South African Literature’s
Russian Soul

Narrative Forms of Global Isolation

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Russia in the South African Imaginary

_In South Africa, as in Russia, life may be wretched; but how the brave spirit leaps to respond!_


In 1825, the Russian Tsar Nicholas I suppressed an uprising of 3,000 army officers against his assumption of the throne, following its surprising renunciation by his brother Constantine. The members of the group in which the revolt was seeded, called simply the “Decembrists” in what is considered a defining event of the Russian intelligentsia’s formation, divided their aims across two main factions: the moderate Northerners sought a constitutional monarchy and the serfs’ liberation, while a more radical Southern contingent sought the end of the monarchy and mass redistribution of land.¹ Tsar Nicholas’s response was more direct. Beset by logistical mishaps over a day-long stand-off, the Decembrists eventually faced open fire by around 9,000 tsarist troops. Many of the rebels were shot and then dumped in Saint Petersburg’s icy Neva River, and those who survived were executed, lashed, or exiled to Siberia.²

It is a story of tragic proportions, chronicled most famously in the poetry of Alexander Pushkin, the so-called Father of Russian Literature. In the background of this lofty act of rebellion, though, is a macabre fecklessness that inflects Russia’s legacy no less than its nobler aspects do. At the execution by hanging of five Decembrist leaders where the ropes around three of the men’s necks broke, the poet Kondraty Ryleev is thought to have muttered: “Unhappy

¹ The mother organization was called the Union of Salvation or, later, the Society of the True and Loyal Sons of the Fatherland. In Russian, Союз Спасения и Общество Истинных и Верных Сынов Отечества.

² For details on the execution as well as the complex origins of Decembrism, one definitive account has been Anatole G. Mazour’s *The First Russian Revolution, 1825: The Decembrist Movement, Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (Stanford, 1937). On Ryleev, see also Patrick O’Meara’s *K.F. Ryleev: A Political Biography of the Decembrist Poet* (Princeton, 1984).
country, where they don’t even know how to hang you!” Ryleev soon died dramatically grasping a book of Byron’s verse: though tradition dictated that survivors of a botched execution were to be set free, the Tsar had just ordered more rope. Thus began Russia’s literary Golden Age, among the most fertile and divisive eras in world intellectual history. Given the at-once compelling and exasperating tandem of intensity and ineptitude in this brief example, one can perhaps begin to contextualize the Russian philosopher Pyotr Chadaev’s remark one year later, that Russia was “only a gap in the human intelligence, only an instructive example for Europe” (Herzen Reader 14).

In what might seem like a jarring transition, the propensity of many of Russia’s notable nineteenth-century thinkers to take a despairing view of their homeland provides a clear bridge to this book’s South African context. “What, in the end, is this monster that calls itself Russia,” asks Alexander Herzen in 1850, “which needs so many victims and which permits its children only the sad alternative of either losing themselves morally in a setting hostile to all that is human, or of dying at the dawn of their life?” (17). J.M. Coetzee—Nobel Laureate, estranged Afrikaner, and “world Anglophone” writer par excellence—has often described his birth nation in similarly warped terms. In his acceptance speech for the 1987 Jerusalem Prize for literature, anthologized in Doubling the Point, he remarks: “The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life,” resulting in national writers that cannot “quit a world of pathological attachments” (98).

The fiery South African critic Ashraf Jamal has taken issue with Coetzee’s fatalism, as well as the stylistic and psychological aridity that he thinks results from it, in terms that further echo the divisions of nineteenth-century Russian intellectual life. In the parallel with which this book starts, and which ultimately saw Chadaev locked up by the Tsar in an asylum, Herzen takes issue not with the accuracy but with the spirit of Chadaev’s description of Russia as an historical “gap.” “We believe,” writes Herzen, while “for [Chadaev] it was enough to point a finger. We hope; for him it was enough to open the page of a journal to prove that he was right” (14). In a recent interview, Jamal decries what we might, in good Russian fashion, call Coetzee’s “spleen” in terms that now seem uncannily resonant:
When Coetzee says that South Africa is as irresistible as it is unlovable he, precisely, re-enacts the procedure of fascination and loathing which largely characterises the continued psychic state of our fellow citizens. Still, just because he is accurate does not mean that the position is meritorious. My counter-view is that South Africa is as resistible as it is loveable. By this I mean that only by conceptualising the country in this way will we counter our pathological inheritance. But then, perverts that we are, we prefer to rot in our fallibility and our weakness. Which of course means that freedom is the last thing that anyone wants!

To go by both Jamal and Coetzee’s renditions of South Africa, the country is perverted beyond affirmative self-recognition. The distinguishing question, then, is not whether South Africa’s “sorry morbidity” or “tedium of polarization,” in Jamal’s words, is grounded in some measure of reality (for these critics it clearly is), but what constitutes the best discursive response to this reality. I mean hereby to illustrate that the apex of South Africa’s literary “brand,” like Russia’s through its foundationally schismatic Decembrist Revolt and the war-torn years of the Great Reforms that followed, is reached via broken nooses. While taking pains not to glorify “bad histories” as giving rise to “good books” (one form of tragedy exchanged for another), this book does acknowledge the peculiarly generative way in which such recourse to domestic pathology becomes a transnational provocation.

