell cannot construct himself as a communist sympathizer to his American audience, and thus his praise for Stalin is always couched in the rhetoric of wartime necessity. He often acknowledges the propagandistic nature of the material that the state feeds him and makes a show of conducting his own investigations and getting his own sources, and his exaggerations of his autonomy lend a note of down-to-earth American individualism to his reports. He insists that he is “not advocating Communism” in any form, but by his estimation, “What [the Russians’] political
system is doesn’t matter. They have demonstrated and proved something, while we sit back on the fact we’re a democracy and must do things such and such a way” (“Lesson from Russia” 24-25).

Rhetorical deflections aside, Caldwell does exhibit a fascination with communism as a means to resolve America’s problems, and this fascination goes far beyond the immediate concerns of the war; in fact, his trip to the U.S.S.R. seems to have awoken him to the possibility of putting “lackadaisical Americans” to work solving the South’s social problems through an “all-out mobilization of men and materials” per the Soviet example. According to Caldwell, there is a false dichotomy inherent in most discussions of the Soviet Union:

Outside of the USSR . . . in any discussion of the Soviet Union all arguments in the last analysis narrow down to the question of whether a person wants socialism, security, and restricted existence, or whether he desires capitalism, insecurity, and freedom of action and speech. (165)

The author instead insists that “workers the world over, for the most part, subscribe to the basis on which the Soviet Union is erected” (165-66). Caldwell’s Soviet Union is “no Utopia, but neither is it a dismal hole”; it is “a workers’ country” in which “work has been provided for everyone and . . . economic insecurity is non-existent” (165). He claims that “there was plenty of evidence to prove that the 194,000,000 persons living in the Soviet Union were fairly well fed and housed,” and there is “no superabundance of anything for anybody” nor any “dire want and poverty among the people” (83). At the top of this structure is Stalin, a genius leader guided at every step by “Lenin’s basic teachings,” and whatever Stalin does, Caldwell notes, “the people will say that it is exactly what Lenin would have done under similar circumstances” (87). Under Stalin’s example, Caldwell believes, the Soviet people volunteer themselves willingly to work on behalf of the collective, and unlike in America, “there was no suggestion of frivolousness” in the Russian character (78).
Published soon after *All-Out, All Night Long* is essentially a novelization of the systems that Caldwell praised in his previous book given extra punch by its focus on personal drama and cinematic action. As contemporary reviewers were quick to observe, the war novel is a far cry from Caldwell’s previous work; gone is much of the complexity of *Tobacco Road* and *God’s Little Acre*, and most of what remains has been repurposed for overtly political use. *Tobacco Road*, which begins with a five-chapter-long arc about a bag of turnips, is obsessed with the material and the mundane, two common topics through which Caldwell explores the psychology of his Southern characters and the often-harsh realities of their lives. In *All Night Long*, material detail is minimal and always purposeful, and day-to-day activity takes a backseat to action. The first chapter begins with Sergei and Natasha discussing their plans for combating the Germans, with Sergei serving as an experienced interpreter of Soviet doctrine; Natasha naively wishes to fight the invaders immediately, while her husband promises that with patience they “can kill ten times as many later—a hundred times as many!” (9). As the enemy approaches the house and Sergei hides himself, Natasha “suddenly realized that she should be doing something that would keep the Germans from being suspicious” and “quickly filled a bowl with soup and sat down at the table” (17). The material or mundane which occupies most of *Tobacco Road* is herein only a front; the partisans of *All Night Long* are endlessly dedicated to the defeat of fascism and only express interest in their material surroundings when they can be wielded toward some end.

Given its overtly propagandistic nature and obvious departure from its author’s usual subject matter, comparisons to socialist realism, the artistic movement which would receive first the endorsement and then the absolute mandate of Stalin’s regime, are inevitable, but such comparisons risk creating connections where none exist or drawing lines of potential influence that obscure the truth. Jay Caldwell’s (the author’s son’s) contention that *All Night Long* is a
heavily Americanized example of socialist realism, for instance, depends on a creative use of the genre’s definition. Jay Caldwell defines *All Night Long* according to the common features that Morson identifies among Western interpretations of socialist realist novels: a focus on psychologically uncomplicated “positive heroes,” formulaic plotting, a preoccupation with socialist themes that Western readers may find “singularly unamenable to novelistic treatment,” the blatant insertion of political sermons, “mandatory” happy endings, and, “most disturbing to Western readers, a lack of irony” (qtd. in Jay Caldwell 221). However, in Morson’s original text, “Socialist Realism and Literary Theory,” this list of features is not a definition of socialist realism, but its antithesis; the very next sentence—“There are numerous problems, however, with this method of definition”—sets the tone for the rest of his argument (122). Among Morson’s myriad objections, the most significant is that “defining the socialist realist novel in terms of a set of features” will inevitably “overlook what, to its creators, was most essential to the new Soviet novel: namely, that it was not the product of just another literary school, but a different kind of art from its Western counterparts” (122).

Indeed, socialist realism is best identified not by its features, but by its purposeful disruption of what its proponents considered to be bourgeois artistic norms in order to dramatize the Marxist progression of history. “After 1932,” Katerina Clark observes, “. . . the Stalinist writer was no longer the creator of original texts; he became the teller of tales already prefigured in Party lore.” Unlike the loosely united canon of the Russian Realists, socialist realism held that the ideology that would bring universal brotherhood already existed, existential crises had already been resolved, and the world was marching at a rapid clip toward its rightful order, and thus the author “does not have to *prove* anything” but instead only “*shows* how, in the particular model situation he has chosen, social and political contradictions work themselves out in
successive resolutions of the spontaneity / consciousness dialectic” (159). To this end, the prototypical socialist realist plot involves a “ritual progress toward ‘consciousness’” by which the positive hero, motivated by “various myths of High Stalinist rhetoric,” must complete a public task (159, 163), the journey toward which sees him or her evolve away from spontaneous action to subordinate him or herself to the state/people.

Despite its Soviet sympathies, All Night Long does not combat the hegemony of the bourgeois novel or subvert the standards of U.S. literature, but instead exploits them for economic and political expediency in much the same way that any traditional potboiler does. As Jay Caldwell observes, “none of [Erskine Caldwell] or Bourke-White’s serious Russian books had sold well,” and thus the author turned to the more accessible territory of the “stem-winding, patriotic thriller that might even attract interest from Hollywood” (220-21). Furthermore, considering that almost no socialist realist novels had even been translated into English by the time of his visit to the U.S.S.R., it is unlikely that Caldwell was much aware of current Russian literary trends (Jay Caldwell 222). The common features in socialist realism that Morson identifies are inherent to the genre only because they reflect a reality posited by Soviet propaganda, and any quickly-composed novel relying heavily on this reality for its plot will at least shallowly resemble socialist realism and may even accidentally mirror most or all of its common features. Moreover, because Western critics often dismiss socialist realism’s overt politicism and lack of irony as a form of literary weakness, any sufficiently unironic or “unliterary” work that supports Soviet themes runs the risk of receiving the same label. In adapting the regime’s propaganda into a wartime romance for American audiences, Caldwell took what was most amenable to a popular novel with a possible film option—strong messaging,
idealized characters, heroic struggles—and filled in the rest with melodrama and common Hollywood tropes, abandoning irony for the sake of expediency.

Though not influenced directly by Soviet literary style, both *All Night Long* and *All-Out on the Road to Smolensk* are certainly influenced by Soviet politics and speak as much to Caldwell’s imagined Soviet Utopia—a land free of Jeeters—as they speak to the war effort. Jeeter is both an asset to and a problem in Caldwell’s fiction, a complex iteration of the problematic Russian and Southern “type” identified by McCullers: “Hedonistic, imaginative, lazy, emotional” (254). His erratic psychology drives much of the novel, the illogical and incidental structure of the work owing much to his actions. He is religious, but as Sylvia Jenkins Cook observes, “Jeeter’s God is clearly a figure of great personal convenience for him, whom he can invoke in various ways as fits the occasion” (*Fiction of Poverty* 110), and understanding his often frustratingly inconsistent system of beliefs becomes absolutely essential to understanding life on the Tobacco Road itself. Caldwell’s approach to the Lester family is sympathetic but filled with irony. In his memoir, *Call it Experience*, he claimed to have “wanted to tell the story of the people [he] knew in the manner in which they actually lived their lives from day to day and year to year, and to tell it without regard for fashions in writing and traditional plots” (101). As a result, the novel’s “resolution to their plight is less positive and more symbolic in nature,” and “simultaneously question[s] the nature of human divinity and assert[s] the need for drastic social reforms” (Cook 114).

*All Night Long*’s Sergei is the anti-Jeeter, as those elements in Jeeter’s personality that render him a comical old sinner in the vein of the elder Karamazov are either totally absent in Sergei or rendered heroic. Sergei is a revolutionary “positive hero,” filled with energy, constantly in motion, and always guided by purpose. His psychology is simple, and his motivations are
transparent; politically, he has subordinated himself to the Soviet way of thinking; meta-discursively, he has aligned himself with the necessities of moving the plot forward, rather than the other way around. His “Closeness to nature”—demonstrated in his work as a farmer—is, unlike Jeeter’s, a form of positive spontaneity common in Soviet fiction (Clark 164). Rather than holding him back from fulfilling his conscious role in society, it provides him with energy and spirit that can be directed toward Soviet causes now that he has achieved class consciousness. While Jeeter’s problems are located in his own shortcomings and his inability to adjust to the changing modern world, all of Sergei’s problems stem from the German invasion of his Soviet paradise, and his is an exemplary story of an ideal individual doing exactly what he needs to do to counteract this threat.

The most significant difference between the two, however, lies in their antithetical approaches to modernization and economy, a difference which also characterizes much of All Night Long’s messaging, as Caldwell covertly posits solutions for Southern problems in Soviet systems. In All-Out on the Road to Smolensk, Caldwell admits that “the chief drawback of a socialist state is that so far nothing has been devised to overcome the tendency on the part of some workers not to exert themselves more than necessary.” As commonly seen in his own novels, laziness “is a form of human weakness readily observable in capitalist as well as in socialist nations, and there may be as many individuals in Russia who try to get by in life doing as little as possible as there are in the United States” (167). However, the difference that Caldwell sees in the U.S.S.R. is education; self-centered laziness “has already been removed from military life” there and “could be removed [from civilian life] by education” (168). The Russian military, he observes, uses medals and honors to motivate its recruits, and the nation’s civilian workers are also starting to be incentivized to work and given ample education. As
Caldwell describes in his review of Edward Dahlberg’s *From Flushing to Calvary* (1932), even an ignorant character “would not be incapable of becoming revolutionary if only he knew how to go about it, or had someone to direct him” (“Ripe for Revolution” 21-22). Caldwell sees in his idealized Soviet model the possibility of combatting Southern ignorance: a way to whip the South into shape and press it into action in modern times.

*All Night Long* bears out this same logic in the story of its ideal hero. Both Sergei and Jeeter are old enough to remember a different era of agricultural production, but whereas Jeeter is bound by the tradition handed down from his father, Sergei enthusiastically embraces the form of modernity fostered by the U.S.S.R. Like Ty Ty Walden of *God’s Little Acre*, Jeeter is “committed to an ahistorical patriarchal identity rather than the one that reflects his material condition” (Dyen 151), and thus his financial ruin owes itself to a combination of socioeconomic factors in the early twentieth-century South and to his own stubborn resistance to change. Sergei, however, is a proud worker at the “Lenin Collective Farm” and fully embraces modernization; like Will Thompson, he “understands the connection between himself and his fellow workers in relation to the industrial system . . . and his beliefs and values are derived from his recognition of his class position” (151). Sergei trained at the *kolkhoz* in machinery operation and farming practices, and after “completing his training at the agricultural school,” he proudly displays his tractor driving certificate in his home (45). The *kolkhoz* treats not only the malady of technological backwardness, but provincialism as well; in preparation for the war, the agricultural school offered courses to train its students for work as partisans. As a result, Sergei is well-informed, socially and politically engaged, able to understand German, and aware of his enemy’s tactics and political systems long before he ever faces them in combat.
The novel is utopian not only in its portrayal of communism, but also in its placelessness:

Caldwell’s fictionalized U.S.S.R. is not just unlike the real thing, but unlike any place in existence, an admixture of foreign and familiar elements easily superimposed over the United States. Contemporary detractors attributed this placelessness to Caldwell’s clumsy handling of Russian regional flavor. William Pene du Bois’s article in the *New York Times Book Review* laments that Caldwell “scarcely scratches the surface of the Russian earth and misses the Russian soul entirely,” and claims that

Mr. Caldwell has wasted rare talent on material he feels but cannot encompass. He will always be a Georgia boy, no matter how hard he struggles; his homeland is in the pine-barrens, not in the frozen-birch-groves before Moscow; even if his Russian improves, he will wander forever among the moujiks a novelist without a compass. (qtd. in Jay Caldwell 256)

Margaret Marshall of *The Nation* similarly finds that Caldwell “came up as a ‘natural’ storyteller, [who] wrote with a seemingly instinctive, strict, and essentially poetic economy of expression wonderfully suited to his material,” but *All Night Long* is “not only a travesty of his own earlier work but . . . makes a travesty of the Russian struggle” (255-56). Their criticism is consistent with previous reviews of his collaboration with Bourke-White, *North of the Danube*, about which Maurice Hindus claimed “the purely Slavic flavor of his conversations with peasants . . . eludes Caldwell” (71). Caldwell’s Russian comes into play only when he has the correct word on hand, and his occasional slips into Southern descriptors serve as reminders of his own nationality; his references to clay soil as *podzol* or cabbage as *kapusta* stand in contrast to his simple labelling of outbuildings as “lean-tos” (76), for example.

