

Living Outside of Time

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In Eugene Vodolazkin's polyphonic novels, the past addresses historians to come, time seems to repeat itself, and the future brings a fundamental change in temporality.



Eugene Vodolazkin; illustration by Simone Goder

Reviewed:

Brisbane

by Eugene Vodolazkin, translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz

The Aviator

by Eugene Vodolazkin, translated from the Russian by Lisa C. Hayden

London: Oneworld, 387 pp., \$26.99; \$16.95 (paper)

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Having won the Solzhenitsyn Prize, the Big Book prize, and the Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award, as well as having been short-listed for the National Bestseller Prize and the Russian Booker Prize, Eugene Vodolazkin has emerged in the eyes of many as the most important living Russian writer. A literary scholar as well as a novelist—or, as he puts it, an ichthyologist as well as a fish—Vodolazkin draws heavily on the Russian classics in novels of ideas addressing what Russians call “the accursed questions,” including the meaning of life and, especially, the significance of death.

“You Russians really love talking about death,” remarks a character in Vodolazkin’s masterpiece, *Laurus*, first published in 2012; Russians presume, in the words of a character in his most recently translated work, *Brisbane*, that life itself “is the long habituation to death.” The same sentiment, of course, dominates the great nineteenth-century Russian novels, especially Tolstoy’s. Gleb Yanovsky, the protagonist of *Brisbane*, favors Dostoevsky and wonders, as Dostoevsky did, how consciousness can be trapped in mortal flesh. Even when Vodolazkin’s heroes and heroines cite Western writers, they focus, Russian-style, on passages that fearlessly address life’s fundamental mysteries.

For Vodolazkin, who was born in Kyiv in 1964, the key to all such mysteries is time. In *Solovyov and Larionov* (published in Russian in 2009), a historian tries to understand a puzzling event: why the Bolsheviks, having seized power, let a defeated White general live. His research turns into a meditation on causality, as two stories—the historian’s quest and his subject’s military exploits—run side by side and intersect in surprising ways. Time seems to repeat itself, but not exactly, while the past seems to address historians to come. It’s as if everything were taking place simultaneously.

In *The Aviator* (published in Russian in 2016), the historian and his subject turn out to be the same person who has led two distinct lives. As the novel begins, Innokenty wakes up with complete amnesia and has to learn his name from a doctor. Wisely, Doctor Geiger does not tell Innokenty anything else, because only one’s own memories can make a self. Instead, he instructs Innokenty to record whatever he remembers. The result is a confused story of his life, told out of chronological order, that interacts in fascinating ways with present events. Since Innokenty’s early life took place half a century before, Stalinist and post-Soviet time comment on each other. At last Innokenty realizes that, near death in a far-north Soviet labor camp, he

accepted an offer to be a guinea pig in a cryonic “Lazarus” experiment. Prisoners were frozen to be resurrected decades later. Only Innokenty has survived the process.

What is a second life like, and how does it relate to the first? What did Lazarus feel like in the decades he lived after being resurrected? Innokenty eventually recalls that he once committed a horrible crime, and so his punishment was, perhaps, justified. As Solzhenitsyn has suggested, Russians will have progressed morally when instead of dwelling on what others did to them, they examine what they have done. That is the spiritual progress Innokenty makes.

B*risbane*, which was published in Russian in 2018, begins in 2012, when Gleb Yanovsky, a world-famous guitarist, discovers a tremor in his hand that interferes with his performance. At just this point, a biographer named Nestorov offers to write Gleb’s life story and prompts his recollections. Again, two stories run parallel. One traces Gleb’s life since 2012, while the other concerns his childhood and young adulthood. Some entries appear in the third person, presumably because Nestorov retells them in his own words, while others are recorded in the first person; in addition to two distinct stories, we have two points of view on the same events. As in *Solovyov and Larionov*, events, for no discernible cause, echo each other, as if some higher power is offering hints of mysteries governing the universe. In one entry, the boy Gleb discovers his mortality; in the next, the adult Gleb learns that the tremor results from Parkinson’s disease, from which he will die. But then, Vodolazkin always seems to be wondering, isn’t all life a gradual habituation to death?

