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## The Role of Literature during the Cold War

In [Gertrude Stein's] probing of nothingness and in her undoing of dichotomous paradigms, she establishes one fundamental role for the imaginative writer . . . in the nuclear age: to confront annihilation's otherness without capitulating to its seductive power.

John Gery, *Nuclear Annihilation and  
Contemporary American Poetry* (1996)

### The Historical and Cultural Context of the Cold War

The widespread adoption of satire as a medium for fictional expression stems from a number of factors that arose in both the United States and the Soviet Union during the years of the cold war. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have attempted to unravel the dynamics that altered the American and Soviet cultural landscapes so drastically between 1945 and 1991. Although they often differ greatly in their ideas about the means by which cultural phenomena influence artistic representations, scholars of the cold war generally agree that these two factors are part of a cause-and-effect cycle. Satirical literature reflects aspects of the culture(s) in which it is produced and subsequently aspires to bring about changes in that/those culture(s), an endeavor that in turn instigates new literary developments, and so on. Such notions concerning the relationship between literature and culture have attained especial (but not exclusive) credence among the New Historicist school of literary criticism. In *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999), Hayden White states his understanding of New Historicism: “[It] has advanced the notion of a cultural poetics and, by extension, a historical poetics as a means of identifying those aspects of historical sequences that conduce to the breaking, revision, or weakening of the dominant codes—social, political, cultural, psychological, and so on—prevailing at specific times and places in history. Whence their interest in what appears to be the emergent, episodic, anecdotal, contingent, exotic, abjected, or simply uncanny aspects of the historical

record" (63). All of the cold war satires discussed in this study diverge from and often seek to undercut the aesthetic and political norms (that is, the "dominant codes") of their time, which is why I have adopted White's notion of a "historical poetics" to analyze them.

In my view a comparative historicist approach is essential to greater understanding of the nature of satirical fiction in an era during which control of language became a powerful (arguably, the primary) weapon for conducting the cold war, both domestically and internationally. Self-contradictory expressions such as "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it" were commonplace in the governmental and military rhetoric of the United States and the Soviet Union, and the extreme propagandization of language during the cold war drastically destabilized the semantic and semiotic values of words. The formal and thematic qualities found in the satires that arise from this cultural context are directly linked to their creators' distrust of language—sometimes including, in true postmodernist fashion, that of their own satires—in the post-World War II world.

Whether considered as the dawn of the "atomic age" or as the "first cold war," the historical period following the Hiroshima- and Nagasaki-induced conclusion of World War II created a radically new cultural context in both the United States and the Soviet Union. E. B. White's comments from the August 18, 1945, issue of the *New Yorker* clearly convey the unsettling sense that a new era has suddenly begun: "For the first time in our lives, we can feel the disturbing vibrations of complete human readjustment. Usually the vibrations are so faint as to go unnoticed. This time they are so strong that even the ending of a war is overshadowed" (108). White understood that the significant shift in the military balance of power was minimal compared with the necessary recalibration of cultural norms in the wake of the atomic bomb's creation and use. During the late 1940s he advocated tirelessly for a unified "world government" as a pragmatic response to the state of global affairs in the nuclear era.

The intensifying political and military rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States was not the only source of "disturbing vibrations" resonating through the cultural landscape after 1945, though. Postwar literature about the Holocaust implicitly responds to Theodor Adorno's oft-quoted assertion that it would be "barbaric" to continue to write poetry as though Auschwitz had never happened; a similar principle holds true for nuclear-themed literature after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As in the literature of the Holocaust, a transformation takes place over time in the language of fiction that attempts to come to terms with the significance of the atomic bomb. In both cases, the emphasis shifts appreciably from largely mimetic (usually realistic or biographical) narratives toward more abstract representations. Whereas Holocaust literature serves primarily as a simultaneously reproachful and memorializing chronicle of a hitherto unimaginable atrocity from the past,

the bulk of nuclear fiction speculates about a future global atrocity that could result from prevalent attitudes.