*All Night Long*’s off-kilter Russianness illustrates the novel’s attempted universality as much as its inaccuracy; its source material is Russian, but its impetus is born of the Popular Front, attesting to the significant relationship between socially-conscious Popular Front literature
and modernist realism in the American South even before the advent of direct Soviet influence. Cook argues that recent studies have found much common ground between the modernists and “a large group of writers once thought to be so inimical to modernism as almost to define its antithesis, namely the socially committed radicals of the 1930s, the proletarian novelists, the writers on the left, now reincarnated as the Cultural Front, the New Deal Modernists, the Writers for the Nation” (“Modernism” 58-59). Though he would later deny any real affinity for their causes and dismiss his associations with communist organizations as mere careerism, Caldwell enmeshed himself in American socialist culture (Cook “Modernism” 59, Fiction of Poverty 4), and however much Caldwell’s partisan journalism in the U.S.S.R. may have contributed to the material of the novel, the political and ideological roots were already sown in his involvement with the Southern proletarian novelists. Though also interested in imagism, psychology, and realistic depiction of the banalities of Southern life, Caldwell’s earlier writing is still socially conscious and arguably revolutionary, his habit of deftly denying political affiliations notwithstanding.

Though All Night Long’s Russian characters pepper their sentences with occasional Russian words (khorosho, tovarish, Fashisti, etc.), their English dialogue is an odd combination of stilted and simplistic, evoking the populist common sense of “workers the world over” rather than a direct political doctrine and aiming for an audience that is more interested in the struggle than in the exact national identity of its heroes (165). In many instances, characters employ an untraceable folk wisdom that may appear in any oeuvre from any country. “All men are brothers,” political officer Nikolai Sorokin claims, “until some of them try to enslave the others. Someday we will all be brothers again and no man will try to make a slave of another” (59). The same character describes communism with a saying handed down from his grandfather that
“proves how wise [he] was, even in his old age”: “if you share with your neighbor, and your neighbor shares with you, both of you will have more than either had to begin with” (60).

Despite his status as a political officer trained in Soviet doctrine and presumably well-versed in the latest in Russian political thought, his understanding of economy is rooted in folk traditions and common sense.

This focus on populist folk wisdom as a source for communist theory speaks to one of All Night Long’s most significant departures from socialist realist fiction: its lack of a traditional spontaneity/consciousness dialectic. The idea that the Soviet-influenced novel sits within the spectrum of socialist realist is enticing but implies a sudden substitution of a new Russian literary form (socialist realism) for a tried-and-true American one (realism), overlooking the significant relationship between socially-conscious Popular Front literature and modernist realism in the American South even before the advent of direct Soviet influence, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the motivations behind All Night Long’s plot. As Clark observes, the socialist realist novel encoded the Stalinist struggle to subordinate personal desires to productivity into stories that were usually but not always focused on ideal heroes working to complete a public task, the accomplishment of which sees the hero (and by extension, the reader) overcome backwardness and selfishness to use his or her energies for the greater good (163-64).

In All Night Long, no such journey is necessary; Sergei must complete a public task (fighting the German invasion), but the advantages of doing so to both individual and collective are already apparent in the folk wisdom to which he and his comrades were brought up, and spontaneous motivations (Sergei’s love for his wife, Fyodor’s lust for revenge, Vladimir’s hope to become a hero) always align with conscious ones.
This populist approach to socialist politicking further unites Caldwell with the Eisenstein model of political storytelling through its utilitarian appeals to common audience values. In his 1925 essay “The Method of Making a Workers’ Film,” Eisenstein defines a film’s content as “its socially useful effect,” or “the summary of the series of shocks (to which you wish to subject the audience in a particular sequence)” (65, 66). Hand-in-hand with this theory of purpose as content are Eisenstein’s definition of form as “the realisation of these dimensions in a particular raw material by creating and assembling precisely those stimulants that are capable of provoking the necessary percentages” to achieve the desired summary of effects (66). Applied to All Night Long, the purpose of the would-be-film is to encourage Americans to support the Soviet war effort, and this purpose is realized in a series of events meant to impress upon the reader the justness and feasibility of the Soviet model. This series is in turn given form by Caldwell’s purposefully chosen stimulants—personal drama, action, the rising and falling fortunes of the heroes as they achieve victories and suffer casualties—all calculated to condition the reader to accept the novel’s message through their resonance with traditional values.

This system differs drastically from Caldwell’s previous work in its tacit agreement with Eisenstein’s assertion that neutral stimuli should only be used to evoke responses that would heighten the effect of politically useful stimuli, as well as its apparent abandonment of the author’s previous dedication to challenging social mores. Disdaining what he saw as bourgeois l’art pour l’art attitude in Western film, Eisenstein believed “that the ideologically acceptable use of a neutral or accidental attraction may serve only as a method of provoking those unconditioned reflexes that we need, not for their own sakes but to train the conditioned reflexes that are useful to our class and which we wish to combine with the defined objectives of our social principle” (66). In earlier Caldwell novels such as Tobacco Road and God’s Little Acre,
these neutral stimuli are a primary focus; sex and comedy take center stage, and Caldwell’s
dissection of Southern poverty and human nature are complicated by rather than always
reinforced by their inclusion. The Walden and Lester families confront the difficulties of modern
capitalism—industrialization, agricultural reforms, anti-union sentiments—but are themselves
comical, in many ways participating in the ignorance and vice that the novels paint culpable for
their current conditions. As Cook observes, Caldwell’s earlier writing “transfers attention to the
strange and shocking nature of human existence rather than to elaborately contrived clusters of
events,” working to “diminish the impact of plot and denouement in favor of antic conduct”
(“Modernism” 65).

*All Night Long* has little room for such levity, instead employing Caldwell’s usual sexual
or comedic themes sparingly as undisguised political tools to demonize Russia’s enemies or
glorify its causes. Most humor comes at the expense of the Germans; Sergei and his comrades
joke about “the ever-thoughtful Nemetskies! Bringing food to us!” after stealing German
supplies (60), and they later joke about their enemy’s poor marksmanship and rations (115, 87),
as well as the ease with which they can be dispatched: “Tovarish Stalin wouldn’t like it if we
didn’t leave enough of them to make a presentable surrender” (145-46). The German officer who
attempts to rape Natasha at the beginning of the novel is coded as comically un-masculine,
complaining about the cold, wrapping himself tightly in a woman’s shawl, and proving
completely incapable of handling liquor (20, 26-27). Indeed, throughout the novel, every German
who is not simply dismissed as evil is in some way pathetic, cowardly, or comical, justifying
Sorokin’s call to “Always remember why they must be killed” (59). As a result, while killing his
first German, “Sergei had no feeling that he was taking a human life; the German was an
inanimate object that had to be destroyed before it destroyed him” (44).
In contrast to the unfeeling occupants of the Tobacco Road, Caldwell’s Russians always view sexual violence as monstrous, and the novel characterizes the brutality of the invasion through depictions of rape, especially of women and children.\textsuperscript{12} Sex in \textit{All Night Long} is always violent and exploitative; as a corollary, it is also always German. The Russian characters display a platonic passion that is otherwise rare in Caldwell’s oeuvre, while the Germans embody the sexual misdeeds that had come to characterize the popular reputation of Caldwell’s novels.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{All Night Long}’s sexual content lacks any element of the burlesque, creating a stark contrast with Caldwell’s earlier works. As the novel opens, Sergei watches his sleeping wife with paternal fondness, and his interactions with her are generally chaste and protective. Far removed from Jeeter Lester, whom, if Sister Bessie is to be believed, does not even exempt his own daughters from his lust, Sergei embodies sexual purity and self-control. By contrast, the first German to appear in the novel tears Natasha’s dress during an attempted rape before stumbling drunkenly and injuring himself. Sergei’s comrades relate stories of the rape and murder of their wives and daughters, and Fyodor describes in great detail how the Germans bayoneted his pregnant wife and unborn child and raped and killed his daughter. The triumphant final arc of the novel finds

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{All Night Long} further echoes \textit{Tobacco Road} in its perhaps coincidental, perhaps intentional focus on victims who are specifically twelve years old. Pearl Lester was twelve when she was essentially sold into marriage, and in \textit{All Night Long} Fyodor’s daughter was twelve when she was raped and murdered by the Germans (83), the twelve-year-old orderly Valdimir is captured and hanged, and the heroes are directed to the German brothel by the mother of another twelve-year-old who was taken there.

\textsuperscript{13} For examples of this reputation, see Fearnow’s study of the reception of \textit{Tobacco Road}’s Broadway adaptation a Duck’s assessment of the grotesque in Caldwell’s depictions of Southern poverty.
Sergei freeing his wife and a host of other Russian women from a German brothel and allows Fyodor to die avenging himself on the enemies who killed his family.

These moments in which Caldwell rallies his audience to the side of the Soviets by demonstrating the overlap between Russian and American mores are not so divorced from the earlier and more famous methods that characterized his previous novels. As a writer of Southern poverty, Caldwell has traditionally appeared simultaneously to critics as a documentarian, a grotesque imagist, and an agitator for social change. Cook describes Caldwell’s tendencies toward a “documentary literature” that is “almost by definition, suggestive of objectivity and comprehensiveness” (“Modernism” 67), a methodology borrowed in part from his work for the *Atlanta Journal* and in part from his father Ira’s own documentary works. At the same time, Caldwell “pursu[ed] his father’s interest in solutions” to the conditions that he represented in his work (71), and thus, as Dyen suggests, was “interested not purely in documentation, but also in shaping the minds of his readers” (151). The grotesque in Caldwell’s fiction helped to bridge these two impulses, shocking readers with what Michael Denning terms a “proletarian grotesque” that works “to wrench us out of the repose and distance of the ‘aesthetic’” (123). As Denning notes, the grotesque was “most appropriate to moments of crisis and transition,” as it “creates gargoyles that violate accepted classifications” (122).

Though Caldwell’s use of the grotesque or burlesque in his Southern novels such as *Tobacco Road* has not come without critical controversy, the author’s abandonment of these elements in his Russian projects underlines a utilitarian rather than merely exploitative motivation behind the content of his earlier works. The dominant critical interpretation of Caldwell’s grotesque, as Duck states, is that the author exhibits a “desire to challenge sexual repressiveness” (88), or, as Denning claimed, to challenge normative classifications. However, to
one extent or another, critics—including Duck, Kenneth Burke, Cook, and Mark Fearnow—all posit that his use of the grotesque has an alienating effect, allowing or even encouraging readers to project the issues that he identifies onto an othered South. Duck claims that Caldwell “enabled audience members to manage fears of their own economic and social decline by projecting them onto the bodies of a spatially and temporally distanced population” that was “isolated from an idealized national temporality” (87). Fearnow, looking to Burke’s concept of “exorcism by misnomer,” claims that Caldwell pushed “dreaded scenes of poverty and dehumanization that haunted people of the depression” past “the point of absurdity,” thus “misnam[ing]” real concerns as “silliness and folly” (113-14). As Cook observes, Caldwell himself claimed that the Deep South is “a state of mind—a local purgatory or an earthly paradise—and often an economic iniquity, a social anachronism, a political autocracy, and a racial tyranny,” thus othering the South from the rest of the nation at the same time that he made it his focus (qtd. in Cook, Fiction of Poverty 12).