Talent cannot explain why Gleb’s music is so moving. “Sometimes even a virtuoso performance doesn’t give birth to music,” his father, Fyodor, reflects. “It merely repeats what is written on the staff.” Gleb’s playing conveys “not [just] a reflection of life but its continuation, its higher self, perhaps.” For him, Mozart’s *Requiem* is “not a depiction of suffering but actual suffering.” Beyond the melody he hears a “supermelody” that he conveys by humming, and it is the strange interaction of instrument and voice that makes his performances unique.

Gleb’s “humming was like a prototype of the music, its heavenly *eidos*”—its Platonic pure Form:

It did not precede the music and was not born of it but rather both preceded and was born of it, inasmuch as it was totally independent of time. Gleb was addressing that heavenly matrix from which the music he was playing was cast.

Gleb thinks of his self-accompaniment as “polyphony,” even though it is

not based on the complicated rules for creating polyphonic music.... This was about a mystical polyphony that combined in music what had been manifested by the composer with what remained closed to him in the heavenly archetype.

Gleb insists on the term “polyphony” because, in his studies of Russian literature, he became “obsessed” with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of Dostoevsky’s “polyphonic novel,” and allusions to Bakhtin recur in *Brisbane*. Polyphonic novels do not just have many voices; their defining quality is that the author interacts with his characters as equals, not predetermining their words and destiny, but allowing himself to be surprised by what they say and do. Reading Bakhtin, Gleb has “discovered for himself that the whole world is polyphonic,” insofar as events in time are accompanied by their timeless essence. Vodolazkin has imagined a kind of music that, in effect, belongs to Russian literature. When we read that “Gleb saw polyphony not only in the parallel of voices of the heroes but in counterposed plots, in the different narrative timeframes,” we recognize the principle by which Vodolazkin’s own novels work.

Musicians usually devote their entire lives to music, but Gleb achieves greatness precisely because he once abandoned it. During this yearslong hiatus, beginning in 1979, he absorbed, from Bakhtin and from his own spiritual life, deeper truths that no amount of practice could reveal: “All those years he kept hearing heavenly music without experiencing any attachment to its earthly embodiment, which is always imperfect.... Music can only exist in harmony with silence.”

Death had produced this pause. When Gleb sees a woman drown, mortality, previously an abstract truth for him, strikes him directly for the first time (echoes of Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*). He quits music school “because I’m going to die.... Why do we need to do anything if everyone’s going to die?” This decision baffles his teachers, but Fyodor recognizes it as “the act of a genuine musician,” because “the distinguishing trait of a musician was not the dexterity of his fingers but the constant thought of death.” (A reader may object: But music isn’t all requiem, and literature has genres other than elegy! In reply, Vodolazkin might cite Bakhtin’s comments shortly before his own death: “And if you must know, there has never been, and cannot ever be, happy poetry. If there’s no hint of the end, of Death, a kind of bad premonition, there can’t be real poetry.... Otherwise it won’t be actual poetry, just stupid delight for the herd.”¹)

Gleb’s grandfather Mefody also appreciates his feelings about mortality and its potential for higher spiritual awareness. “But what if you’re not going to die?” Mefody asks. After all, as Bakhtin points out, one’s own death can be an event only in the lives of others. Still more important, it may be possible to escape death, at least as we fear it, by escaping time altogether. It is too bad Gleb gave up music, Mefody

observes, because music “reminds us of eternity.” When Gleb asks what eternity is, Mefody explains, “It is the absence of time...which means the absence of death.” The priest Father Pyotr adds, “Ultimately it is God.... The One you are seeking.”

When Gleb’s teacher finds him reading a religious book—an abomination for Soviets—he confiscates it. Summoning Mefody to retrieve it, the teacher offers what Soviet authorities regarded (believe it or not) as definitive proof of atheism: when the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was circling Earth, he did not see God. “True,” Mefody replies. “Yuri Gagarin did not see God.... But God saw him. And blessed him.”