In other words, the conviction that something is wrong with Russia and South Africa has been a touchstone of the world-renowned literatures to which both of these countries’ strife has given rise. The title of this chapter, “Russia in the South African Imaginary,” therefore plays with that of an influential essay often used to teach South African writing in college classrooms, Leon de Kock’s “South Africa in the Global Imaginary.” De Kock’s argument, in a nutshell, is that South African literature is theorizable only insofar as its concept encompasses mind-boggling social and intellectual incohesion. More to the point, South African literature exists as a field only to the extent to which it acknowledges its incohesion, or the impossibility of doing what it nonetheless tries to do. “Literary ‘fields’—entities, groupings—require some

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3 The Caucasian War, most famous for Russia’s mass expulsion of the Circassian peoples from their homeland in the Northwestern Caucasus, lasted from 1817 to 1864. The January Uprising of Poles and Lithuanians against the Russian Empire lasted from 1863 to 1865.
reason other than the mere convenience of geography for their existence” (263), De Kock writes, amid a slew of examples of how South African writing is curated via disclaimers to this effect. It may therefore seem surprising that this “non”-tradition has inspired such devotion as an international export of recognizably white-hot liberal writing from Alan Paton’s _Cry, the Beloved Country_ in 1948 and on through Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, and Antjie Krog in the late- and post-apartheid years. It is as if apartheid’s effacement of difference in the name of its preservation allowed outsiders, too, an escape from the real thorns of the vexed cultural and linguistic space that apartheid inversely signified. The rise of “global literature”—consolidated in no small part around discussion of Coetzee in the 1990s and early 2000s—would thus seem to have structurally more in common with apartheid than with its multiculturalist rejection. Finally, a rubric to announce extreme variation even as it is quarantined, studiously ducking for cover from the mess it invokes.

With this in mind, _South African Literature’s Russian Soul_ sets for itself the paradoxical task of making global literary connections outside of—even in opposition to—the idea of global literature. It aims to do this through what must at first seem like the odd comparative optic of nineteenth-century Russia and late twentieth- to twenty-first-century South Africa. Perhaps the most vivid example of the formative “backwardness” underlying this connection is the major South African novelist Damon Galgut’s all-but-forgotten 1983 play _Echoes of Anger_, which stages a palace showdown between Tsar Nicholas II and the notorious peasant mystic Grigorii Rasputin in the years between the First World War and the Russian Revolution. In an amped-up intermingling of social history, psychological portraiture, and occult sex, Galgut depicts the Russian Empire’s downfall as a product of its own paranoia surrounding its cultural rough edges. “For more than a century crude echoes of anger had rippled through Europe from a broken France,” the fictionalized tsar informs the audience: “Now they had moulded themselves to the thick mouths of the Russian peasants and came shrieking at me from every quarter” (24). Before delving deeper into this unlikely national pairing, though, to advance a larger set of ideas about the relationship between realist forms and historical dislocation, I’d like to lay a foundation for why it matters. Beyond serving as yet one more vector in the frenzy of global connection (albeit one that bolsters an ongoing push to break down dated forms of center-periphery relation),
Russia in the South African Imaginary

why look to South Africa and Russia, a century apart, to nuance our sense of transnational literary practice?

The first part of the answer is that the height of South Africa's literary response to apartheid (roughly the late 1970s through the mid-1990s) coincided quite precisely with the dawn of what we now know as the "global turn" in literary studies, and thus South African writing has often been used as a litmus test for international readers' responsiveness to oppression, alterity, and the like. Yet, this conjunction of nationalist isolationism and global response also serves to defer a complex understanding of South African literature as such. This is not to imply that twentieth-century South African writing is not formed partly through international mobilization against apartheid—from Cry, the Beloved Country's initial publication in New York, to the United States and European harboring of dissident writers and intellectuals, to Nadine Gordimer's famous "Living in the Interregnum" lecture at the New York Institute for the Humanities in 1982—or that this reception is always reductive. It is merely a way of saying that there is little information available about South African literature's own transnational projections and fascinations (especially those that bypass England or the United States), or about how any postcolonial bodies of writing use distant places to think themselves into existence.

Such arguably unidirectional global scaling made sense when the multiculturalist or subaltern imperatives of what has been called "discursive" postcolonialism (I'm thinking of works like Robert J.C. Young's White Mythologies from 1990, and more broadly, the anti-orientalizing "moment" of literary theory at least through that decade) was the driving force behind Anglophone scholars' treatment of non-western writing. But the flip side of a healthy fear of "othering" or "essentializing" foreign literary cultures is not looking into them too deeply, beyond the limits of sanctioned pieties about the irreducible alterity of non-western peoples and places. The most recent wave of global methodologies has largely abandoned this emphasis on difference as an end in itself, instead using novels as case studies for broad theories of cosmopolitanism, world literature, and globalization. While this has had some positive effects—for example, increased exchange