As such, Caldwell’s most famous fiction turns grotesquery into a vehicle for social change not only by challenging social mores, but also by using “the shock of the new” (Cook, “Modernism” 74)—in this case, Southern depravity—to provoke audiences to come to the defense of their dominant national narratives. In Tobacco Road, sexual content challenges traditional sexual mores but also demands castigation. Duck highlights a revealing exchange in which a Chicago judge and a writer for the Nation accused each other’s cities of identifying with the Lesters, with the Nation writer concluding that though “no one who observes the turnip-eating youth and the harelipped imbecile is likely to be impelled to go and do likewise,” we still “wish very violently that something could be done about such things” (qtd. in Duck 94). The novel itself predicts such responses; when Bessie drags the sixteen-year-old Dude to the
Courthouse to obtain a marriage license, the clerk briefly steps into the audience’s role, questioning their marriage, condemning Jeeter for previously marrying off his twelve-year-old daughter Pearl, and offering Dude a chance to reject Bessie’s proposal (124-27). Apathy prevails when the clerk’s annoyance with Bessie’s preaching leads him to rush the couple out of his office, leaving the audience with the sense that their eagerness to ignore issues in the South stands between the nation and the fulfillment of its values. By evoking these sorts of response to Southern abjection, Caldwell’s works and their adaptations attack dominant mores in order to provoke the populace to defend them, ironically placing a modernist or popular-culture preoccupation with the burlesque in service of social reforms based in part on a conservative sexual morality.

Caldwell’s abandonment of imagism, grotesquery, and irony in his Russian projects is thus less likely to signal his abandonment of his standing social missions than to reveal his thoroughly utilitarian deployment of these stylistic considerations in his Southern proletarian work. Formal differences aside, Caldwell’s Russian and Southern works both engage with America “as a collective that could be mobilized to produce a more just and flexible socioeconomic structure” (Duck 86-87), and they are heavily defined by their resonance with dominant national values, calling audiences to action via their embrasure or disavowal of his represented milieus. Whatever the popular impact of the author’s early novels, their “spatially and temporally distanc[ing]” effect was the opposite of what Caldwell hoped to achieve with his stories of the U.S.S.R. (Duck 87), which instead draw parallels between American and Russian identities and values to encourage support and emulation rather than paternalistic intervention. It is for this reason that the model of Soviet propaganda became a temporarily useful tool for Caldwell, and why its use, despite its stylistic departures from his usual forms, was not
ideologically inconsistent with his previous works. Moreover, the overlap between the ideological simplicity of the Soviet model and the cinematic traditions to which Caldwell hoped to weld his Russian works further incentivized his turn toward Soviet-style writing. Not unlike the way that *Tobacco Road* posited the abject South as a challenge to the nation’s self-identification in order to correct it, *All Night Long* and *All-Out* appeal to dominant narratives of American identity and values to show American audiences a path toward a more unified national identity.

The possibility that the U.S. South and Russia might reconfigure central narratives of nation and economy across the globe was not confined to Caldwell. As Marina MacKay observes, “the history of modernism as a whole intersects at many different points with world-scale transformation across half a century affecting many millions of people” (5), and few such transformations affected so many as did the Soviet political and cultural reforms. The practice of employing the “kino-fist,” as Eisenstein termed the cinema (Bordwell 9), for political goals was not confined to Soviet and Southern creators and would go on to be a common staple of nationalist cinema during the era of World War II. However, the systems in which political literature and film were first perfected have their earliest roots in the innovations of the Soviet cinema and the pervasive, multi-modal approach of Popular Front artists. Aesthetic considerations aside, Caldwell’s brief turn toward Soviet modes marks an unusual but—given his earlier political aims—not illogical attempt to push the impoverished South into the twentieth century by employing new Russian forms to unite individuals, social strata, and regional divides through an Americanized version of Stalinist socio-political narratives. The economic and political failure of Caldwell’s Soviet experiments notwithstanding, to the left-leaning chronicler
of Southern poverty and national apathy toward the Southern problem, a Soviet future for the South was, at least during the early 1940s, not an unappealing outcome.
CHAPTER 4

“ALL MUSIC IS FOLK MUSIC”: HOLLYWOOD BLACKNESS AND THE SOVIET PEASANT IN GRIGORII ALEKSANDROV’S MUSICAL COMEDIES

Arthur “Harpo” Marx’s ghostwritten autobiography Harpo Speaks! (1961) may seem an unorthodox starting point for a discussion of subversive Southern and Soviet filmmaking, but the star’s life and career straddled both. Neither Southern nor Russian and only a brief visitor to either region, Harpo nevertheless uses his account of his 1933 trip to the U.S.S.R. to vividly dramatize the cultural clash between Stalinist dogmatic rigidity and the American comedian’s brand of nonsense. Despite his friend Alexander Woollcott’s projection that he would enjoy immediate acceptance on the “soviet Circuit”—“Can’t you see the three-sheets? ‘Presenting Marx—In person’!” (297)—Harpo instead discovers a country that he likens to “the other side of the moon” (304), characterized by stone-faced government agents, oppressive living conditions, and a Moscow Art Theatre so humorless that his guide and interpreter has to tell the audience at his audition that his routine “was a joke” (312). After the intervention of foreign minister Maxim Litvinov, however, Harpo soon discovers a great commonality with the Russian people:

I never knew any people who laughed as easily as the Russians. Maybe laughter was more of a luxury to them than to anybody else. Maybe they were starved for it. I stopped trying to figure them out. Walking the streets, working, or waiting in line, these were the most self-controlled people I had ever seen. In the theatre, the same people couldn’t hold themselves in. Every move I made threw the joint into a new riot. The director of the Moscow Art Theatre, the guy who’d almost auditioned me out of town, still had tears in his eyes from laughing when he came back to congratulate me. (315)

Following this discovery, “what had been two weeks before a city on the other side of the moon was now [his] new home town” (318), and Harpo is invited to stuff “knives up the sleeves of the [Pushkin] statue” in imitation of his famous silverware-stealing gag, perform in packed Russian
theaters, and play straight man to Litvinov himself during a guest appearance at one of his shows (330, 328).

This is not the only time that Harpo encountered an unexpected audience to whom laughter was a luxury. In their film *A Day at the Races* (1937), having just escaped one of several run-ins with the police, the Marx Brothers stumble upon an unlikely sight: an impoverished Southern Black hamlet, apparently situated within walking distance of the upscale Standish Sanitarium where the three have been causing mayhem. The brief scene of forlorn Black poverty is transformed when Harpo produces a flute from his overlarge coat, and the entire community suddenly reveals a skill for song and dance. The ensuing musical number exhausts all the conventional racial tropes: the Black laborers burst into song and perfectly choreographed dance sequences, a Black man performs a simultaneously impressive and comical shuffle, a young Black woman sings that “All God’s chillun’ got swing,” and by the number’s end the brothers have ended up in blackface disguises. The show ends abruptly with the arrival of the sheriff. The brother’s new Black friends disappear until their triumphant return at the film’s conclusion, where they parade the brothers through the streets brandishing handfuls of money won from betting on Harpo at the racetrack. Their tune changes with their fortunes, and the performers revise their previous refrain to “All God’s chillun’ got dough.”

Harpo’s disruptive appearances in Hollywood and Soviet theater challenged both with an alternative narrative of “mass culture,” but his participation ironically undermined his satire, allowing the mechanisms of the industry to transform his parody into propaganda. In Russia, Harpo baffles spies, translators, and directors alike, exposing to his American readers the hypocrisy of a centrally controlled People’s culture. Describing his Hollywood experiences, Harpo regales his readers with stories of his brothers’ disdain for order, ruining schedules,
messing up takes, and dragging out productions purely by nature of being genuinely rather than calculatedly zany. But while Harpo’s anarchical performances initially confounded Soviet theater, by the time of his debut on the Soviet Circuit, his Russian handlers had processed him into something they could use, until his “greatest laugh”—in which Foreign Minister Litvinov unexpectedly pulls one of his own gags on him—involved the regime clowning him back. The comic’s own acceptance of “the other side of the moon” is a consequence of the state’s scheme to redefine itself to its people and to outsiders (304), employing Harpo and its own “People’s Vaudeville” to replace any real disquiet with a controlled, acceptable anarchy (319). Hollywood, too, responded to the chaos the brothers imbued with added restriction; Hollywood’s The Cocoanuts was not the brothers’ heavily improvised Broadway version, as the system instead digested it into a form suitable for filming. Thus Harpo’s Soviet and Hollywood comedy, while typically nonsensical, still fulfills Evgeny Dobrenko’s idea of “state appropriated laughter” (“Soviet Comedy Film” 49), as the entertainment he provides works, whether under a studio banner or the sponsorship of the Soviet foreign minister, as an approved product of a tightly restricted system.

Harpo’s example demonstrates the extent to which the Bakhtinian carnival in which anarchy supplants authority existed in only a measured form in the theaters of Classic Hollywood and Stalin’s U.S.S.R. Industry standards—whether based in a capitalist commitment to uncontroversial moneymaking or a totalitarian aversion to the appearance of weakness—occasionally allowed for some limited boat-rocking, but never to the extent that anyone might surmise that the boat was actually on rough water. In Hollywood and Moscow, not just Marx Brothers but also peasants and minorities posed a problem for the two film industries. While their apartness from the traditional mainstream imbued them with an undeniable appeal, their
existence troubled traditional narratives of mass identity and standardized modes of production. Seeing Black and peasant subjects simultaneously as founts of cultural creation and political controversy, Hollywood and Stalin’s cinema, each of which had contributed in no small part to their real-world marginalization, found themselves in need of a system by which they could encompass them within their own presented worldviews without subverting their own interests or acknowledging their own complicity.

The brunt of Classic Hollywood’s and the Stalinist U.S.S.R.’s cinematic engagements with their respective oppressed underclasses appears in Soviet comedies such as Grigoriy Aleksandrov’s *Volga, Volga* (1938)—a satirical musical centered on humorous depictions of contemporary Russian peasants—and in American comedic films such as *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *A Day at the Races*. Under the umbrella of musical comedy, America’s Black and Russia’s peasant populations are reconciled with the industries’ dominant national images in satirical depictions that estrange them from the mythologized main body of the population through stereotyping and aggressive othering while simultaneously tying them to the “spirit” or “principle” of the nation. Because their popular-culture identities linked these populations to peripheral Southern and Russian backwaters and the old regimes of serfdom and slavery, their comical representations in Classic Hollywood and Soviet film play host to a consequence-free mixing of past and present and of periphery and center. Through such characters, anachronisms coexist with modernity and Southernness and its Russian provincial equivalents become expected parts of a comedic Blackness and peasantness.

The plots of these films contrive to depict real national problems such as discrimination, poverty, regional divisions, and abusive power structures as products of individual, foreign, or otherwise unrepresentative elements, and the “underdog” heroes overcome them by temporarily
embodying the underlying ethic of the nation. To quote Dobrenko’s summation of Byvalov, the self-important bureaucrat in *Volga, Volga*, the enemy in such films “is always yesterday’s face of authority . . . a sign of the change in the image of authority” toward the current, popular model (“Soviet Comedy Film” 55). Thus, the controlled revolt by which the marginalized heroes take center stage in these narratives turns the everyday workings of the nation upside-down only to display the integrity of the foundation underneath.\(^1\)

The key to this process lies in the national cinemas’ use of their respective populations’ folk or folk-inspired music, and *Volga, Volga* demonstrates how the same schemas by which Hollywood could fit an othered culture into a nationalist narrative were useful to Soviet creators. As Steven C. Tracy observes of ragtime, such music “tak[es] the cultural fragmentation, the raggedness, the frequent dislocation of time, life, and art along with the corresponding sadness in the lives of African Americans” and “put[s] things back together again in a happier medium that takes the African-based stylistic alterations and discontinuities . . . as a guide to resolution in approach and attitude” (5). Thus, the “White avant-garde and mainstream interest” in adopting and exploiting Black performance enacts a “process of imbuing the era of art with the spirit of hardship relieved by hope for the future” (6). This same process is present in *Volga, Volga*, which transforms the dark reality of the Soviet peasants’ lives into entertainment in service of the dominant narrative of Soviet uplift and happiness. Unlike earlier films of peasant progress such as Aleksandr Dovzhenko’s *Earth* (1930), however, *Volga, Volga*’s transformations rely not on

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\(^1\) As Naremore observes of films like *Cabin in the Sky*, “the greatest irony” of Classic Hollywood’s Black-focused films was that while their stars were transforming into celebrities in their own right and thereby transforming the face of Hollywood, they were also “gaining membership in a conservative enterprise – a system devoted to praising the American way, and to promoting the values of glamor, charm, and illusion” (119).
socialist realist melodrama, but on song. Through its heroine Strelka’s “Song of the Volga”—a folkloric showtune that explicitly forwards a narrative of hardship transmuted into joy by Soviet policy—the film changes the face of peasant backwardness into a vehicle for celebrating Soviet achievements and uses folk music’s focus on individual performance, populism, and nationalism to unite the U.S.S.R.’s disparate regional and class-based identities.