Lawrence L. Langer and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi clarify the connection between works about the Holocaust and works about Hiroshima/Nagasaki. Langer writes in *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature* (1978) that the “Hiroshima bomb, perhaps even more than Auschwitz, changed the quality of war and hence the quality of life and of survival itself” (61). He expands this analysis in the introduction to *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology* (1995): “Language, of course, has its limitations; this is one of the first truths we hear about Holocaust writing. . . . The question we need to address, dispensing with excessive solemnity, is how words help us to imagine what reason rejects—a reality that makes the frail spirit cringe” (3–4). Applying this assessment of the potential of language to Holocaust texts, Langer writes that the “most compelling Holocaust writers reject the temptation to squeeze their themes into familiar premises: content and form, language and style, character and moral growth, suffering and spiritual identity, the tragic nature of existence—in short, all those literary ideas that normally sustain and nourish the creative effort” (6). In *The Age of Atrocity*, Langer posits the dilemma facing the post-Auschwitz / post-Hiroshima world in terms of a “disruption”: “With the disruption of a familiar moral universe, the individual must find ‘new’ reasons for living and ‘new’ ways of confronting the prospect of death introduced into reality by atrocity. Such disruption mars not only an ordered universe, but the identity of one’s self, one’s conception of where he fits and how (and why) he is to act as a human being in a dehumanized world” (62). Thus the “familiar premises” of literature are rendered “barbaric” in the sense that the “familiar moral universe” that they described has been revealed to be literally and figuratively atrocious.

Ezrahi uses a similar idiom of dehumanization in *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (1980) as part of a discussion of Saul Bellow’s work, stating that he “deplor[es] the threat to the self, the loss of identity, which both the Nazi and the nuclear forms of mass extermination represented” (177). Albert Einstein’s 1946 admonitions about the widespread failure to recognize the altered state of the postbomb world serve as yet another point of comparison: “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything, save our modes of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled disaster” (quoted in Dewey 7). These comments all indicate the value of language — including fiction—as a medium in which to track how and why “modes of thinking” changed in response to events that established forms of reasoning cannot comprehend.

In essence the Holocaust generated literature aimed at making it impossible for its readers to forget what happened or to allow something similar to recur, whereas most early nuclear literature served as a warning to prevent the apocalyptic events it depicts from ever occurring. As Stanley Kubrick

explained in describing his motivations for making *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963), “It was very important to deal with this problem dramatically because it’s the only social problem where there’s absolutely no chance for people to learn anything from experience” (quoted in Whitfield 219). The subversive satirists who wittingly or unwittingly followed Kubrick’s lead extended this task toward a general critique of the dehumanizing processes at work within the cold war.

The cold war period is unusual in the way that both Russian and American literary cultures responded to the inherent novelty of the times. Whereas American literary expressions of the post–World War I zeitgeist generally adopted the “high” artistic forms associated with modernism (as with the fiction of the Lost Generation or the highly intellectual poetry of Eliot, Pound, and others), a substantial part of the initial literary response to the cold war occurred in “low” or “popular” forms such as science fiction and espionage thrillers. The vastly decreased cost of mass-producing books coupled with the burgeoning film and television industries assured greater opportunities for publishing and consuming literature in the decade after World War II than in the decade after World War I. The traditional university-educated and/or university-employed American literary elite began to engage extensively with cold war themes extensively in fiction only in the early 1960s, in the process drawing significantly on the “low” forms that came before. Whereas the initial responses generally engaged with the historical and political events of the early years of the cold war (or extrapolated the effects of such events into futures, usually utopian or dystopian ones),<sup>1</sup> the subversive satires that begin springing up in the early 1960s engage with the period in more oblique terms, critically examining the underlying philosophy and language that shaped the more visible historical and political domains.

Even though the later elite works have generally still become the canonical texts, the influence of popular culture is much more pronounced and direct because of this process of incorporation. Philip E. Simmons discusses the direct connection between mass culture and literature in his *Deep Surfaces* (1997):

With the vertiginous self-consciousness and skepticism that belong to the postmodern historical imagination, writers as different in style and approach as Thomas Pynchon, E. L. Doctorow, Ishmael Reed, Don DeLillo, Nicholson Baker, and Bobbie Ann Mason not only write about the present while writing about the past, but construct histories of their own novelistic methods, of the conditions of their texts’ production, and of their own approach to representing the past. In these constructions, mass culture—particularly film, television, and the consumer culture built on advertising—shows up as a significant historical development

in itself. Enabled by new technologies and multinational organizations of capital, mass culture has become the “cultural dominant”—the force field in which all forms of representation, including the novel, must operate. (1–2)

Simmons later includes literary forms such as science fiction and pulp magazines as part of “mass culture.” While Simmons does not directly associate the cold war with the transition of the “cultural dominant” from the elite to the masses, many factors his study claims as distinctly “postmodern” are ones I attribute primarily to that sociohistorical correlation. The combination of greater and faster media saturation, increased literacy among the general population, and the tremendous rhetorical and physical power unleashed by the development of the atomic bomb all contributed to the rapid development and entrenchment of a belief that the world was in a radically new era.