By depriving Gleb of dexterity later in life, his Parkinson’s produces a second period of silence that leads to still deeper truths. Now he cannot play, but accompanying another musician, he hums the supermelody. To be left with supermelody alone is to approach eternity. Gleb’s problem, Mefody says, is that he is, like most people, oriented to the future, whereas life is a timeless design: “From the standpoint of eternity, there is no time, no direction. So that life isn’t the present moment but all the moments you’ve lived through.” Gleb objects that Mefody speaks about the present and the past as if there were no future. “In fact, there isn’t,” Mefody answers. For one thing, “it comes only in the form of the present.” For another, the future “is the scrap heap of our fantasies. Or, even worse, our utopias: people sacrifice the present to make utopias come true.”

Gleb’s mother’s utopia gives the novel its title. From his earliest childhood Gleb has heard her speak of the Australian city, which seemed to her “the embodiment of the carefree life” and of everything beautiful. Soviet authorities do not allow her to travel abroad, but she corresponds with an Australian man. The Soviet Union falls, and she accepts his proposal of marriage and sets off for utopia—only to be murdered by a gang of robbers on her way to the airport. For Vodolazkin, utopia is always a blood-soaked illusion because it tries to realize the perfection of eternity in time.

Soviet communism represents only an extreme form of utopianism, but utopian thinking also abides in other forms of Western thought. For Vodolazkin, utopianism characterizes “the modern mind,” which misunderstands the relation of human life to time and history. Because utopian thinking places the highest value on the remote future, Bakhtin explained, the near future of the present moment “is drained and bled of its substance.” What’s more, the myth of inevitable progress, Vodolazkin writes in his essay “At Lenin’s Tomb,” substitutes the calendar for real thinking: “History, to the modern mind, has a goal and follows the path of progress, so that *new* becomes identified with *better*.”² That is why some people refute ideas by saying they belong to the past, as if anything people think now

must be superior to anything anyone thought before. We must change our understanding of time, Vodolazkin believes, and that is what his novels try to accomplish.

What is the alternative? For Vodolazkin it is a contemporary version of the medieval understanding of time. He is a researcher in Old Russian literature at the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) and studied with Russia's greatest medievalist, Dmitri Likhachev. He foresees the coming of a new Middle Ages, by which he means not a return to old social forms but a society that has changed its fundamental understanding of temporality.³

And how did people of the Middle Ages understand time? Vodolazkin conveys the answer in his greatest work, *Laurus*, in which the narrator explains events largely from a medieval standpoint.⁴ As it happens, one character, the fifteenth-century Venetian Ambrogio Flecchia, has accurate visions of the future, and so today's historians can in effect join the medieval conversation. Like the intense discussions in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, these conversations consider abstract philosophical questions explicitly and at length.

Ambrogio foresees the life of a modern medievalist, Stroev, who himself notes that historians in the Middle Ages explained events not through causation or as part of a continuous unfolding narrative, but discretely and in relation to their moral significance. To be sure, they may have noticed "the direct [causal] connection between events," but they "didn't attach much significance to it." They explained the world vertically, with respect to higher meanings, rather than horizontally, as we would. They did so not to excuse present social evils but to endow daily life with universal significance.

Accordingly, although the four parts of *Laurus* trace the causal connections among events in its hero's life during the fifteenth century, these connections turn out to be relatively unimportant. The protagonist, Arseny (later called Ustin, Amvrosy, and Laurus), grasps that his life falls into distinct sections best understood in relation not to one another but to what is higher. At first the lack of coherence in his different identities disturbs him. "I no longer sense unity in my life," he tells the Elder Innokenty. "I was Arseny, Ustin, Amvrosy, and have just now become Laurus. My life was lived by four people who do not resemble one another and they have various bodies and various names." Even his memories, he continues, "seem like an invention," as if they belonged to someone else. "They thus lack the power to link me to those people who were me at various times," and so for him, "life resembles a mosaic that scatters into pieces."

"Being a mosaic," Innokenty replies, "does not necessarily mean scattering into pieces." Only up close does it seem that way. When those pieces are viewed from above, one sees that "there is something

important in each of them.” They are connected not as a causal sequence, but by their relation to God and your “aspiration for Him.” Thinking of his childhood, Arseny senses that

these were already thoughts about someone else. He had long suspected that time was discontinuous and its individual parts were not connected to one another, much as there was no connection—other than, perhaps, a name—between the blond little boy from the Rukina Quarter and the gray-haired wayfarer [he had become].