4 For a provocative discussion of how South Africa has been frozen in apartheid by the western imagination, see Rita Barnard's article "Oprah's Paton, or South Africa and the Globalization of Suffering."
between literary studies and the social sciences, and a rush of detailed print historical and archival work—it has also been accompanied by the default canonization of a small set of writers and texts who seem especially global in both content and reception (Coetzee chief among them). This is not so much a moral or ethical problem, in my view, as it is a structural contradiction within the conceptual claims “global literature” relies on: unlike globalization in a more clearly delineated economic sense, globality as an experiential or expressive paradigm can by definition not be limited to a handful of recurring case studies read through an overdetermined lens. For global literature to be what it says it is, in other words, it would have to admit texts and traditions that lay claim to a rival scale of orientation (e.g., local, regional, or national). And yet in doing so, the field opens up the possibility of belying its supposed inclusivity, and even its existence.

This book thus seeks both to capitalize on and push back against the too-easy assumptions and bugbears of the globalist wave in and beyond postcolonial studies, expanding the historical and linguistic context in which we make sense of South African literature without assuming its paradigmatic or geographical end point. How do individual bodies of writing—which, unlike De Kock, I do see as convenient products of shared geographical and political space as much as they are more porous constructions—come just as “accidentally” to be sanctified as global? It’s an old idea, really, of going deep in order to go broad, a longstanding virtue of comparative literature that nonetheless constitutes an innovation to global Anglophone scholarship in the present moment. As Paul Jay in *Global Matters* (2010) and Natalie Melas in *All the Difference in the World* (2007) have demonstrated, comparative literature has long been seen as anathema to a “global” orientation. This is owing to what was, in many ways, a flawed but understandable sense of the field’s ahistoricism and Eurocentrism through the 1970s, which occluded what Melas suggests were its more positivist and culturally expansive originary intentions (6–8). As a result, postcolonialism took hold in English departments to offer “a framework for studying literature and culture in a transnational context that moved beyond and explicitly questioned older Eurocentric models of ‘comparative’ analysis” (Jay 1–2), supplanting what might have been a more rigorous emplacement in the older comparative methodologies Melas revisits. With some notable exceptions (David Damrosch and Franco Moretti chief among them), recent contributions by self-proclaimed comparatists to “World Literature” have
also adopted an antagonistic stance. Emily Apter, in Against World Literature, confesses to “serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities’” (2), and Gayatri Spivak in An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization casts doubt on the linguistic uniformity of even the best-intentioned globalist paradigms.

World Literature is too vast and fungible a discursive terrain to make it a meaningful framework for this book, and it sidesteps what for me is the real challenge of capturing the simultaneously grandiose and claustrophobic apocalypticism for which South Africans have seen nineteenth-century Russia as a proxy. (“This is the end of the world” (58), pronounces Nicholas II in Galgut’s play Echoes of Anger, which was translated into Afrikaans by Pauli Lombard as Verefning, or “settling scores.”) In practical terms, “global literature” as a distinct field has been more limited to postcolonial geographies, and/or to texts engaged directly with emblems of globalization (the maritime or petro-economies, for example). The fact remains, though, that global literature in the name of a corrective anti-universalism or anti-nationalism has gotten away with a whole lot that comparatists could not, not least of which is a failure to engage with other languages and local contexts as a means of testing assumptions about the globalism whose ubiquity is now assumed, and whose particular expressions need only be uncovered. (This despite the fact that some of the earliest and most compelling work on globalization and form, like Fredric Jameson’s “Cognitive Mapping” in 1988, suggested precisely the false isomorphism of system and subject.)

But if the nation is a construct informed by global flows, then surely globality is a construct informed by national “insularities.” The much tauted need to get “beyond” the nation, rather than imagine it as one scale among many that may be more or less relevant to particular forms or traditions, helps explain the heavy skew of global or post-postcolonial scholarship toward approaches that privilege commercial and distribution networks. It is a bias, though, that sometimes results in a glaring reduction of (especially) non-European writers into so many points on a map we hover over at safe distance. Global literature in this way tends to overshadow the contestations that comprise both the national and transnational resonances characterizing a body of writing as fraught in its relation to the wider world as Russia’s or South Africa’s. We now
privilege networks “experienced” as mediations between discrete locales over what are often equally formative, and, indeed, comparable instances of hand-to-hand engagement within them.

Following what amounts, in practice if not always in theory, to a logic of mutual exclusivity, work on South African writing in the global era has proceeded along two differently “encyclopedic” main lines of inquiry: one deep and one broad. There are a number of recent studies that treat South African literature’s current relationship to its apartheid past (books like Rita Barnard’s *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, Lucy Graham’s *State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature*, or Shane Graham’s *South African Literature after the Truth Commission*), as well as some that address its transnational construction (most notably Andrew van der Vlies’ *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over*). On the other end of the spectrum, there are a great many books that enfold South African writers into larger theories of the global and/or world novel. One of them, Vilashini Cooppan’s *Worlds Within*, identifies Coetzee as among a group of “exiles, border-crossers, migrants, cosmopolitans, and global citizens” (xvii), a characteristic description of his centrality to this ever-growing body of scholarship.