But even within this limited carnival the repressed could make itself known. As is the case with the Black characters in *A Day at the Races*, the fact that *Volga, Volga*’s peasants are configured as a natural part of the film’s controlled chaos is itself an admission that they have been society’s victims, and that the Soviet ideal represented within the film has not applied to them. Their very peasantness and the conditions of their village are symptomatic of their real marginality; that they even need to seek the State’s recognition exemplifies their position on the forgotten fringe of Soviet modernity. Since their journey toward recognition covers both ideological and geographical ground, their adventures call attention to both the Black/White and peasant/non-peasant segregation of American and Russian spaces and the ways these spaces separate unevenly along South/North and industrial/pre-industrial lines. *Volga, Volga*’s peasants, then, offer an unexpected parallel to marginalized representations in American cinema, demonstrating both a broad trend across world cinema toward the exploitation of peripheral populations and the isolated but continuous opposition to this exploitation that existed in both Hollywood and Soviet cinema.

Studying blues music’s reception in Russia after the fall of the U.S.S.R., Michael Urban asks, “Do those historical circumstances surrounding the creation and development of blues music in the United States evince any meaningful similarities with conditions prevailing in postcommunist Russia?” (2). The same question could be asked of jazz during the 1920s and
1930s, and there are certainly parallels in the histories of formerly unfree African Americans and Russians during their lengthy periods of integration. In addition to their economic disadvantages, like American slaves, the peasants had faced no small amount of discrimination and abuse. Even among Marxists, the peasants were considered Russia’s “dark people” who were beyond saving, and, as Robert Conquest observes, the “expressions of hatred and contempt” for the peasantry among the revolutionaries served as a precursor to the genocidal dekulakization that occurred under Stalin’s rule (19-20). Maxim Gorky lamented “the animal-like individualism of the peasantry, and the peasants’ almost total lack of social consciousness”; according to Khrushchev, “for Stalin, peasants were scum” (qtd. in Conquest 20). Stalinist mythology forwarded the image of the miserly, backward, or otherwise obstructionist kulak that was “irremediably hostile to the regime” (Conquest 3). Though dekulakization—the systematic deportation or killing of influential, traditionalist, or recalcitrant peasants—Stalin was able to refocus the epistemology of the Soviet peasantry from an oppressed uneducated rabble to a dangerous opponent. Overt attacks on the U.S.S.R.’s peripheral population, including intentionally induced famine in Ukraine and Stalin’s genocidal Decossackization in Southern

2 Apart from their initial poverty and lack of education, peasants also faced challenges owing to the sometimes haphazard methods of their emancipation. Though former serfs received tracts of land from the government, much of the land remained in the hands of their former masters, and what the newly independent peasants did receive came with costly “redemption payments” (Conquest 15).

3 The kulak, or “rich peasant,” was a construct of Soviet mythology that was in most cases as misleading as its self-contradictory name would suggests. As Conquest observes, “to the extent that he had existed at all,” the kulak “had disappeared by 1918, and the word was used of a farmer with two or three cows, or even of a poorer farmer friendly to the first. And by the time of the terror-famine, even these were no longer to be found in the villages.” Therefore, dekulakization targeted “in principle the better-off, in practice the most influential and the most recalcitrant to the Party’s plans” (4-5).
Russia, drove home the internal otherization immanent in the U.S.S.R. The greatest peasants in Soviet mythology—like the martyred Vasil of Aleksandr Dovzhenko’s *Earth*—were the least peasant-like, and Russian traditionalism, previously hailed as a bulwark against Western influence, became a loose ally of the nation’s capitalist enemies.

As with the side-by-side study of serf and slave narratives, however, the exact comparability of African-American and Russian peasant music and experiences in the early twentieth century is less central to the simultaneous study of their representations in film than the suggestive ways by which contemporary discourse configured their relationships. As Robert Freund Schwartz observes, “diaspora studies have determined that the conditions of the dissemination of musical knowledge largely determine which elements of music migrate to a new cultural milieu” (xi). Urban similarly posits that “whatever meanings that Russians might take from this [African American] music would be conditioned by their own culturally informed forces” (viii), and what is true of the U.S.S.R.’s use of African American art and performance is also true of its use of the systems for deploying them to the benefit of the dominant cultural regime. “Almost from its inception,” Paul McCann notes, “jazz,” for instance, “was a musical tradition for which various parties would try to claim ownership” (74), and among those who attempted to coopt the art of the “unchanging American primitive” were those who meant to stage its intervention as a chance to reinvigorate “the civilized, alienated, market-corrupted Europe” (93). For the Soviet leadership, to whom the cooptation of traditional folk forms was central to the creation of a totalitarian mass culture, the subjugation of the unchanging Russian “primitive” in state-sponsored entertainment was of similarly vital importance.
Participating in a new nationalist paradigm that meant to relocate “the line of demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘them’” to the country’s borders (Salys 208), Volga, Volga symbolically unites Russia’s industrial center and pre-modern periphery through Moscow’s acceptance and eventual cooptation of peasant musical talent. The people of the fictional village of Melkovodsk (meaning “Little Waters”), who, like many folkloric Soviet peasants, are “living in the past” (Taylor 210), receive a telegram from Moscow inviting them to perform their music at the All-Union Olympiad of Song. Their leader, Strelka (Lyubov Orlova), has composed a folk-inspired song that she hopes to perform; however, the obstructive bureaucrat Byvalov conspires with Strelka’s boyfriend Alyosha to send the village orchestra instead. The film follows the comical mishaps that ensue as the two teams race to the capital aboard rickety boats until the music-illiterate Strelka agrees to let Alyosha’s friends put her song on paper.

Further complications arise when a storm on the Volga blows the sheet music to Moscow ahead of them. The players arrive to find the Soviet capital filled with “alligators,” to use the New Orleanians’ term for the “white predators” of jazz (Brothers 35). Bands all around the capital have adapted Strelka’s song into marches, dances, and jazz renditions, casting doubt on its originality. Fearing criticism from Alyosha, Strelka had already told him that her fictional friend, Dunya, composed the song, and the new confusion surrounding its originality leads her to avoid the Olympiad committee’s search for its composer. After a series of misadventures throws

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4 This same paradigm can be found in limited form in Aleksandrov’s earlier comedies. The Jolly Fellows, though it involves a journey from the periphery to the capital, unites urban and rural spaces through their dedication to popular music. Circus, too, aims at unifying Soviet spaces, and its main song—“Song of the Motherland”—defines the U.S.S.R. “through a dialectic of largeness as unity,” arguing that the country’s “geographic expanses” allow for greater “freedom,” “opportunity,” and “social justice and cohesion” (Salys 175-76.)
the Olympiad into chaos, Strelka performs her song and wins recognition, vindicating herself the villagers. While the film celebrates the beauty of the Volga, it also glorifies the progress that the villagers see as they approach Moscow: in the words of Nikolai Mikhailov’s *Map of the Motherland*, “We love our glorious, dear Volga, but we do not wish to leave it quite as it is” (qtd. in Dobrenko, “Topography” 194).

*Volga, Volga* simultaneously parodies and supports Soviet systems while treating Russia’s peasantry with much the same exploitative fondness present in Classic Hollywood depictions of Black subjects, and the obviousness of its satire even in the face of rigorous government censorship has made it something of a critical enigma. Maya Turovskaya calls it “one of the most absurd pictures in the history of Soviet cinema” and claims that “the history of the making of the film appears even more absurd than the film itself” (“Strange Case” 75).

Moreover, Turovskaya prefaces her analysis of the film with a hefty disclaimer:

> I will try to do my best without pretending to offer a full analysis of the film, an act that would require a more rigorous and sophisticated plan to be able to separate the concept from the final result. (76)

However, considering the film as a partially unconscious product of a system not unlike a Classic Hollywood film brings the initial concept and final result more in line with each other. Stalin himself believed that “Cinema is the greatest means of mass agitation” and that the Soviet Union must “make good use of it,” and thus “focused particularly on the most popular genres—such as the musical comedy—as an innocuous and willing vessel for ideological edification through entertainment” (Ratchford 83). Despite the dawning of the Great Terror and the recent famines among Russia’s peasantry,⁵ the Soviet leader hoped to force more positivity into Soviet art in the

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⁵ In Ratchford’s words, “It is no accident that the height of the musical comedy coincided with the darkest hours of the Stalinist terror” (83). Though Soviet cinema head Boris Shumaitsky’s
mid 1930s and pushed the narrative that “Life has become better, life has become happier” (Dobrenko, “Soviet Comedy Film” 52). Though by this time the U.S.S.R. had “opted out of the world film process” by forgoing the importation and exportation of film so that state film would have “virtually no competition” (Turovskaya, “Cinema in Context” 41-42), the Party recognized the significant role that a truly popular theater could play in the shaping of public opinion, even if it meant mirroring Hollywood models. Consequently, just as Hollywood film played a central role in codifying the stereotypes and machineries of systemic oppression which would characterize the rural South for years to come, “these seemingly innocent productions would become one of the main vehicles for conveying the legitimizing myths of Stalin’s rule on the Soviet screen in the 1930s” (Ratchford 84).

Aleksandrov’s underlying mission in Volga, Volga is to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Revolution and the state’s two most recent political accomplishments: the completion of the Moscow-Volga Canal that literally and symbolically “connected the capital to the rest of the country” and the creation of the 1936 Constitution which, according to Stalin at least, afforded the Soviet People freedom of speech and freedom of the press (Salys 208). Joining the director in the project was a collection of notable characters in Soviet comedy, folk, and jazz performance. Star Lyubov Orlova had taken the lead in her husband’s two previous musical comedies, both times playing provincial jazz singers—a Russian in The Jolly Fellows (Vesyolye rebyata, 1934) and a U.S. Southerner in Circus (Tsirk, 1936). Composer and Order of 1935 decree “Movies for the Millions” argues that “The victorious class wants to laugh with joy. That is its right, and Soviet cinema must provide the audience with the joyful Soviet laughter” (qtd. in Ratchford 84), in truth, the new Stalinist comedies were vehicles for managing public sentiment in an especially desperate time.
Lenin recipient Isaac Dunaevsky had collaborated with Aleksandrov on his previous musicals and composed music for Russia’s most prominent jazz revues. Yakov Skomorovsky’s jazz band performed music for the film, and satirist Nikolai Erdman—recently returned from exile—covertly contributed to the script. Through a combination of Aleksandrov’s indebtedness to American film icons such as Charlie Chaplin, Busby Berkeley, and Walt Disney and his collaborators’ experience in jazz and satire, *Volga, Volga* transformed Hollywood methods for creating popular plots and spectacles into a partially tongue-in-cheek vehicle for Soviet propaganda. The film, Rimgaila Salys notes, “both reproduced the dominant ideology and gave people what they wanted—entertainment, escape from the travails of the everyday, and hope for a better life” (9). In socialist realist terms, it satisfied lingering spontaneous desires while reinforcing the systems to which class-conscious citizens were meant to subordinate themselves.

Important to the film’s complex mission was its creators’ familiarity with the “the syntax of the western musical film genre in its imbrications with audience values and the dominant ideology” (Salys 7). Such imbrications were not always present in Soviet mass entertainment, especially before the 1930s. As Bruce Johnson observes, “initially, attempts to interest the populace in ideologically sound popular music were of little avail” (45). Early plans to engage Soviet audiences with political music through folk songs were largely unsuccessful, and in the 1930s “the government producers’ desire to create a monoculture led inevitably to the neglect of the tastes of many, if not of most, people” (Starr 173). As a result, the *massovaia pesnia* (mass song [Salys 7]) of the 1930s were often “the most banal form of kitsch” (173), and, with the exception of those penned by Dunaevsky, failed to gain the traction their creators had envisioned.
Chief among the challenges to state-supported music was *dhzaz*—specifically, the American jazz musicians who visited Moscow in the 1920s and the host of Russian jazz performers who would turn the early 1930s into what Frederick Starr calls a “Red Jazz Age.” The arrival of Bennie Payton’s and Sam Wooding’s jazz bands in Moscow circa 1926 introduced Russian audiences to a more organically popular form of music that was economically relevant but also rebellious in the eyes of the government (45). Additionally, imported American films of the 1920s “disseminated images of [jazz’s] performance rhetoric and also channelled the music along such lines as class and gender,” especially among Russia’s “lower middle class” (35).