Novels, of course, explain the world by stories in which earlier incidents and choices account for later ones. The central narrative trick of *Laurus*, then, is to present readers with a novelistic narrative while teaching them to overcome the novelistic understanding of events.

Like the hero of *Brisbane*, Arseny grows up with magic hands: “These were the hands of a musician who had inherited the most astonishing of instruments as a gift: the human body.” The novel opens as the boy Arseny is living with his grandfather Christofer, an expert in curative herbs. Herbalists then explained healing power not with biochemistry but with symbolic correlations between the shape or taste of leaves and their supposed properties. When Arseny becomes a healer who can sometimes even save people from plague, he grows skeptical of herbalism. Avoiding what we would call confirmation bias, he subjected the herbs “to testing and reach[ed] his own opinions.” But this skepticism, interestingly enough, leads to conclusions very different from ours. Arseny’s ability to cure people, he decides, lies in his touch. (And indeed he comes to be called “Rukinets,” not only because he comes from “the Rukina Quarter” but also after the Russian word *ruka*, hand.) While we might explain this power psychosomatically—today’s disguise for magic?—he believes it reflects divine intervention. He attributes his failures, therefore, to his own sinfulness, and blames himself for his patients’ deaths.

The turning point in young Arseny’s life comes when he rescues a young woman, Ustina, shunned by others as a plague carrier, and soon falls in love with her. Keeping her existence a secret, he neglects to call a midwife when she goes into labor, with fatal consequences. Blaming himself for her death and the death of their unborn son, he resolves to save her from eternal punishment by living in such a way that his good deeds will be credited to her. Those deeds involve going from town to plague-stricken town trying to cure as many people as he can.

At last he becomes a “holy fool” in the city of Pskov. Defying all social norms, a holy fool exchanges his identity for a sort of anti-identity and behaves in ways contrary to ordinary sense. But they do make a higher sense. Like the holy fools in Russian medieval literature, Arseny throws stones at pious people’s houses and kisses the walls of sinners. Another holy fool, Foma, explains that devils cannot penetrate into the

homes of the pious, so Arseny is stoning them as they hover outside; with sinners, it is angels who abide outside. When Foma asks Arseny if he knows how many years he has been living as a holy fool, Arseny, who has taken a vow of silence, cannot answer. “Well, you don’t need to know that anyway,” Foma advises. “Live outside time for now.”

The novel’s third part begins with Ambrogio Flecchia, who has the amazing ability to predict events, both in the near future (like the war between France and the Holy Roman Empire in 1494) and centuries later (like the 1966 flood in Florence and Stroeve’s research on Arseny’s years as a holy fool). Later, Ambrogio even foresees the unspeakable horror of Auschwitz. Like others of the fifteenth century, Ambrogio has calculated that the end of the world will come in the year 7000 (our 1492), but unlike them, he also sees events that took place after that. Could it be that time is not unitary, that one sequence ends in 1492 while another continues, so that the future both does and does not exist? To resolve such questions, Ambrogio learns Russian and resolves to go to Pskov, where, a traveling merchant explains, they have the deepest understanding of eschatology. “Perhaps on the boundary of the world,” Ambrogio tells his father, “I will learn something about the boundary of time.”

In Pskov Ambrogio meets Arseny, to whom he explains that Russians do not yet know that they live in “ancient Rus’...but they will figure that out over time.” If the future is already given, Arseny asks, does that mean that human freedom does not exist? No, not at all, Ambrogio replies. God created people in His likeness, which means “people are free” even though “history is not free. It is not people [in the mass] that are free but the individual person.” Here Vodolazkin seems to get muddled: after all, Ambrogio foresees not just grand historical events but the minute choices of particular individuals. Nevertheless, this distinction is crucial for Vodolazkin, who, while envisaging a predetermined future, insists on what Bakhtin calls the “surprisingness” of each person. If we are to be redeemed, Vodolazkin maintains, it must be as individuals, and we must therefore place our trust not in broad historical forces but in personal self-improvement. “It seems ever more to me,” Ambrogio explains,

that there is no time. Everything on earth exists outside of time.... I think time is given to us by the grace of God so we will not get mixed up, because a person’s consciousness cannot take in all events at once. We are locked up in time because of our weakness.