In the Soviet Union, the sense of living in a fundamentally changed world was initially delayed by Stalin’s continued rule. The rigorous state control over literature and the widespread annihilation of the intelligentsia during the “great terror” (*yezhovshchina*) of the late 1930s ensured that the post–World War II literary scene in the Soviet Union did not resemble that of the highly innovative 1920s in either its artistic or intellectual merit. Until Stalin’s death in 1953, the party’s control over literary form and content was relatively unquestioned and nearly complete. This situation improved somewhat during the Thaw (*Otтеpel’*), a period of relaxed governmental control from roughly 1954 to 1963, but the relative candor of this time also contributed to discontent by continually providing reminders of how tenuous and restricted the new freedoms were.

Although token dissenting works such as Vladimir Dudintsev’s *Ne khlebom edinym* (1956; *Not by Bread Alone*) and Yuri Bondarev’s *Tishina* (1962; *Silence*) were published and a number of previously outlawed writers were rehabilitated (either in reputation, if dead, or in person, if alive), the Thaw’s limitations were still exceedingly clear to authors who wished to criticize something other than the excesses of Stalin’s rule. The relaxation of censorship never expanded beyond a few politically expedient internal targets,<sup>2</sup> thereby allowing the party and its organs to retain full control over legal means of publication, especially from the end of the Thaw through glasnost. Thus the literary response, satirical or otherwise, to the cold war inevitably remained divided into official and unofficial branches. This phenomenon implicitly imparted political undertones to nearly all works of Russian literature, undertones that were defined by the extent to which a work sought and/or received official sanction. The generation of young writers who got their first glimpse of what was possible beyond Socialist Realism during the Thaw included Akseyonov, Dovlatov, Iskander, Yuz Aleshkovsky, Sasha Sokolov,

Vladimir Voinovich, and Aleksandr Zinoviev, each of whom went on to produce subversive satirical works that were published outside the official literary organs of the Soviet Union.

**“When night seems thickest and the earth itself an intricate absurdity”:** *Literature as a Reaffirmation of Life in an Increasingly Dangerous World*

According to many U.S. and Russian historians, the cold war reached its zenith during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. The Soviet Union and the United States came into unprecedented direct conflict over the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba as well as the United States’ deployment of missiles in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> In his exhaustive political memoir/history *Danger and Survival* (1988), McGeorge Bundy, special assistant for national security affairs in President John F. Kennedy’s cabinet, maintains that this was the “most dangerous crisis of the nuclear age,” although he downplays the actual danger by stating that “the largest single factor that might have led to nuclear war—the readiness of one leader or another to regard that outcome as remotely acceptable—simply did not exist” (453). Whether or not this assertion is accurate, the resonating aftereffects on the collective psyche of Russian and American society demonstrate the power contained within the *perceived* threat of imminent total destruction.

The extreme anxiety engendered by the standoff in Cuba served as a stimulus for a literary response that followed closely behind. As Paul Boyer outlines in his two excellent cultural histories, *By the Bomb’s Early Light* (1985) and *Fallout* (1998), fictional works with nuclear themes were fairly commonplace before 1962. Most of these works, though, had been classified in the traditionally “low” literary category of science fiction and thus had flown under the critical establishment’s radar. Of the “familiar titles” of nuclear-themed fiction from the precrisis period listed by Albert E. Stone in his *Literary Aftershocks*, only the works of two British authors, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957), generated any stir within critical circles.

Although the possibility of nuclear war had been the overt source of anxiety during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the satires that arose in its wake did not necessarily limit themselves just to criticizing the dangerous practices of nuclear brinkmanship; they also decried the underlying cultural forces that made such risky practices possible in the first place. The number of works of satirical fiction increased dramatically in the wake of the precrisis publication of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and the release of *Dr. Strangelove* in 1963. The eleven years immediately following the Cuban Missile Crisis witnessed the production and publication of the following works: Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* (1963), Kurt Vonnegut Jr.’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Robert Coover’s *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), Pynchon’s

*The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967) and *Unspeaking Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971), Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (1971), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). All of these works of fiction, and many others like them, contain satirical elements that are part of a broad criticism of American cold war culture in toto in a period when a number of other factors (the Vietnam War, civil rights, and so on)<sup>4</sup> led to a "sudden fading of the nuclear-weapons issue . . . whether as an activist cause, a cultural motif, or a topic of public discourse" (Boyer, *Fallout* 110). Whereas Boyer sees the years between 1963 and 1980 as the "Era of the Big Sleep"<sup>5</sup> because of a "sharp decline in culturally expressed engagement with the issue [of nuclear war]" (*Bomb's Early Light* 355), I contend that this decline, if it can be said to have happened, was far from a comfortable slumber.