Jazz’s popularity gained additional support from “local cinema musicians,” who “incorporated US jazz material into their collages” (36). Among these, Johnson notes, was Dmitri Shostakovich, who would go on to be one of the U.S.S.R.’s most prominent composers and the writer of two jazz inspired pieces, *Suite for Jazz Orchestra No. 1* (1934) and *No. 2* (1938). Prominent jazz figures in the Soviet Union included Alexander Tsfasman (34), whose jazz orchestra contributed music to Aleksandrov’s *Circus*, and jazz singer Leonid Utesov, who starred in *The Jolly Fellows*, which follows his attempts to make a success out the titular jazz band.

By the time of *Volga, Volga*’s production, Soviet creators had already begun to seek remedies for the “disparity between what the ideologues defined as proletarian culture and what the proletariat wanted” (Johnson 46). Having experienced a period in which “neither folk songs nor the tired diet of hits from light operas satisfied anyone” and “Only jazz rhythms and dances, it turned out, could attract and hold the attention of Soviet audiences” (Starr 59, 62) creators such

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6 Additionally, Shostakovich would briefly partner with Leonid Utesov, composing music for the singer/actor’s first jazz revue.
as Aleksandrov looked to popular tastes for cinematic inspiration. For many, this move accompanied a broad condemnation of overly intellectual filmmaking. As Moira Ratchford observes, Stalinist filmmakers at the 1935 All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Cinema Workers “denounced the abstract, intellectual, experimentalism of the revolutionary school of filmmakers” in favor of the “clearly constructed plots, understandable characters, and conventional montage” that they hoped would make cinema better resonate with mass audiences (85). For Aleksandrov, this meant melding the needs of the state with the lingering capitalist “idea that any Soviet citizen, however humble, timid, or wretched at the beginning of the film, can make a success of life and rise to the heights that socialist society has to offer” (Taylor 206). When Strelka wins recognition and hears all of Moscow playing her song in *Volga, Volga*, she fulfills the “powerful myth of the possibility of personal success in an ostensibly collectivistic society” (Enzensberger 97). At the same time, Aleksandrov’s film continues the tradition he began with *The Jolly Fellows* of leaning on American influences in popular music and cinema rather than counteracting them. Though by the time of *Volga, Volga*’s production the Party had already begun to rescind its approval of jazz and return to the idea that “the only music acceptable to communism was peasant folk music,” the “most popular mass songs” that followed “were all, to a greater or lesser degree, tinged with jazz” (Starr 161, 173).

*Volga, Volga* also takes a more covert approach to propaganda than many other Soviet films of the period; its folkloric plot and characterization warm its audience to its setting while representing Soviet themes in the background. Unlike earlier Soviet projects that used the barest trappings of the popular as an unsuccessful mask for the political, *Volga, Volga* is only political in the sense that its plot operates within a utopian Soviet space. Taylor observes that the Soviet “musical was in many ways the perfect vehicle for the depiction and promulgation of the
socialist realist utopia,” in large part due to the ways that popular music, folkloric or fairy tale elements, and clever utilization of the “topographical conventions of the image of utopia” all “weakened audience resistance to the reception of the utopian model depicted on screen” (203). The grandeur of the Olympiad and the exaggerated splendor of Aleksandrov’s fictionalized Moscow contrast sharply with both the backwards Melkovodsk and the actual reality of the capital city, but critiques of the film’s unreality lose some of their potency amid the film’s fantastic elements. Strelka’s “Song of the Volga” speaks generally to the happiness of life and the improvement of the peasants’ lot (“Before our sorrow sang, / But now our joy sings”) without reference to its implied roots in Soviet modernization, allowing audiences to enjoy a post-collectivization “renewal of the folklore tradition” regardless of its intended implications (Günther 81).

*Volga, Volga* was not Aleksandrov’s first experiment in this brand of mass-oriented filmmaking, and both his previous comedies—*The Jolly Fellows* and *Circus*—prepared the groundwork for its popular musical style. In *The Jolly Fellows*, the jazz performer/kolkhoz worker Kostya (Utesov) and the singer/maid Anyuta (Orlova) enact a class-based love story that is contingent on both their relatable status as economically unprivileged workers and as performers of a popular new variety of music. Having missed his opportunity to romance a wealthy socialite who had mistaken him for a famous composer, Kostya leaves his provincial farm to lead The Jolly Fellows, a working-class jazz band whose disruptive comedic behavior clowns conservative norms and traditionalist tastes. Salys observes that though the film purportedly celebrates the Soviet system, the “‘ideology’ of the film is purely musical; the genre validates itself by advocating popular music, both jazz and popular song” (73). Though he was already a star when production began, *The Jolly Fellows* propelled Utesov to superstardom,
making the Russian jazz singer “probably the best-known man in the Soviet Union” after Stalin himself (Starr 155). *Circus*, while not so narrowly focused on American-inspired music, sets U.S. Southern racism against Soviet egalitarianism to posit the U.S.S.R. as a superior stage for U.S. performers. American jazz singer, dancer, and acrobat Marion Dixon (Orlova again), whose name coincidentally echoes the famous Mason-Dixon line dividing North and South,⁷ is the white mother of a half-Black child, Jimmy (Russian-African-American writer James Lloydovich Patterson). Having escaped lynching in the U.S. South, Marion travels to the U.S.S.R. only to fall into the hands of a German villain named Kneishitz, who threatens to expose her as Jimmy’s mother. In a plot that directly parallels the Soviet film industry’s vision of its relationship with Hollywood, the flawless Soviet hero Ivan Martynov takes Marion under his wing, improving her circus act while teaching her about the superiority of Soviet life. After seeing Jimmy for the first time, Marion’s remarkably diverse Soviet audience lulls the mixed-race child to sleep with a lullaby sung in several different languages. Freed from Kneishitz’s schemes, Marion and her son integrate freely into their new Soviet family.

Aleksandrov’s vision of American music and screen traditions and their relationships to Southern racism and African American cultural production reveals as much about the Soviet cinema’s use of Hollywood’s methods for encoding American themes and characteristics into Russian milieus as it reveals of its technical indebtedness to early American film. In *The Jolly Fellows*, Kostya’s troubles during his rise to the top reflect Utesov’s real-life progression from provincial Jewish entertainer to Soviet superstar. Beginning as a circus actor, musician, and

⁷ In actuality, Dixon was named for Marlene Dietrich, whose role in *Blonde Venus* (1932) inspired much of the background plot of *Circus* (Salys 160).
occasional black-face minstrel performer, Utesov picked up jazz stylings from his observations of Sam Wooding’s band in Moscow and Ted Lewis’s performances in Europe, which he combined with Soviet ideology by performing Russian folk tunes alongside American jazz pieces at Leningrad factories (Starr 145-46). Like Utesov, Kostya manages his rise to the top through the alignment of his humble origins and the national ideology. When the Jolly Fellows perform at the prestigious Bolshoi Theater while drenched from a previous engagement in a “New Orleans-style funeral” procession (154), their appearance offends the enemies of the proletariat but endears the band to the masses. Starr observes that Utesov’s life mirrors that of Al Jolson, who similarly “seized on the new American music as a means of establishing a niche . . . in the non-Jewish world” (132-33). Even beyond this, Kostya’s fictional career demonstrates that the same American music, combined with a certain degree of Russian provincial performance, could ingratiate the proletarian Soviet overculture with the skeptical Russian masses.

Aleksandrov also took political inspiration from the historical roots of new African-American musical forms, supporting Soviet causes with allusions to racist American milieus. Circus’s Marion Dixon, especially, is a white woman fulfilling the mulatto role in a passing story. As the secret mother of a half-Black child, Dixon’s motherhood is coded Black, and the lullaby she sings to her son, based loosely on “negro spirituals” (Salys 174), forces her into a simile with the mammies of American popular culture. That the American lynch mob at the beginning of the film targets the technically white Marion evidences that the director was either only partially familiar with the usual mechanisms of America’s lynching culture or uninterested in its specific details. The exact form that America’s racial violence takes is not as important to Circus as the fact that it exists and can conveniently explain why American talent might find life in the U.S.S.R. liberating. Dixon becomes, as Salys labels her, an “American belle” (89), an
artifact of an outmoded Southern system rescued and given new purpose in a more progressive Soviet society. When her audience sings her son to sleep, their lyrics—“A hundred paths, a hundred roads / Are open to you”—affirm the dissolution of mother’s and child’s scandalized identities into a Soviet collective. As in the case of the Soviet jazz culture in *The Jolly Fellows*, however, the Soviet Union’s acceptance of the counter-normative Marion hinges not only on its disregard for Western prejudices, but on the significant overlap between its own popular spirit and the new artistic forms created by the West’s underclasses.

Expanding upon Aleksandrov’s approach in these previous films, *Volga, Volga’s* construction of Russia’s peasantry draws on Hollywood’s unique form of musical anthropology to turn its peasant characters into rough analogues to Black musical performers in American film. At the 1935 All-Union Conference of Cinema Workers, Aleksandrov claimed that he had “wanted to study the methods of American constructions, and then and there try to do them not as in America, but to do them better.” However, he apologized to his audience for failing in part “because the subjects of American comedy that are being parodied are not familiar to audiences in our country” (78). Though the director identified the Western bourgeois partygoers and racist foreigners that provided *Jolly Fellows* and *Circus* their villains as incongruous in Soviet milieus, the Americanized elements of their musical heroes were the key to their successes with Soviet audiences. The roots of African American music and Russian peasant styles linked the two in ways that were helpful to Aleksandrov’s political mission, as both could embody the national character through explicit ties to the geography and history of the nation. The anonymous 1919 article “A Negro Explains ‘Jazz’” quotes musician and band leader Lieutenant James Reese

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8 Translated by Salys, pp. 174).
Europe to the effect that “The music of our race springs from the soil, and this is true today with no other race, except possibly the Russians.” As such, Europe notes, “all of my musicians have come to love Russian music,” and “it is the only music I care for outside of Negro” (97). Similarly, as Salys notes, “Aleksandrov recognized that Russia was a singing country with a rich tradition of folk and urban melodies” (7), and he employed his own form of Hollywood’s capitalist “rationalization and commodification” of folk culture to create the same kind of “carefully managed style of mass entertainment” in service of the system under which he worked (Naremore 105, 107).

In the same way that American musical comedy film constructed Black music and dance, Aleksandrov answered the call to create a comedy of the Russian peasantry by travelling to Georgia, Azerbaidzhan, Abkhazia, and Adzhahistan to experience Soviet samodeiatel’nost’ (amateur arts activities), particularly song and dance. It does not appear that the director made a particularly thorough study; instead, he borrowed an aesthetic, complete with humorous images—he recalled particularly a burly man in the Urals singing women’s songs because he lacked any other sheet music, for instance—that engendered a lively non-Western style to embody the Russian soil in opposition to bourgeois musical forms (Salys 205-06). Dunaevsky’s score played to the composer’s reputation for combining Russian, Ukrainian, and Jewish folk songs with Soviet mass songs and jazz (Starr 150), transforming its central theme, “Song of the Volga,” from folk dance into a variety of forms, including frequent “jazz variation[s]” (Salys 268).

Whereas a film such as Cabin in the Sky could hardly begin production without signing a Black cast—it depended, after all, on the star power of its leads at least as much as it did on its aesthetic—Volga, Volga recreates samodeiatel’nost’ with a cast of experienced stars and
character actors following the tradition of the director’s earlier projects. Unlike New Orleans jazz bands touring the U.S. North, for whom the label “authentic” was always “an important part of the wholesome fun” (Brothers 27), Aleksandrov’s fictional musicians were not tied to the appearance of realism. As with the jazz ensemble in The Jolly Fellows, Melkovodsk’s peasantry is roughly vaudevillian; apart from the comparatively “normal” Strelka and Alyosha, the main peasant performers look like Russified versions of the comedic stock characters of American theater and film, replete with slightly silly facial hair, poorly-fitting clothing, and other clownish attire. This implicit nod to American screen culture resembles more explicit ones in other Aleksandrov films, such as the presence of a Chaplin lookalike as Kneishitz’s underling in Circus to demonstrate the way Hollywood held “genius in bondage to capitalist society” (Salys 173), or the parodic opening credits of The Jolly Fellows, which specify that Buster Keaton will not appear in the ensuing comedy.