While in large part the aims of *Worlds Within* are in line with my own, which is to say that it resists the voguish idea that “because the global international has altered the nation,” it has necessarily “rendered it obsolete, a mere analytical archaism withering away before our eyes” (xvi), it also demonstrates the almost complete absence of any sort of middle ground in modeling literary transnationalism. We know that a single “national” canon can be shown to exceed or complicate this designation (following the general idea that nations and texts are co-constructed), and we also understand it is quite possible to chart a global concept or trend using texts culled from what is often an astonishing range of geographies (this frequently has the layered effect of discussing global writers because they have already been discussed as global writers). However, what the transnational turn lacks, on the whole, is an available means of reconciling the study of “global literature” with that of global *literatures*, or a method that makes good on the “less scripted and more scattered” transnationalism that Francoise Lionnet and Shu-meh Shih suggest in *Minor Transnationalism*, one that can be “produced and performed without necessary mediation by the [global] center” (5) but offers a sustained structure
and argument as to what these lateral associations suggest. In this book, I develop an axis that shows where local contexts and “big” concepts intersect, an approach I mean to resemble what Edward Said called “contrapuntal reading” on an ambitious but manageable scale. This axis seeks to balance the immediate realities and outward projections, the local compulsions and global inflections, of literary traditions conjoined at incrementally more complex levels. It assumes that even as crowds amass energy, they contain individuals who sometimes break away or even stand still.

This brings me back to the initial question of why nineteenth-century Russia and late twentieth-century South Africa should be a pairing of any contemporary note. The second part of this answer is that both countries, during the most formative moments of their novelistic traditions, seemed almost quarantined from the international networks in which they were no doubt embedded in purely economic or geopolitical terms. South African Literature’s Russian Soul does not advance the obviously naive hypothesis that nations really can exist in isolation, but the more poignant supposition that a widespread sense of worldly non-inclusion can be just as constitutive of literary expression as the transnationalism we now find flowing under every stone. In a recent essay for the literary magazine n+1, the South African novelist Imraan Coovadia sees Nelson Mandela’s self-professed affinity with the character of General Kutuzov from War and Peace as evidence of a shared, intuitively cutoff sense of national identity. In particular, Coovadia looks to Tolstoy’s idea of “national feeling” (народная чувства), described in the novel as a pure strength that emanates from Kutuzov’s preservation of the Russian people rather than his conquering of others (an idea, Lina Steiner points out, ostensibly influenced by Herder, and yet Herder’s own thinking evolved through his Russian travels). In reading this bygone quality as the source of

5 Said summarizes contrapuntalism in Culture and Imperialism as follows: “We must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others” (32).

6 “And only this feeling bestowed on him that highest human height, from which he, the commander-in-chief, directed all of his strengths not to killing and destroying people but to sparing and pitying them. Such a simple, humble, and for that reason truly great figure could not be cast in the false form of the European hero, the supposed leader of men, that history has invented. /И только это чувство поставило его на ту высшую человеческую высоту, с которой он, главнокомандующий, направлял все свои силы не на то, чтобы убивать и истреблять людей, а на то, чтобы спасать и жалеть их. Простая, скромная и потому истинно величественная фигура эта не могла улечься в ту лживую форму европейского героя, мнимо управляющего людьми, которую придумал истори” (War and Peace volume 3, book 4, chapter 5, my translation). See also Lina Steiner’s book For Humanity’s Sake: The Bildungsroman in Russian Culture.
Mandela’s iconicity in and for South Africa, Coovadia sounds an elegiac note about the “death of the nation” zeitgeist that is more often celebrated in a (post)colonial context. This book’s task is to unearth other such similar ways in which a defining perception of being on the outside unfolds across key texts and moments in the development of Russian and South African realism. This includes both manifestations of outsider status that have found lasting appeal as world literature as well as some that haven’t, demonstrating that a transnational affinity can take the unlikely form of insistence on priorities close to home.

Communality on the basis of perceived “backwardness” notably bypasses the more prominent connection between Russia and South Africa, usually discussed in relation to Cold War politics. This is therefore an important moment to note what it is this book does not try to do. While strong ties between the Soviet Union and the African National Congress (ANC) do provide an important point of entry to this unexpected pairing (a topic treated by Monica Popescu in her book *South African Literature Beyond the Cold War*), my premise is that these engagements between political contemporaries are the tip of a much larger iceberg. South African writers’ fascination with Russia, from both the English and Afrikaans communities and across racial lines, is often expressed via discussion of nineteenth-century literary figures and concepts. It is not unusual, of course, for world writers to cite Tolstoy or Dostoevsky as influences, or to register vague admiration for great works of Russian literature. What is remarkable about the South African context is the density and scope of its references to Russia, on the one hand, and the similarities between the driving narrative questions of apartheid and those of the tumultuous half-century preceding the Russian Revolution, on the other. Like Russia’s, South Africa’s realist tradition develops both organically in relation to its historical circumstances, and in mediated form through debates about what, exactly, a realism of social crisis is meant to achieve. The difference is that Russia also figures prominently in South African intellectual turf-wars, thereby amplifying the basis of this book’s comparison.