To his credit Boyer admits as much when he qualifies his remarks: "This is not to suggest that nuclear fear ceased to be a significant cultural force in these years. Robert Jay Lifton may well be right in his speculation that the denial of nuclear awareness . . . affects a culture as profoundly as acknowledging it does" (*Bomb's Early Light* 355). In my view this is precisely the phenomenon that the writers mentioned above exposed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Pynchon rather disconsolately hints at such a viewpoint in the introduction to *Slow Learner* (1984) in the process of explaining the themes of his 1959 story "Under the Rose": "Our common nightmare The Bomb is in there too. It was bad enough in '59 and is much worse now, as the level of danger has continued to grow. There was never anything subliminal about it, then or now. Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we have all tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it—occasionally, as here, offset to a more colorful time and place" (18–19). Pynchon and other writers like him pointed out, among other things, the kinds of elaborate political and social manipulations that were involved in diminishing that "simple, standard" nuclear fear to levels that didn't threaten pervasive dissatisfaction with either the system or its masters, all while still allowing anti-Communist popular sentiment to produce strong support, at least initially, for otherwise dubious policies like the Vietnam War. Boyer's "Big Sleep" essentially represents a period of greater sublimation and abstraction in terms of the iconic vocabulary of cold war rhetoric, and this process is due, at least in part, to a concerted effort on the part of the Johnson and Nixon administrations in redirecting fear of Communism away from nuclear weapons (Johnson's [in]famous "Daisy" campaign ad notwithstanding)

and toward related issues fraught with less totalizing peril, such as preventing the spread of Communism into the Third World. By the mid- to late 1960s, the shoe-banging, missile-brandishing Soviet bogeyman that Khrushchev represented in the early 1960s took a back seat to the Vietcong soldier as the predominant symbol of the Red Menace.

Nuclear motifs disappeared in the United States only in their *explicit* forms during this period; however, implicit and/or metanarrative expressions of nuclear and related cold war themes remained consistent and perhaps even increased in number. Joseph Dewey addresses this issue in the introduction to his *In a Dark Time* (1990): “The apocalyptic temper emerged strongest in the very period Boyer dismisses. . . . However, the response did not undertake the direct treatment of doomsday scenarios, but instead dealt directly with how people adjust to life in perilous times” (48 n. 18). Dewey’s qualified and insightful definition of “apocalyptic temper” in a post-Hiroshima context rejects many of the pejorative labels that have been applied by hostile critics to some of the most important cold war works: “The apocalyptic temper, then, brings more than . . . the joy of plotting. It is more than a collective paranoia, a defensive strategy affected by the scared against a terror that seems to spin wildly out of control. It is more than a sugar pill for those who in the dark moments seem to see the very beast itself slouching toward Bethlehem. It is more than simply supplying form to time, a shape when it seems most defiantly shapeless. It is supremely an act of the moral imagination, a gesture of confidence and even *defiance that challenges its own assumptions* that history is itself tracked toward endings” (15; emphasis added). His formulation of the apocalyptic perspective on the cold war allows for a proactive and politicized mode of fictional expression that overcomes both bleak defeatism and the temptation to replace one flawed utopian scheme with another: “When history, then, goes critical; when God seems withdrawn, or silent, or, even worse, casketed; when, as in this century, the finest instruments of our own technologies seem bent on destroying us; when night seems thickest and the earth itself an intricate absurdity, the apocalyptic temper refutes the bated breath of the cataclysmic imagination and the nonchalant breathlessness of the millennialist spirit. It refuses either simple annihilation or the simplistic spiral of inevitable progress to offer the oxymoron of humanity as a creature brave and timid” (15). Such refusal of “simple” or “simplistic” solutions echoes the notion of satirical subversion that Steven Weisenburger establishes in his *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930–1980* (1995). Both Weisenburger and Dewey deny the existence of a single “proper” alternative in place of the systems they refute. More important, though, both schemes allow for wholesale dissent against norms without resulting in nihilism, meaninglessness, or hopelessness. For Dewey, the apocalyptic mode provides “reassurance that a dangerous present is fraught with as much hope as it is with danger” (15). Weisenburger, using a semiotic context,



more abstractly claims that the works he analyzes in his book demonstrate that “no one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever really stripped of power over those messages that continually relocate one as sender, referent, and addressee” (6). Both modes of interpretation offer something more than cold comfort to readers, even as they acknowledge the grim potency of the debased and warped spirit of the nuclear age.