Missing from Volga, Volga are the Berkeley-inspired Art Deco set pieces and grand musical numbers of Circus, and the scenes in which Volga, Volga does exhibit its musical talent more closely resemble those in A Day at the Races or in Cabin in the Sky, in which a general tune unites myriad individual performance styles. The famous cannon dance in Circus places Orlova at the center of a class-conscious geometrical abstraction on the human form, the other performers collaborating selflessly in a patterned display of unity between Hollywood aesthetics and Soviet comradery. When Strelka and Alyosha’s teams compete for Byvalov’s approval in Volga, Volga, however, the film creates a clear contrast between the two styles that favors Strelka’s samodeiatel’nost’ for its higher degree of individualism. The heroine divides her team into several units, each of which surprises Byvalov with its own performance as he passes by; waiters dance and sing over his dinner about their victories on the food front, soloists take turns
regaling him with songs, fiddlers step in for short demonstrations, and so forth. By contrast, Alyosha, as the symphony’s conductor, is the only member of his team to receive any characterization, and while Strelka’s team wears mock-traditional costumes, the members of Alyosha’s symphony don matching uniforms. Alyosha’s music, the film suggests, subjugates the individual to a collective in service to an abstract ideal, but Strelka’s music, like the Jolly Fellows’ performances, “symbolizes the triumph of spontaneity over order, youth over age, popular culture over high culture” (Starr 155).

The opposition between folk and classical styles in Volga, Volga sets samodeiatel’nost’ in congruence with Classic Hollywood’s internally contradictory employment of jazz, a form that it considered at once othered and indigenously American and contemporary while having roots in a sentimentalized past. In popular films of the 1930s and 1940s, jazz represented both the exotic and the distinctly national, its status as a form of African American artistic production rendering it simultaneously local and othered. Moreover, as James Naremore suggests, jazz was “associated with flappers, skyscrapers, and the entire panoply of twentieth-century modernity” while also “connot[ing] agrarian or pre-capitalist social relations” in the South that “could be linked to a pastoral myth,” a form of duality that owed everything to jazz’s origins “with African Americans who migrated to the northern cities” (100). For these reasons, popular depictions of jazz culture obfuscated much of the distance between sophisticated jazz and the rural, the agrarian, and the folk as they related to African American subjects. Blackness in Classic Hollywood is nearly synonymous with Black musical expression, and when rural Black performers erupt into song and dance in A Day at the Races or a host of modern jazz musicians appears as a “primitive” African troupe in Ali Baba Goes to Town (1937), the very idea of Blackness dislodges itself chronologically from the order of the world.
In *Cabin in the Sky*, for instance, heroes Little Joe (Eddie “Rochester” Anderson) and Petunia (Ethel Waters) step back and forth between the dualities of past and present, simultaneously embodying traditional American values and uprooting them by virtue of their racial otherness while occasionally interrupting their sentimental songs with sudden displays of jazzy sophistication. When Little Joe scolds Petunia for her sudden soulful outburst at the end of “Taking a Chance on Love,” the film winks at its constructed dichotomies. On the surface, Joe’s chastisement is in keeping with the film’s tongue-in-cheek morality tale, as Petunia’s outburst threatens the “wholesomeness” of her performance. Like some of Waters’s previous music—especially, Stephen Tracy notes, 1921’s “Down Home Blues”—Petunia’s initial performance “suggest[s] a certain vigor and honesty associated with the rural southern setting,” while her slip into a jazzier style hints at “a trickster-like taunting of notions of wickedness, similar in motivation to the appropriation by African Americans of ‘nigger’ in a positive sense, or ‘bad’ turned around to mean ‘good.’” (231, 197). Underneath, Joe’s admonishment as his wife switches forms nods to the film’s artificiality, both in terms of its status as a musical (serving as a reminder that the song is not, in fact, spontaneous, but planned and meant to be tonally relevant) and as a determiner of culture (Petunia’s easy swing from agrarian sentimentalism to urban jazz acknowledges the chronological and geographical placelessness in which it locates Black performance).

Popular depictions of jazz also created a cultural tether between the modern American city and the agrarian South. This link initially stemmed from the origins of jazz and blues music in slave and former-slave traditions. As Albert “Sunnyland Slim” Luandrew explained, “They were singing the blues in Mississippi and Louisiana ever since there were colored peoples living there to my way of knowing” (qtd. in Brothers 48). Blue’s “association with cornfields, cotton
bales, and cane brakes” helped tie the tradition to Southern milieus (Brothers 50), but also served as a source for stereotyping. Reviewers of King Joe Oliver’s touring Creole Band insisted upon the performers’ roots in the Southern pastoral. Thomas Brothers quotes a reviewer who claimed only semi-accurately that “They all hail from New Orleans,” and who then added the outlandish fiction that these seasoned professional musicians “were working on the levee there when they were picked up by a café owner” (27). The common conflation of Southern origins and romantic plantation scenery, and of historical roots and ahistorical myth, placed Black performers within conciliatory regional narratives. While some in Chicago’s African American community were fighting to remove “marks of servitude” and plantation imagery from newly arriving Black Southerners for fear of the spread of such stereotyping (50), the machinery of American popular culture was clamoring for more.

Given the obvious political utility in a system that could so easily link a nation’s nostalgia for its own past with its celebration of its rising modernity and its increasingly strong center with its agrarian periphery, it is not surprising that Aleksandrov would employ a similar method in his own tribute to the Revolution’s anniversary. Both socialist realism and folk culture, after all, locate human struggle in a mythologized local space, and by the 1930s, Naremore observes, the Popular Front was already deploying “folksy” culture “on behalf of a progressive social agenda” in America (102). In Volga, Volga, the same dichotomies that appear in Hollywood jazz films appear in depictions of folk performers, and with them, the same “ideological schizophrenia” (110). Their surface-level political sympathies aside, Strelka’s group is decidedly un-communist—the performers do not work, they know nothing of politics, and their village is terribly backwards—but it is also very decidedly Russian and clearly enmeshes
itself in a nostalgic peasant past.\textsuperscript{9} The film’s peasants are both modern and pre-modern, their lifestyle harkening back to pre-Soviet days while their music, grafted to the cinematic showtune style of Dunaevsky’s mass songs, embodies a more contemporary popular sensibility. When Alyosha attempts to teach Strelka appreciation for the classics by performing the tuba part in “Death of Isolde,” his enthusiasm for Wagner—even when playing a decontextualized series of long notes and forty-seven bars of rest—provokes only disappointment: “She dies too long,” the near catatonic Strelka claims. Strelka’s song, however, is an immediate hit with the people of Moscow, who seem to take for granted Aleksandrov’s belief that “the population would eagerly accept” the sort of indigenous popular forms inherent to musical film (7).

The disparity between orchestra and \textit{massovaia pesnia} in \textit{Volga, Volga} accompanies a pervading classist attitude on the part of the orchestra that, like popular music of the Great Depression, correlates musical performance to economic or social status. White audiences during the Great Depression empathized with Black characters on film due to their shared economic woes, as these characters, following in the vein of comedians such as Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and the Marx Brothers, put a cheerful face to poverty while bamboozling the upper class. Moreover, to White audiences, Black music, “identif[ied] [them] with those who suffer[ed] along with [them]—if only for the length of a song,” and thus to an interwar era of depression and

\textsuperscript{9} The very inauthenticity of \textit{Volga, Volga}’s pre-Soviet peasantry aligns the film even more closely with Classic Hollywood’s depictions of Black performers. In his analysis of \textit{Cabin in the Sky}, Naremore “hasten[s] to emphasize that nothing in the film was generated by an indigenous, agrarian culture, and that folklore itself is a suspiciously modern phenomenon, born of late eighteenth-century attempts to distinguish between the learned and the popular” (102). Just as Black characters in Classic Hollywood were often shepherded into constructed narratives of what constituted Black performance for largely non-Black audiences, Aleksandrov molds his peasant characters into a politically and socially appealing form to appease his Soviet critics.
social change, Black music was “just the prescription . . . that the country needed” (Tracy 6).

Standing in contrast to the samodeiatel’nost’ in Volga, Volga are the obstructive Byvalov and aloof Alyosha, who demonstrate both their general antagonism and more specific lack of national spirit through their squareness, their refusal to enjoy the raucous local entertainment. Alyosha brags that no one lower than an accountant plays in his orchestra,10 and looks down on the ferry pilots, cooks, and cart drivers who perform with Strelka, claiming that “If [Strelka’s friends] get to Moscow before us, our region will be disgraced!” Byvalov stubbornly dismisses Strelka’s singing and dancing talents even as he watches her perform, insisting that no one could sing as she does without twenty years of formal training. Like the “Hostile writers” in the Soviet Union who “took pains to dismiss jazz as fitting only for circuses and variety shows” or the western critics who “were interested primarily in discrediting the artistic value of the musical form in favor of European models” (Starr 56, McCann 75), Byvalov and Alyosha’s symphony initially “don’t get” popular music, and, as a corollary, “don’t get” Sovietism.

That Aleksandrov made a study of samodeiatel’nost’ in the Soviet Union’s non-Russian states and that he specifically announced the film as speaking to the recent constitution that enfranchised previously marginalized peasants mark the people of Melkovodsk as a different kind of Soviet that only recently came to be integrated into the broader Union. Consequently, the fictional villagers of Melkovodsk bear some similarities to the stereotyped Black subjects of American comedies, especially to the extent that the village is fashioned after Hollywood Black culture in its absolute dedication to music. As Dobrenko describes them, Volga, Volga’s peasants

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10 Ironically, Alyosha himself is that accountant, a point that the film comically emphasizes by showing him keeping time with an abacus as he conducts.
occupy their time “with amateur performance: singing, dancing, and other amusements” while all work remains undone (50). Nearly every member of the community has inborn musical talent and a jolly aversion to work. Their playful musical numbers, like that of the Black performers in *A Day at the Races*, spring suddenly from an otherwise quiet, rural milieu, and not only transform the peasant village into a stage for an obviously choreographed sequence, but also transform the mood of the film. When Petunia performs “Taking a Chance on Love” in *Cabin*, the scene changes an idyllic country kitchen into a stage for local performance and turns a simple doorway and window into box seats for her on-screen audience. *Volga, Volga* similarly repurposes places of work—kitchens, water carts, ferries, cottages—as stages for performance. This performance literalizes the *Saturday Evening Post*’s dismissal of jazz as “musical bolshevism” (qtd. in McCann 76); Melkovodsk’s only contribution to the Soviet Experiment is to infuse class activity with musical energy.

Through music, *Volga, Volga* and Hollywood’s Black comedies attempt a manner of comedic and artistic reconciliation between periphery and center and past and present in two rapidly advancing but still largely rural countries: a reconciliation that serves the purposes of the system at work in its construction.\(^\text{11}\) The shift from viewing jazz as “a vulgar artifact of African American musical tradition” to a participant in an artistic paradigm that might “revitalize fettered and supposedly moribund Europe” owed much to its popularity (McCann 74, Appel 37), but also to the ease with which it could be “celebrated as a folk tradition” (McCann 74). “Once jazz is framed as a premodern folk tradition,” McCann observes, “its artistic value is located in its

\(^{11}\text{As Naremore suggests, *Cabin*, for instance, mixes good intentions with a business-minded desire to mollify “the black critique of Hollywood” in service of its own image (107).}\)
ability to teach us about ourselves” or to “restore to the West some lost vibrancy” (93, 74). The same holds true in Volga, Volga, in which, following its discovery of Strelka’s song via sheet music, the Moscow Olympiad seems to halt, awaiting the arrival of the peasant composer. The capital transforms into a glorified theater where Strelka—representing the Russian people in their pre-industrial form given new life by Soviet advancements—imbues the festivities with a new Soviet soul. On stage, “Byvalov . . . is condemned for his not wanting to see [the] talent of the laughing masses,” and the film’s conclusion is predicated on the idea that “authority defends the laughing masses from the unsmiling bureaucrat” (Dobrenko, “Carnival of Authority” 52). Just as Soviet mythology held that Stalin’s power was a result of his perfect representation of the Soviet people, the capital’s grandeur is reinforced by its acquisition of the peasant’s product to affirm a new form of national unity.