If the idealization of global literature often results in making nation and locality seem like sites from which we can “scale-up” to real stakes, the periods and places this book takes as its subjects are so contested as to thwart generalization even within one city. Russia in the mid-nineteenth century,
torn between mismanaged country estates and a few rapidly industrializing urban centers, is a thicket of both progress and dissent: during the years of its Great Reforms (usually dated as those of Tsar Alexander II’s reign from 1855 to 1881), the nation undergoes a massive push to “modernization” brought on by its humiliating 1856 defeat in the Crimean War. The 1861 liberation of the serfs, previously fettered to an unstable gentry class and numbering nearly 40 percent of Russia’s total population, is followed by sweeping changes to legal, military, and judicial institutions. Beneath the shaky surface of these big steps forward in a society with a 90 percent illiteracy rate, Russia’s intelligentsia fractures along increasingly jagged lines. First, between Slavophiles and Westernizers in the 1840s and 1850s (the period in which Dostoevsky was briefly associated with the Petrashevsky Circle, a group devoted largely to the study of how European socialist philosophy might be applicable to the Russian context); then, over events like Russia’s brutal suppression of Poland-Lithuania’s infamous January Uprising against conscription into the Imperial Russian military; and later, in contending with more radicalized groups like The People’s Will (or People’s Freedom, from the Russian Народная Воля), responsible for Alexander II’s gory assassination by bomb.

It is fitting that this period should resonate acutely for South African writers during the at-once apocalyptic and revolutionary period this book covers, which extends in terms of its primary texts from the early 1980s to the very recent past. *South African Literature’s Russian Soul* has no pretense of being a work of historical scholarship, but some understanding of the comparable urgency of its contexts is indispensable. The book’s readings pick up in anticipation of South Africa’s recurrent “States of Emergency” that lasted from 1985 to 1990, during which the police and military were given more-or-less carte blanche to act outside the judiciary. Violence was escalating on the part of both the National Party government and those who sought to overturn it, inspiring eschatological paranoia and revolutionary fervor in equal measure.

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7 Ivan Bunin’s fictionalized memoir *The Life of Arseniev* (Жизнь Арсеньева), written in France between 1927 and 1939, even attributes the Russian Revolution to the impractical and intrinsically “Russian” nature of his father’s gentry milieu: “[H]e never did anything,” he recollects of his father, “and, in truth, he spent his days in that happy idleness which was then so characteristic not only of the life of country gentlemen, but of Russian life in general” (22). Most notable among the reforms taking place under Alexander II were the introduction of universal conscription, a ban on corporal punishment in the military, and the creation of an elaborate and inclusive system of local and provincial government called the zemstva.
Just one year after P.W. Botha is elected by “the Nats” as prime minister of South Africa in 1978 (just after which he introduces a secret nuclear weapons program and the infamous counter-insurgency unit Koevoet, or “crowbar”), Soviet military specialists arrive in Angola to train Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC. In 1985, the ANC vows publicly to make the black townships ungovernable (previously “governed,” where at all, by local authorities under National Party auspices), exacerbating long-standing liberal anxieties about the Soviets’ role in third-world affairs as well as the stark choice ostensibly emerging between bloodshed and inaction.

How to take national tensions like these and make of them grist for the (often triumphalist and revisionary) transnationalist mill? Even in her efforts to rethink world literature through the lens of what she calls the “Untranslatable,” Emily Apter demonstrates how rocky the path is from local experience to global significance. “Consider,” she suggests, “how Tolstoy gained admission to the precinct of the ‘world novel’ by opening War and Peace in French. This gambit may look paradoxical—to attain greatness as a Russian novelist, write in French!—but it confirms that one function of foreign languages is to certify the novel’s non-provincialism; it’s bona fides as Weltliteratur” (16). It is tempting to endorse wholesale Apter’s persuasive analysis of how Tolstoy’s untranslated French and German, as well as his Gallicized Russian, perform the “metafunction” of “[trademarking] the world novel as a chronicle of political instability and crisis,” or “demonstrating, with a certain realism, how language-savvy aristocratic society lives in a world in which blunted comprehension and linguistic subterfuge are the norm” (17). Indeed, this expression of social atomization via over-performed cross-cultural literacy could just as well be a cocktail party for educated white South Africans in the 1980s as one of Tolstoy’s Saint Petersburg drawing rooms, full of Afrikaners speaking English who can “get by” with a few clicks of isiXhosa. And yet the world literature apparatus, from Tolstoy’s point of view, seems oddly extraneous here to assessing the writer’s achievement, a clunky machine for refining his cruder reflections on the reality he inhabits. Apter leads us to consider just how far we can extend an organizing concept

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8 For a detailed analysis of the USSR’s support for the ANC in the early 1980s, see Vladimir Shubin’s article “The Soviet Union/Russian Federation’s Relations with South Africa, with Special Reference to the Period since 1980,” and Henning J. Pieterse’s essay “Russia and South Africa in the Nineties.”
before it falls over the cliff of any meaning, and in this case, to wonder if the result of Tolstoy’s “worlding” is as significant as the provincial anxieties behind it.