By the same token, readers of *Laurus*, because of their weakness as moderns, encounter its events in a sequential narrative about the inferiority of the sequential understanding of events.

In one remarkable passage, Ambrogio has visions of a twentieth-century relative, Francesca Flecchia, who in turn has visions of him. His prophetic dreams concern the future, hers the past. After

publishing *Ambrogio Flecchia and His Time*, a book based on her dreams, Francesca “developed Einstein’s theory of the relativity of time.” Time as we usually understand it is an illusion; events in a different time are no different from those in a different space. For Vodolazkin, that means they are quasi-simultaneous and may resemble two mirrors reflecting each other infinitely. At the beginning of the novel, the boy Arseny stares into the fire, where he discerns an old man he recognizes as his later self staring back at him. As the book draws to its conclusion, the same passage appears, almost word for word, now describing how the old Arseny sees his boyhood self in the fire staring back at him—*almost* word for word because time is not repetition but a spiral, with no moment exactly resembling any other.

In his essay “The New Middle Ages,” Vodolazkin points to numerous signs that, he imagines, indicate the modern sequential understanding is passing. The popularity of dystopian fiction, in his view, arises from the rejection of utopian progressivism. Most important, postmodernism, with its deconstruction of traditional narrative, has brought us closer to a renewed medievalism. “At no point since the Middle Ages has literature so closely resembled medieval writing,” Vodolazkin concludes. “It seems that we are entering a time very much in keeping with the Middle Ages, as if in rhyme with it.”

We can look forward to what Vodolazkin calls a new “concentration,” which will entail “inner strengthening and social reconsolidation.”⁵ By focusing on their unique souls, people will try, and occasionally succeed, in overcoming their focus on mere self. Vodolazkin is struck by a phrase that recently entered Russia from the individualistic West: “That’s your problem.” It reflects a worldview that is entirely amoral because it acknowledges nothing beyond self-interest. In Vodolazkin’s novels, by contrast, the deepest moments of self-understanding occur when an empathic hero enters into the souls of others. Arseny’s healing power derives in part from his special ability to listen attentively to others, who feel they are truly understood as if from within. Instead of speaking, he is silent, so their voice becomes his: “They think his attention is special, for he who refuses to speak expresses himself by hearing.”

In the age of concentration, as Vodolazkin foresees it, people will prize such empathy above all. “The key conceptual pair is justice and mercy,” Vodolazkin has observed, “where mercy is higher than justice.”⁶ Literature will lead the way, because when readers of fiction identify with characters unlike themselves, they practice empathy. “The experience we receive from books,” Vodolazkin observes, “is also *our* experience.” As the hero of *The Aviator* comes to realize, “when you describe a person in a genuine way, you cannot help but love him.... You accept him into yourself and begin feeling responsibility for him and his sins.” If only it were so easy.

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1. *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Duvakin Interviews, 1973*, edited by Slav N. Gratchev and Margarita Marinova, and translated by Marinova (Bucknell University Press, 2019), p. 148. ↵
2. Eugene Vodolazkin, “At Lenin’s Tomb,” translated by Lisa Hayden, *First Things*, No. 320 (February 2022). ↵
3. See Eugene Vodolazkin, “The New Middle Ages,” in *Solzhenitsyn and American Culture: The Russian Soul in the West*, edited by David P. Deavel and Jessica Hooten Wilson (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020). ↵
4. *Laurus*, with its generous use of old Slavonic vocabulary, presents special difficulty for the translator; *Brisbane*, which makes a point of mixing Russian and Ukrainian, also demands ingenuity. Both Lisa Hayden and Marian Schwartz have done outstanding jobs. ↵
5. Eugene Vodolazkin, “The Age of Concentration,” in *Solzhenitsyn and American Culture*, p. 28. ↵
6. José Vergara, “The Flower and the Forest: An Interview with Evgeny Vodolazkin,” *Words Without Borders*, February 4, 2021. ↵