Speaking to Volga, Volga’s connection to the 1936 Constitution, Aleksandrov announced that, “In this film, we want to show that in our country, all the opportunities have been created to grow any talent of every person, to develop it to the highest degree” (qtd. in Salys 205). In another interview, Aleksandrov described an early version of the script in which, following the completion of the Volga-Moscow Canal, “the level of life” in the village “bursts out and transforms the everyday life of the little town, and sparkles in all its colors,” and the villagers bring “their songs, their folk dances, their joy and wealth of art” so that “together they can report to the great leader about their happiness” (qtd. in Salys 208). While the final version of the film includes no direct references to the economic uplift made possible by the new canal, the originally intended message—that the onscreen utopia simply reflects Soviet progress in the real world—remains. Thus, even while subjecting them to satire, Aleksandrov could argue that his film participated in the uplift of the Russian peasantry by the Soviet system. However, befitting
the director’s tribute to a constitution which pretended to grant rights to the Soviet people in
demonstration of the State’s confidence that it could not be successfully opposed, Aleksandrov’s
mission is to idealize Soviet accomplishments rather than to reform or improve society. Like the
lullaby scene in the earlier *Circus*—in which an adoring crowd affirms Marion Dixon’s Black
child as a worthy Soviet—*Volga, Volga* does much to refute prejudicial ideologies but little to
suggest reform, instead merely asserting that the U.S.S.R. had already achieved an egalitarian
way of life.

*Volga, Volga* is thus all the more problematic for its erasure of historical wounds, a move
that is not at all unfamiliar to audiences of Classic Hollywood. Speaking to *Cabin*’s avoidance of
social reality in its depictions of Black characters, Naremore observes that MGM’s “strategy may
seem offensive when so much of the actual experience of African Americans has been
suppressed or driven into a political unconscious” (119). Furthermore, American popular
entertainment’s attempts to circumnavigate racial issues rather than address them head-on had
regional and historical implications. Whether performed by white actors in support of racist
regimes or Black musicians as an appeal to white audiences, “[l]ate minstrelsy,” Brothers
explains, “was an essential part of how the nation was still trying to reconcile itself to the Civil
War, still trying to heal wounds that had been festering for five decades” (27). Through minstrel
imagery, Hollywood and the American stage folded Southern slavery and oppression into an
appealingly “wholesome” package that would remain popular into the mid twentieth century
(27). When Louis Armstrong donned “the full dress of the authentic plantation darky” for the
1942 move short *Sleepy Time Down South* (28), for instance, Hollywood successfully encoded
the range of Southern apologetics into an innocuous image purporting to celebrate the talent of
the very population that it exploited.
The same holds true in *Volga, Volga*, which represents an extremely hard turn from the epistemology of the peasant-as-enemy that contributed to the deaths of millions during the terror-famine less than five years prior. As Turovskaya claims, films such as *Volga, Volga* serve “not so much as the reflection of their time’s objective reality, but rather as the reflection of the reality of its image of itself” (qtd. in Enzensberger 100). Moreover, in such films,

“embellishment” of Soviet reality should be regarded not as a “distortion of the truth” – for faithfulness to life was never their aim – but as a standard and perfectly legitimate stylistic mode within popular cinema, the mode that elevates its subject matter into the realm of a “dream” or Utopia, enabling spectator to “rise above” reality and regard it in a more sublime and optimistic manner. (qtd. in Enzensberger 97)

However, as Maria Enzensberger notes, “the Soviet musical enacts its Utopia in the here and now, the present-day Soviet reality in which everyone works and, for that matter, works miracles” (98), and thus, the film’s unreality is inseparable from Soviet reality. Moreover, Dobrenko observes that the Stalinist theater is pervaded by “a constant aggression which is aimed at the spectator” in the form of “threatening laughter.” In spite of its apparent chaos, the comedy on screen is still “authority’s event,” and “since refusal to laugh is understood as a sign of the dangerous dissident” (“Soviet Comedy Film” 56), the audience is forced to laugh along with the state at the disruptive behavior of the villagers while knowing such disruption would not be tolerated were they to try it themselves.

This being said, the voice of the Russian people was not entirely unable to make headway against that of the government-prescribed “People” in *Volga, Volga*, as its writers contributed stealthily parodying the systems to which the film speaks. In her study of the Soviet cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, Turovskaya recalls Aleksandr Herzen’s observation that “there was only one salvation from bad Russian laws and that was to carry them out equally badly.” The same, she notes,
applies in full to the sphere of “ideology.” It could “command” culture at its “point of departure” and check up on it at its “point of exit,” but the real presence of culture in society was only partially subordinated to this dictate. In actual fact culture was more complex, more multilayered and more “pluralistic.” (“The 1930s and 1940s: Cinema in Context” 34)

She and Salys both make much of the “pluralism” injected into *Volga, Volga* by writers Mikhail Volpin and Nikolai Erdman, who at the time had recently returned from exile in the East, their experiences away from the heartland of Sovietdom having acquainted them “with small towns where civilization hadn’t dropped in despite the fact that this was the twentieth year of Soviet power” (Turovskaya, “Strange Case” 80). On the rare occasions that such marginal places did appear in Soviet film, they were generally undergoing rapid industrial development, as in Dovzhenko’s *Earth* (1930). In *Volga, Volga*, then, the fact that the “object of parody . . . is for the first time that ‘sacred beast’ which was always something called ‘the people’” evidenced a drastic departure from the norm of Soviet cinema, however well-clothed it may have been (Turovskaya, “The Strange Case” 80).

Using the Russian peasantry as the locus for its comedy allows *Volga, Volga* to enact a safe form of satire by divorcing the subject of its parody—the Russian people—from the mainstream idea of what the Russian people are or are supposed to be. Studying Czech films from the 1960s and 1970s, Charles Eidsvik identifies the satirical mode of “mock realism,” a form of film that creates social commentary through the observation of everyday people whose

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12 Ironically, Stalin’s obsession with government censure may have contributed to the sudden one-time reversal of this standard. Aleksandrov, seemingly unaware of the film’s potentially subversive message but well-attuned to the political climate, supposedly told Erdman that he would “understand that it will be a lot better for you if your name does not appear in the credits” (78); had Stalin’s infamous paranoia not convinced the director to make such a move, their overt involvement may have moved the censor to demands changes.
words and actions, when viewed neutrally, are occasionally “both funny and revealing about social realities” (92). Eidsvik further notes that “What creates the comic effect” in satires made within authoritarian countries “is that allusions to the real world of the viewer allow the viewer to react in terms of an imagined world suggested by the film—one that is incongruous and funny” (93). Aside from its focus on slapstick and use of numerous “interpenetrating scenarios” to create a sense of chaos (Carrol 28-29), Volga, Volga’s comedy stems from its positing of the people of Melkovodsk as both an absurd comedic invention and a meaningful analogue to the U.S.S.R. Unlike in Eidvik’s Czech films, in the Stalinist U.S.S.R., jokes to the effect that the country was a “worker’s state” in which “nobody is working, and even those who might want to work cannot accomplish much” would never gain political approval (94), but making this critique specific to a single, clearly fictional peasant village existing in extreme isolation renders it, at least in the eyes of censors, acceptably neutered. That its inept heroes are peasants localizes the satire to an unrealistic depiction of a marginalized group, and by basing the plot around the village’s need to reconcile itself with the larger Soviet community, Volga, Volga can preserve its parody elements while insisting on the surface that it is, in fact, promoting rather than critiquing Soviet norms.

The satirical central conflict in Volga, Volga stems from the obvious gap between the film’s Russian peasantry and the regularly prescribed heroes of Soviet culture and from the hoops that its disruptive heroes must jump through to reconcile themselves with the larger U.S.S.R. The normal hero of Stalinism is a superhuman worker, a martyr, or an extraordinary leader. In Soviet films such as *Earth* or *Mother*, his or her spontaneity is subordinate to a class-conscious outlook, and the plot’s focus is “the transformation of the individual’s consciousness” as society moves ever forward (Bordwell 44). Within the landscape of socialist realism, where
this transformation is film’s \textit{raison d’être}, the peasant artist’s refusal to submit to Soviet standards would normally code him or her as a \textit{kulak}, and the existence of an inept society that resists Soviet change and “depends on the sense that nothing \textit{can} change” for its comedy stands in opposition to the norms of Soviet art (Eidsvik 96). Nevertheless, the film sells its trickster folk heroes as true Soviets from the beginning, encouraging audiences to laugh and identify with them, all while clearly contradicting Soviet policies on labor and culture. It is only that their shenanigans happen without consequence, and that the film encodes them in such a way that consequence seems politically unnecessary, that precludes them from seeming worthy of censure.

That the nation’s acceptance of its peasant underclass is predicated entirely on that class’s self-identification as a separate entity in need of reconciliation renders \textit{Volga, Volga}’s positive message about the peasant’s place in the U.S.S.R. contradictory and incomplete, as Melkovodsk’s journey to recognition underscores its forgotten status. Dobrenko observes that the various vessels by which the people of Melkovodsk travel the Volga are “demonstrably in decline” (“Soviet Comedy Film” 51), a fact that provides much of the film’s humor.\footnote{Immediately after being told that her plans will “fall through,” Dobrenko notes, Strelka herself crashes through the deck of the ancient steamer \textit{Sevryuga} (55), a ship so old that it was supposedly given as a gift to the Russian Empire by the United States and has sat idle for thirty years. According to the ship’s captain, the \textit{Sevryuga} (Sturgeon) is “a great boat, just don’t touch it.”} Structural failings across their makeshift fleet render the villagers’ trip comedically perilous, and eventually forces Strelka and Alyosha to put aside their differences and work together to reach Moscow. Closer to the capital, the villagers are rescued by the luxurious steamship \textit{Iosef Stalin}, a tongue-in-cheek reminder of their previous disconnection from Soviet society and the generosity
extended to them by Stalin’s regime. The dichotomy between the *Sevryuga* and the *Stalin* underscores the disparity across the supposedly egalitarian system and resonates with the shifting meanings of words and situations within America’s Black “underculture” and white “overculture” (Spencer 7). To the regime, the peasants’ dilemma results from their backwardness, but to a critic of the regime their struggle underscores how the Volga—and by extension, the U.S.S.R.—is a treacherous place that the heroes are unequipped to navigate. It is only when Strelka and her comrades approach Moscow that the film begins to see Russia as the State intends it to be seen: its wildernesses tamed, its rivers travelled safely and quickly by modern vessels, and its people carefree and unified. That Melkovodsk has no means to reach this center and does so only by happy accident makes its marginality all the more apparent.

Thus, *Volga, Volga*, like its writers Erdman and Volpin, enacts a satirical return from exile that confronts the capital with the elements within the U.S.S.R. that it would rather forget. Russia’s size was a simultaneous boon and disadvantage to Stalin’s regime and the previous Russian Empire alike; while it provided ample space and resources and strategic locations across Northern Asia, it also left huge swathes of the country empty, disorderly, or unwanted. Thus, internal exile in Siberia, the Urals, or other regions distant from the Soviet heartland became a common solution to the problem of undesirables, and the writers’ exile would have given them a new commonality with the rural Russian peasantry. Aleksandrov intentionally placed his film within a new “spatial mythology[y]” in inter-Soviet politics which began to see “Social legitimacy . . . concentrated in the center not as a monopoly, but as a point of distribution” (Salys 208), and in *Volga, Volga*, this mythology covertly extends to the people in exile as well. Indeed, trapped as they are with nothing for transportation but a decaying steamer, the Melkovodskites are essentially living, as did their writers, in political exile. Like the writers, who returned to
work in secret, their names muddied but their talents still necessary to the working of the system, the villagers overcome their exile to offer their much-needed talents, for we assume, given the general air of anticipation in the hall of the Olympiad, that Moscow was eagerly awaiting the arrival of some new sensation to restore its soul.