The Johannesburg-based writer Ivan Vladislavic—among the most revered and formally innovative in South Africa since the early 1990s, despite having received an international publishing contract only in 2013—captures Russia’s nineteenth-century provincialism in a very different frame. In his 2006 nonfiction assemblage of Johannesburg vignettes, Portrait with Keys, he describes finding a kitschy beach painting called Sunset by an artist named Marios, along with an illustrated edition of Turgenev’s celebrated 1859 novel Nest of the Gentry, awaiting garbage pick up on a city street corner. “My first impression—that two more ill-matched objects would be hard to imagine—proved to be superficial,” Vladislavic concludes. “Despite the silken thread of the bookmark and the richly textured, cream-colored endpapers, the book, produced by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow in 1951, is poorly designed and printed. The moody theatrical illustrations (by Konstantin Rudakov) would have appealed to Marios” (96). Turgenev’s lyrical work on the “superfluous man,” a mid-nineteenth-century concept that yokes European literature’s Romantic hero to idiosyncratic debates about the Russian gentry’s maladjustment to the realities of their homeland, is thus implanted as a reminder of Vladislavic’s fraught relationship to his own locality. Vladislavic picks up the novel in Yeoville, a Johannesburg suburb that morphs from a Jewish cultural stronghold in the 1970s to its post-apartheid state of “Afropolitan” bustle (the area’s population was 85 percent white in 1990 and 90 percent black in 1998).

Portrait with Keys, then, like Nest of the Gentry, is a record of both the profound alienation of a “worldly” citizen from his immediate surroundings and an equally strong commitment to cultural emplacement. The fact that Vladislavic is walking around Yeoville in the first place marks him as neither of its world nor of his own: Joburg, according to most of its white inhabitants, is not a pedestrian-friendly city. “Long before he invented London, Dickens knew that cities exist primarily so that we can walk around in them” (34), Vladislavic remarks at one point, further revealing the aspiration-bordering-on-delusion required to link South African experience with what seems like its closest predecessor (i.e., England) among world literary traditions.
In this way, my linking of Russian and South African narratives is stubbornly rooted in a concern with how experience drives form. (It is not, first and foremost, a study of “influence” per se.) I am less concerned with revealing how writers construct new versions of reality than with showing how it is that similarly problematic realities yield new constructions. Fortunately, I can make the epistemological and gestural connections between the two bodies of writing at hand without sacrificing a degree of less speculative archival connection. Vladislavic, after all, reaches back to a thematic affinity with the Russian nineteenth century by way of a physical artifact that embodies more recent Cold War interactions. The difference between how he implants Turgenev into Yeoville and how Apter uses Tolstoy to redefine the world turns on the question of how literary records of local disjuncture find resonance in other times and places. Is it through deliberate inscription into dialogue with more dominant world cultural traditions (per Apter’s reading of Tolstoy’s French), or a coincidental synchronizing of one time’s concerns with that of another (as Vladislavic happens upon the resonant Turgenev novel)?

South African writers’ references to, along with what we might call their “productive misunderstandings” of Russia both seem to point to the aspirational explanation, what J.M. Coetzee in his lecture “What Is a Classic?,” from Stranger Shores, calls the “sociocultural one” that is really a “masked expression of material interest” (8–9) on the part of insecure provincials. As Lina Steiner notes in her book For Humanity’s Sake: The Bildungsroman in Russian Culture, Russia’s absorption of European philosophy from the Enlightenment onward means that Russian culture might well serve as yet another “variant of modernity” (4) at which peripheral postcolonials gaze longingly. South African Literature’s Russian Soul, though, argues that South African allusions to “great” Russian writers do more than just inscribe a new “center” where Britain would be more obvious: they are but a verifiable indication of a deeper formal and philosophical likeness. As the South African intelligentsia discover their nineteenth-century Russian counterparts through Georg Lukács’s criticism as well as George Steiner’s 1959 study on Tolstoy or Dostoevsky (the latter suggested to me in conversations with numerous South Africans who attended university in the 1970s), the effect is not so much one of opening up new avenues of discussion as of finding what seems like an ideal lexicon to describe a situation in which they are already immersed. Russia is
both same and other to late-apartheid South Africa: identifying with it allows
distance from the colonial powers to which white South Africans actually are
the inheritors but avoids direct engagement with the more materially “real”
Soviet Union, thus preserving a less-determined literary domain.

This suggests an important difference from better-known connections
between Russian realists and English writers like Katherine Mansfield or
Virginia Woolf (and Bloomsbury generally), for whom Tolstoy, Turgenev, and
Chekhov were either contemporaries or recent predecessors. Mansfield likely
saw Chekhov’s short stories as a stylistic template for her own work rather
than as a social and ideological signifier, while Woolf used her admiration
of Russian writers as an entryway to negotiating thornier, more current
issues of translation and cultural contact. As Sara Stefani notes in her 2008
dissertation, the most appropriate paradigm for discussing Bloomsbury’s
fascination with Russia may therefore be found in Edward Said’s Orientalism,
which, despite its difference in geographical orientation, offers a generalizable
model for the ethics of cross-cultural representation. In sum, it matters a lot
that the Woolfs and their coterie related to Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Turgenev
more as practitioners than as legends: their impressions of Russia and its place
in their work are inextricable from blossoming cultural networks and the self-
reflection they inspire. The West’s essentialism of Russia is no doubt at issue in
these more famous cases. In the parallel between nineteenth-century Russia
and South Africa in the throes of its “transition” out of apartheid, though, I
mean to emphasize more heated contention as to what is essential to literary
expression. To return to Coetzee’s “What Is a Classic?,” reaching past timely
Cold War investments in the Soviet Union to the more timeless associations
of nineteenth-century Russian literature allows South African writers to
wrestle with the constraints of their own culturally marginalized but politically
prominent place in the world. Following Coetzee, the classic from a provincial