There are a number of significant problems with the literary histories of the cold war that have been published since the early 1980s. Not the least among these is an almost exclusive focus on American and, to a lesser extent, British works. This limited scope remains blind to a corresponding upsurge in “apocalyptic temper” in Russian literature in the late 1960s and 1970s. Aksyonov, Iskander, Voinovich, and Zinoviev, for example, all establish their dissident credentials during this period, primarily as a result of their satirical writings. Especially in the cases of Aksyonov and Voinovich, adoption of the subversive satirical mode represented a significant departure from their earlier, more ideologically acceptable forms of writing.<sup>6</sup> Each of these writers criticized Soviet (and occasionally American) governmental policies that led to, resulted from, and perpetuated the dangerous strategic shell game of the cold war.

Explicit instances of nuclear themes are scarce in both official and unofficial Russian literature—certainly far less common than in American fiction. In his *Red Stars: Political Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction* (1985), Patrick L. McGuire points out that while “after-the-bomb stories had been appearing in western science fiction since a time when the atomic bomb was itself fiction . . . no post-1920s Soviet story deals with the theme directly” (59). In fact, McGuire lists only two novels that feature post-nuclear-war settings at all, *Obitaemyi ostrov* (1969; *Prisoners of Power*) by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky and *Posledniaia voina* (1970; *The Last War*) by Kirill Bulychev. In 1989 Vladimir Gakov and Paul Brians published a more extensive bibliography in the journal *Science-Fiction Studies* that lists fifty cold war-era Russian works “depicting nuclear war or its aftermath” (67) and another fifteen works that deal with the threat of nuclear war. Even with Gakov and Brians’s expanded list—prefaced with the compilers’ acknowledgment that “the theme has hardly been a popular one in the Soviet Union” and that the works they list are “for the most part . . . not major contributions to fiction” (67)—the number of Soviet texts explicitly engaging with nuclear issues is minuscule in comparison to the frequency with which this topos occurs in American science fiction.<sup>7</sup> Overt references to nuclear weapons occasionally cropped up in novels by dissident and/or émigré writers,<sup>8</sup> but such novels were generally written with little or no hope (or intention) of being published in the Soviet Union.

Rosalind J. Marsh also mentions the “tenuous” presence of nuclear themes in postwar Soviet literature in her *Soviet Fiction since Stalin: Soviet Politics and Literature* (1986).<sup>9</sup> Yet the scattered works she includes are never more

than tangentially concerned with nuclear issues. Marsh attributes the general lack of nuclear themes in Soviet literature both to “a special military censorship [that] vetted all literary references to nuclear research” and to “the ambiguous Soviet position [on nuclear weapons], which can be defined as the combination of an avowedly defensive policy with an offensive posture” (195). Because ambiguous policies are inherently difficult to depict in an ideologically “correct” manner, most writers avoided altogether the possible pitfalls associated with the nuclear issue.

The immensely different relationship between the “average” citizen and the atomic bomb in the Soviet Union as opposed to the United States also helps explain the disparity in fictional representations of the bomb. First, the Soviet Union had no history of using its nuclear weapons in combat, thus sparing its citizenry the kind of moral dilemma that the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings represented.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the Soviet Union and allied Communist organizations worldwide sponsored a campaign to outlaw atomic bombs entirely in the years immediately following the end of World War II. Although the Soviet Union was covertly working to produce its own bomb at the time, the pursuit of this policy was both good propaganda and a win-win political position: “If by chance the United States agreed to a paper ban without inspectors, Russia might feel a little more secure; meanwhile, provoking disgust toward atomic bombs would teach the world to despise the Americans who owned them” (Weart, *Nuclear Fear* 117–18).

Second, the quick onset of the cold war allowed Soviet authorities to claim moral superiority in the conflict by claiming that their own nuclear policies were simply a reaction to the demonstrated aggressive stance of the United States. Published opinion polls that showed the American public favoring the use of nuclear weapons in the Korean War served only to bolster this feeling and led to a rapid acceleration of weapons development and stockpiling on both sides (Boyer, *Fallout* 36–38).<sup>11</sup> In its early years, Soviet propagandists found it easy to justify the nuclear arms race as both a source of pride for the achievement of Soviet science and as defense of the Soviet motherland against American nuclear belligerence (a position that was predictably mirrored in American pronuclear, anti-Soviet propaganda). After the Cuban Missile Crisis, this tone moderated to the point that Soviet government official Mikhail Suslov openly stated in 1963 that in the case of nuclear war “the question of the victory of socialism would no longer arise for entire peoples, as they would have disappeared from the earth” (quoted in Weart, *Nuclear Fear* 238). Suslov and other Soviet officials who voiced similar opinions were careful to note that this was *not* the case for the Soviet Union; in keeping with Marxist-Leninist historical determinism, the governmental stance consistently, and irrationally, remained that nuclear combat would be regrettable but that the Soviet Union would survive and prevail.