Profession: Deceiver

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Panel: Why I Write The Way I Do
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When I was a boy, I dreamt mainly of three things: becoming a generalissimo, a soccer player, and a chess champion. None of these dreams came true, that is why I am here.

At the same time, I am here because these dreams were somehow realized, even if in a rather perverse and hilarious way. You might call it a paradox, though in my case paradoxes mean nothing but logic.

This is because Russia is woven with paradoxes. To remind you of a few: we’ve been poverty-stricken for ages and living, for ages, on one of the plentiful lands; our state is the biggest on earth but is ruled by the smallest of leaders; we’re extremely concerned about the whole world and don’t care a bit about our abodes; we are people of scale without measures, that is why our measures seem to visitors to be so out of scale; for decades we awarded the artists not for what they have done but for what they don’t have the guts to do; we don’t like ourselves but demand that others love us; we feel almost proud when we’re ashamed, and we are almost ashamed when we are not proud; we believe in tomorrow but never today; our past is each time unpredictable, our present always makes bad worse, our future, though, is full of glory.

My own past, present and future reside in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia, which is famous for its picturesque mountains, pure water, and with that, beer and vodka, best in Russia and thus in the world. Our republic is also well-known for its courageous generals, music conductors, painters, artists, wrestlers, and soccer players. Additionally, we are very good in boasting and cursing ourselves. Our native mythology is considered a real world treasure. Its heroes, the Narts, are inexcusably proud and have decided not to bow low to gods. Instead they prefer, one and all, to get struck down by their punishing arrows. Hence, paradoxically (or, in our terms, pretty logically), we are born from those who were killed before they turned out to become our parents. Isn’t that the usual manner of choosing the roots, by the way? Since the Narts were all slaughtered, our roots must be spread to the heavens. Our roots are the routes of those punishing arrows. We don’t mind our roots to be routes. When you live in the underbelly the skies, you may take it for granted, as well as the weird idea that death could deliver a birth from the clouds which are drifting just under your feet if you stand on the top of a mountain.

When you stand on the top, your fantasy grows to be top-less. Now you are free to invent your own past. Thank the Lord, it is still unpredictable!

My first book was such a prediction. An instinctive and impudent guess about what happened a hundred years ago, even if it happened nowhere, except in my novel. I wrote about our past aiming at present and future and mixing them up in the entangled polyphonic story that never took place in a place which in no way was real. Surprisingly, many people did recognize both the place and the past. Thus my deception became their fact and I’ve joined that notorious gang for whom to deceive was only a means of telling the truth. From then on I felt free to deceive more and more. What’s more in this “more,” I was deceiving myself.

To deceive myself by myself was not easy. I had to invent something amazing, incredible, even forbidden until now. Forbidden for hundreds of those who had been deceiving themselves in the past. Well, I finally did. I invented the story where everyone gets a sudden and frightening right to start life once again, from the very beginning, this time – without any past. My characters are just free – all of them! – to choose their way in a way we can’t choose even
our best lies, not to mention the truth that we choose to keep lying! Isn’t it the thing we all dream about? Isn’t it our vocation or mission?

To create such a lie I had to create a new world. To create a new world meant creating a language. Creating a language means breaking the rules and losing a sense of reality, of what is permitted or not. Isn’t it the goal that we long for – to break all the rules, to get lost in unlimited freedom?

Unlimited freedom means solitude. To bear it or not to bear, that is the question. Writers call solitude their main gift and main curse. Mostly curse, that’s for sure. But, well, what a gift in return! Without solitude there wouldn’t be books, or, at least, they’d be much fewer.

Our solitude only increases when the novel is finally done. This very moment we suffer a definite, almost absolute devastation, as if we just died for a while. What we feel is a sort of injustice, horrible and irreparable: the world is going on like it was, as if nothing had happened, although you’ve just reconstructed the whole stupid world. It looks like a rehearsal of our own death. The privilege is rather dubious. What is not dubious is our privilege to deceive both the world and the death – until we have our reader.

Then who is the reader? To whom do we appeal our lies? We have to admit that, as a rule, he is a kind of a schizophrenic: could be a friend or an enemy, he could be a clear head or a dolt, workaholic or lazybones, a savior or a destroyer, fair/unfair, beautiful/ugly, intellectual/boor. The first one reads certainly us; the other is reading himself. At any rate, the recipe of what we writers do for a reader is just as simple: our task is to make him a bit more interesting to himself. If we fail, we are losing the reader.

The good thing about our phony profession is that the building materials for writing might be any old thing. The bad news is that fairly often it is not enough.

Having once started deceiving ourselves we cannot help stop it. Lies are drugs and we are incurably addicted. I guess my experience is quite typical. After the second book where I gifted the characters with an absolute, frightening freedom, the only chance to warm up my addicted-to-lies imagination was to increase the dosage and to invent something new, even more radical and free than the existential freedom of my former protagonists. This time I composed a novel where the main character is someone whose ability to lie by telling nothing but truth is ultimately unbeaten. Who could it be? No one but literature in the flesh! And, believe me, it was a remarkable flesh. Not just erotic, but also rotting-resistant. For the first time in my life I found a protagonist who was not able to die. Let all the world go to hell, she will be forever alive!

You may say, I have lost the perception of any reality, and you would be right. We are the losers of authentic reality, which in my case – remember? – was to become a generalissimo, or a chess champ, or a great soccer player. Well, in some sense I was not that bad. Through creating the new worlds I’ve become somehow a chess player. To rule such a crowd I had to attest a generalissimo talent. As for soccer, I have been aiming for a goal to step out of my life. Why? The answer knows any writer. It is very simple: writing is our exclusive and powerful means to become, for a moment, immortal.

From time to time we writers die too. Sounds weird, doesn’t it?