9 Most attention to Mansfield and Chekhov focuses on stylistic and tonal similarities in their work
to argue for Chekhov’s likely influence on Mansfield. “Mansfield’s attachment to Chekhov has long
been the subject of controversy,” writes Adrian Hunter, “owing to the accusation…that her story
‘The-Child-Who-Was-Tired’ plagiarized Chekhov’s ‘Sleepyhead’” (70).

10 In her famous 1925 essay “The Russian Point of View,” Woolf writes that “the great Russian writers
are like men deprived by an earthquake or a railway accident not only of all their clothes, but also
of something subtler and more important—their manners, the idiosyncrasies of their characters.
What remains is, as the English have proved by the fanaticism of their admiration, something very
powerful and very impressive, but it is difficult to feel sure, in view of these mutilations, how far we
can trust ourselves not to impute, to distort, to read into them an emphasis which is false” (174).
perspective becomes not trans-historical but acutely historical, tested time and time again, able to withstand a neurotic self-consciousness about one's own “history and historical conditioning” (12) that exacerbates rather than dampens the urge to transcend it.

Christopher Hope, for example, an English-speaking South African writer whose first novel was banned by the National Party government in 1981, describes his affinity with Russian culture in a memoir called *Moscow! Moscow!* as one of either timelessness or stagnation, depending on whether one is reading for perennial literary appeal or historical progress: “I went back again and again, simply for the pleasure of knowing where I was without understanding why” (1), he writes in 1989 about a series of trips to Moscow over the previous decade. “It is natural to expect a linear progress, experience deepening into knowledge. But I never found this. For me there was Moscow, and again, Moscow” (4). Hope's emphasis on the cyclic, eternal perseverance of Russianness through political upheaval allows him to bypass the teleology of the anti-apartheid struggle in which the Soviet Union figured prominently.11 “I thought for a moment I had been given a glimpse beneath the skin of things,” Hope writes at one point, “back into that other, older world which the present brutal disposition of Moscow, and so much of Russian life, seeks to disguise” (48). The reserve with which he approaches the sweeping change he is supposed to be witnessing in the Soviet Union's disintegration is expressed as a temporal tension, but it is also one between description and social action. “Reports in the papers discuss events which have yet to occur,” he points out, “democracy, freedom, consumer choice, full shelves and the rule of law. Perestroika [restructuring] continues to be written in the future tense, but glasnost [openness] means we can talk about it now—or not” (41). Whether this is a fair assessment of late-Soviet affairs is beside the point. It is the uneasy relationship between change and writing about change that makes Russia so central to Hope's own narrative of liberal South African fiction.

In a compact 1985 essay titled “The Political Novelist in South Africa,” Hope lays bare the “contradictory tensions” that define all serious writing in

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11 This is made clear throughout Hope's Introduction to *Moscow! Moscow!*: “Nowhere, since I left South Africa, had I found a society where the talk was all of reform, of change, nor any place where less of it was to be seen” (2). And quoting a Moscow acquaintance: “Mark you, I said the "Russian" way, I didn't say the "Soviet" way. Not that there is any difference between the Russian and the Soviet way, but somehow I always like to make the distinction” (3).
his homeland: “I am not sure that novelists set out to be political. What makes the novelist political is precisely that he or she writes about life in South Africa. It is a vocation; it is also a trap…” (41). And while South African and Soviet literary establishments share key structural and thematic attributes as outlined in Moscow! Moscow!—dissent against a tiny, corrupt ruling elite; cultural hermeticism vis-à-vis the West; and a sense of the egregious gap between official language and that of daily life—Russia’s perennially enigmatic nature also represents an alternative to the crude binaries imposed by apartheid’s “single issue politics” (1985, 42). In other words, South African fiction, too, is sustained and perverted by the same strong pull toward realism as the dominant mode of literary expression. South African novelists “face double jeopardy,” Hope writes, “because the ideology which limits them, i.e. racial dominance, is itself so narrow, clumsy and boring” (1985, 42).