Melkovodsk’s status as a village in exile is literalized in Byvalov, who has only recently arrived in the village and sees it as undesirable and unimportant. In an early version of the script that saw the factory head teaming up with a disgraced theater director exiled for his avant garde tastes, Byvalov insists that he is merely “sitting it out temporarily” in the “backwater” town due to a “misunderstanding” that he hopes will be rectified shortly (qtd. in Salys 211). His attitude is much the same in the final film, as demonstrated in his introductory conversation with his deputy, Zoya Ivanovna. The two configure their careers geographically; they were getting “closer to Moscow every day” until, “when there are only three of four thousand kilometers left to reach Moscow,” Byvalov was sent to the backwater to beat all backwaters. Despite his insistence that his transfer was a mere error, and in contrast to the warm welcome that the judges at the Olympiad extend to Strelka, it is clear that Byvalov’s transfer really is a form of punishment. The humor in the factory head’s character stems from the audience’s awareness of what he is unable to see himself: that he was sent to Melkovodsk in order to push his incompetent egotism as far into the periphery as possible. Even as the film posits the villagers as ideal representations of the popular narodnost’ and Byvalov as an unrepresentative square, it manages to subtly allude to the existence of a current face of authority that shares his worldview, understanding Melkovodsk as undesirable, un-Soviet, and a locus for everything that Stalinism means to hide away in the U.S.S.R.’s most isolated corners.
The transformation that Strelka and her friends effect in the Moscow Olympiad is therefore all the more significant for its interruption of Soviet geographical narratives of art and culture. As Aleksandrov described before the film’s release, Strelka’s performers do indeed come to Moscow to “report to the great leader about their happiness” (qtd. in Salys 208). However, the wording is resonant, as it was indeed their happiness that the Melkovodskites represented: a non-Soviet happiness, born of different values and set in opposition to the pervading class culture. Though early versions of the script attempt to configure Strelka’s group as a manifestation of desirable massovost by having Byvalov lament that their “popular orientation is ruinous for art” (qtd. in Salys 212), it is clear that their expression is against the grain of the People’s art, and by bringing in outside voices to attempt to assert its successful absorption of all of Russia into a single collective, the Olympiad confronts its audience with a new way of living for which it has no ready explanation. The peasants’ antics as they rush to locate Strelka’s fabricated friend “Dunya,” Strelka and Aloysha’s childish squabbling under the judges’ table, and the frenetic bursts of song and dance on the center stage confuse all of the officials while also injecting mirth into the festivities. Clearly, Moscow, like the bourgeois West that it was so fond of parodying, is unaccustomed to freedom and fun.

Though Stalin himself does not appear in the film, Melkovodsk reported its happiness to the great leader with much aplomb, as Volga, Volga quickly gained a reputation as his favorite film. This fact, alongside its broad success in the Soviet Union and its reputation for satire, speaks to the complexity of Soviet cinema’s engagement with satire in general and Russia’s oppressed underclasses in particular. Just as Classic Hollywood moved to encompass Black and Southern music and performance while supporting systems that exploited its Black stars and tacitly reinforced racist paradigms, the Stalinist theater attempted and mostly succeeded at
turning the othering of its own population into a vehicle for popular entertainment. However, not even a totalitarian regime or corporate studio can maintain absolute control, and wherever the repressed is represented, the opportunity for subversive commentary becomes possible. *Volga, Volga* is not a ground-breaking or progressive film by any means; as his contemporaries M. V. Minonova and Vladimir Zaharovitch attested, “Alexandrov was not too brave a man,” perhaps not even “so brave to direct it knowing what he was doing” (qtd. in Turovskaya, “Strange Case” 81). But as in Hollywood, it is the unconscious elements in the film—the appropriation of popular indigenous art, the references to popular national narratives and sentiments, and the allowance of some degree of satire in the name of comedy—that allow films like *Volga, Volga* to simultaneously critique and support official narratives.
CONCLUSION

Analyzing D. W. Griffith’s debt to Charles Dickens’s narrative style, Eisenstein offers the following warning:

Analogies and resemblances cannot be pursued too far—they lose conviction and charm. They begin to take on the air of machinations or card-tricks. I should be very sorry to lose the conviction of the affinity between Dickens and Griffith, allowing this abundance of common traits to slide into a game of anecdotal semblance of tokens. (“Dickens” 213)

This danger is immanent to any field of study involving such comparisons, and this project necessarily runs the risk of drawing lines of influence where none exist or of exaggerating minor historical confluences into significant parallels. Eisenstein, however, meets this challenge with hard evidence; his analysis demonstrates that Griffith not only resembles Dickens, but read him, admired him, and even adapted him, and thus the relationship between Griffith and Dickens—or at least the novelistic tradition to which Dickens wrote—is borne out in both a resemblance in features and a traceable history. The traceable history of the exchanges between the U.S. South and Russia is mercurial and highly varied, with different writers and filmmakers interpreting the connections between the two regions in myriad ways that reflect their own time periods, creative milieus, and socio-political goals. As is the case with Eisenstein’s study of Griffith and Dickens, this historical analysis of Russo-Southern cultural exchanges and dialogues ultimately reveals more about the two regions’ comparable clashes with Western modernity than do the superficial resemblances between them.

Eisenstein’s warning applies to more than just scholars, as the creators whose works defined the literary and cinematic histories of these two regions were not always careful to hide
the “machinations or card-tricks” that lay behind the semblances they discovered. Often, their interest in the other region is, at best, secondary to some immediate goal, and analysis reveals that many of the links that Russian and Southern creators found between their two regions in the period from slavery to the Second World War were either tenuous or highly exaggerated. Building a bridge, as McCullers does, between Russian and Southern literature places two distinctive cultures alongside each other to answer questions about what it means to be premodern or peripheral in a globalizing industrial world; arguing that Russian Realism is the closest relative to Southern literature, contrarily, intentionally sections the South off from its close ties to the North. When Aleksandrov leans on depictions of Southern racism and racialized Hollywood caricatures to depict life in the rural Soviet Union, he forgoes an honest exploration of Southern and Russian social ills in service to a widespread erasure of depictions of prejudice within the Soviet Union. This is not to say that the connections these creators found are fictitious, insignificant, or ill-informed, but that, in many cases, the pursuit of semblances between Russian and U.S. Southern art has revealed as much if not more about the underlying motivations of those drawing the parallels as it has about any historical truth behind them.

However, that many of the architects of the scattered Russo-Southern discourse so clearly laid bare the machinations at work in its maintenance is a boon rather than a hindrance to transnational scholars, as their aims—promoting a more progressive political discourse, abolishing slavery, supporting Marxist ideology, or asserting local or regional legitimacy—speak directly to the questions of regional and preindustrial identity that characterized their relationship with the modern world. The cross-cultural references by William Wells Brown, McCullers, Caldwell, Eisenstein, and others are wrought with internal and external contradictions, exaggerating or minimizing similarities and differences in service to a variety of creative,
political, economic, or social missions. However, they all align in shared interest in revising world narratives of modernity, progress, and the chronotyping of peripheral regions and their determination that the two regions can speak to each other’s troubled relationships with modernity. In many cases, the historical confluences that these creators analyzed are only starting points. The similarities between Old Russia and the Old South, slavery and serfdom, or Soviet and Northern industrialization offer the suggestion of comparability, but the oppositional status of the other region and its ability to disrupt dominant traditions are ultimately more central. The ways that Southern and Russian creators expanded and manipulated these confluences to suit their individual goals underscore the geopolitical similarities across Russian and Southern experience as marginalized regions asserting their validity in the modern world even as they complicate and challenge the very particulars that invited their comparisons.

Much work remains be to done pursuing these parallels. It is beyond the scope of this project, for example, to delve into those who specifically argued against Russo-Southern connections or who used these connections to bolster arguments about the distinctness of the South vis-à-vis Russia and the North by attributing Soviet-style ideas and intentions to Northern rather than Southern intellectuals. Though it was not until the end of the Second World War and the weakening of the Popular Front that the South gained its reputation for opposing communism, Southern traditionalism and the association of radical ideals with Northern politics inevitably created substantial pockets of anti-communist sentiment among the South’s literary elite long before the Cold War. Because of communism’s twentieth-century association with Russia, some Southern apologists viewed Russianness as antithetical to Southernness rather than analogous to it. Such reactionary discourses liken the South to Russia only as a proxy to their
greater narrative of the North’s relationship to Sovietdom, envisioning a conflict between Russo-
Northern industrial politics and Southern agrarianism.

The discourse of the Twelve Southerners who contributed to *I’ll Take My Stand*, for instance, cautions that Russia exemplifies what the South might look like if left to Northern
dominance. The authors’ introduction, which lays the groundwork for their broad opposition to
industrial expansion in the South, characterizes Northern industrialists as the “true Sovietists or
Communists” who “would have the government set up an economic superorganization, which in
turn would become the government” (xiii). Henry Blue Kline warns of the danger of “a repetition
of the Russian noble experiment” in the South (326), and Andrew Nelson Lytle claims that “the
Republican government and the Russian Soviet Council pursue identical policies toward the
farmer” that differ only in “the manner and speed of the suicide” (203). Donald Davidson
forecloses the possibility of Southern industrialization by exaggerating the threat of a looming
Russification of America. The “extreme democracy” of the U.S.S.R., he argues, “threatens the
existence of man’s humanity.” He worries that in a Soviet-inspired future the “industrial theory
of the arts” will be decided by a “United States Chamber of Art or a National Arts Council, with
a distinguished board of directors and local committees in every state” (49, 28). Allen Tate uses
comparisons with the “simp[e] supernaturalism” of the religious nature of “the Russian or
eastern European mind” to argue for the uniqueness of the American or Western “notion that
tradition is not simply a fact, but a fact that must be constantly defended” (163). Though Stark
Young suggests that the South and the “Russian nobility” may have shared similarities in their
love of “social existence rather than production, competition, and barter” (342), even he does so
as part of a larger refutation of Soviet-style industrialization and defense of Southern
traditionalism. In this schema, the agrarians suggest that the provincial South is not unique or
anti-modern due to its socioeconomic system, but instead that it is industrialization which is antithetical to the humane agrarian lifestyle embodied in the Southern system.

Future studies will also find a wealth of material in the change in serf and former serf writing in Russia after emancipation and its analogues to post-emancipation African American literature, especially as illustrated in Nikitenko’s career as a government censor. Though most prominent writers of nineteenth-century Russia hailed from the serf-owning class rather than from the serfdom itself, many of their works were inevitably subjected to—and depended on the approval of—Nikitenko’s scrutiny. As a censor, Nikitenko advocated for free thinking, earned a reputation as the “wisest of censors” (Jacobson xix), endured occasional imprisonment for excessive leniency, and wielded his knowledge of tyranny in the defense of such contemporary authors as Pushkin and Gogol. The impact of Nikitenko’s pen on the writers whose work he oversaw or on the tone of the discourse permitted within Imperial Russia’s restrictive print culture will offer further insights into the ways that serf voices were able to shape Russian discourses. While American literary and historical studies have already traced the ways that slave and former slave writers moved from a pre- to post-emancipation African American literature, the former serf authors’ influence on Russian cultural discourses requires further study. As is the case with the study of serf narratives, the tools for uncovering Nikitenko’s influence and for examining the impact of former serf writers and readers already exist within the methodologies of African American literary studies, and the importation of these methods may again unearth a plethora of overlooked serf voices.

Additionally, future scholarship may attend to the ways that Russo-Southern connections have reshaped themselves in the new millennium, as the end of the Soviet era and the political events in the late 2010’s sparked new questions about the interrelation between U.S. Southern
and Russian culture and politics. In March of 2017, former Alabama senator and then U.S. Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III recused himself from an FBI investigation into possible ties between President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign and the Russian government after it was discovered that he himself had met with Russian ambassador Sergei Kislyak, supposedly on matters concerning the campaign. Sessions’ recusal, if nothing else, highlights a drastic shift in Russo-American relations, as the optics of a reactionary candidate for the presidency receiving aid from Russia, and of a conservative Alabaman unable to manage the investigation due to possible conflicts over his own Russian ties, would have seemed nonsensical during the Soviet era. Viewed within the context of Russian and Southern grappling with modernity, the renewal and expansion of a reactionary Russo-Southern dialogue in the face of increased globalization and social progress appears as a logical outgrowth of the two regions’ continued resistance to Western modernity.

These varied discourses highlight the ever-shifting ways in which Russian and Southern experiences with modernity shape their attitudes toward each other and toward the Western hegemony that divides them. Analyses by Southern agrarians, Russian filmmakers, and writers of the Southern Renaissance may all begin from many of the same historical particulars, but the diversity of their conclusions suggests both the internal conflicts within the South and Russia over their regional identities and socio-political futures and the varied ways by which different ideological camps approached their regions’ external conflicts with the modernizing world. Whatever the immediate artistic or political goal behind individual analyses of Southern-Russian relations, however, all revolve generally around the concept of modernity, whether in support of or in opposition to its goals. That both Russian and Southern creators acknowledged each other and moved to speak around the geographical and cultural gaps that separated them evidences
their common realization of the significance of inter-peripheral dialogues in the modern era.

Future studies, whether into Southern and Russian intercommunication or into their dialogues with other regions with similar peripheral statuses, will further attest to the role that such communications played in these regions’ attempts to redefine themselves within and against an increasingly global and industrialized world.
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