Hope’s combination of his own cultural self-consciousness and an instinctive cross-cultural familiarity in Moscow! Moscow! recalls J.M. Coetzee’s memoiristic account of his Cold War childhood. In his 1997 memoir Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life, tellingly named for Tolstoy’s semi-autobiographical trilogy Childhood, Boyhood, Youth (1852–6), Russia is first introduced as a positive source of identity in contrast to the Coetzee family’s uncertain social position. “The topic [of religion] is difficult to raise at home because their family ‘is’ nothing,” he writes. “They are of course South Africans, but even South Africanness is faintly embarrassing…since not everyone who lives in South Africa is a South African, or not a proper South African” (18). For the boy-Coetzee, however, the conflict between the “Russians and Americans” (18) offers traction in a world of monolithic designation—Jews or Catholics, English or Afrikaans—and, more importantly, intellectual individuation. The future world novelist “chooses” the Russians “because he likes the letter r, particularly the capital R, the strongest of all the letters,” and because “his loyalty to the Red Star sets him absolutely apart” (27). This act of private rebellion grows into an alienating secret, which is also a catalyst for fashioning an aloof writerly identity and developing his powers of description: “He begins to think of himself as one of those spiders that live in a hole in the ground with a trapdoor,” he elaborates a page later: “Always the spider has to be scuttling back into its hole, closing the trapdoor behind it, shutting out the world, hiding” (28). Russia is appealing as a bold escape from South Africa
South African Literature's Russian Soul

and its messy lineage, and yet in its alterity, represents not so much worldly inscription as a yearning for de-historicized, individualistic virtue. Though Cold War Manicheism is the stage on which Coetzee’s “choice” plays out, at heart we are dealing with one boy’s isolation in an already isolated provincial backwater milieu: Russia is a giant that fits in a child’s pencil case.

This stands in sharp contrast to the Soviet Union’s prominence among resistance writers of the same period, for whom Moscow is an emblem of global solidarity and a foremost political ally. As Popescu, among others, has noted, the material and ideological alliance between the ANC and the USSR was formative for the development of South African resistance literature: Mongane Wally Serote, Mandla Langa, and Alex La Guma, to name just a few writers, spent time in Moscow (as did many prominent ANC activists during the 1950s through 1970s). In Miriam Tlali’s novel Amandla, a focus of this book’s next chapter, freedom fighters’ ties to Russia are a point of almost compulsive repetition, as well as an impetus for reaffirming the self-sufficiency of South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in the 1970s. “[T]here’s no America, no well-meaning white man, no foreigner who is going to help us get our land back—not even Russia” (253), avows one young character to galvanize his peers. Yet the novel is peppered with muscular references to “eager, efficient men who had been trained in Russia” (263), and “Russian-made bullets” being “emptied” into a police officer’s body (280). Association with Russia is a failsafe means of distinguishing just, calculated violence from the petty brutality of apartheid’s henchmen, as emphasis on black fighters’ bullets and training is juxtaposed with description of Afrikaner police who commit murder with a pick and trash bin.

Unlike Russia’s age-old resonances for the ambivalent Hope, Coetzee, and Gordimer, furthermore, not to mention Damon Galgut’s youthful vision of Rasputin, La Guma’s 1978 travelogue A Soviet Journey maps Soviet society directly onto present-day South Africa, all the while “[maintaining] an uneasy silence about Stalin’s excesses” and causing Popescu to wonder “why such a keen critic of Afrikaner authoritarianism would fail to see the obvious signs of Soviet totalitarianism” (27). In other words, Communist Moscow is not merely reminiscent of South Africa but held up as a model of progress for South Africa, and the text evolves to fit this criterion. As Popescu accounts in some detail, La Guma invokes the “ghosts” of Russia’s imperial past to create a
“disarrayed timeline” (42), upsetting the more linear structure of his novels and the anti-apartheid struggle narrative while nonetheless maintaining a sense of historical direction. Traces of the Russian past aren’t summoned to foster description of a timeless present as in Hope’s Moscow! Moscow!, but layered on top of one another and South African images to create a kind of international palimpsest. In one of Popescu’s examples, La Guma disrupts a reflection on Dostoevsky with a present-day street encounter, in which a Russian man claims to have photographed La Guma’s father. The sum of these illustrative if contrasting parts—Galgut, Vladislavic, Hope, Coetzee, Tlali, and La Guma—is the conclusion that any of the narratives to which Russia is pegged (crude and alienated provincialism, timeless cyclicality, or beacon of progress from past to future) seem uniquely well suited to capturing key aspects of South Africa’s hyper-fragmented reality.

This is not to suggest that modernity has somehow been smooth in Western European colonial and cultural hubs, but that defining narrative genres in Russia and South Africa mature amid a “belated” and extreme social and intellectual tug-of-war over whether to grant modern liberalism inevitability. Belatedness, to most postcolonialists, is no doubt a term that invites easy charges of western bias, and yet it is unavoidably a part of mapping the conversations that this book develops as formative on a local level. Even the most difference-minded postcolonial methodology must contend with the fact that South Africa’s final “decolonization” in 1994 is decades behind the main wave of African colonial independence in 1960, as the Russian Revolution in 1905 post-dates its French “predecessor” by over a century (a shared sore point captured by the Galgut play’s title, Echoes of Anger). The ruling elites of both countries, furthermore, share unusual geographical contiguity with “colonized” populations. In sum, for both of these places, the imposition of power in world history’s colonial era is a far cry from the insidious wielding of cultural capital characteristic of Western European counterparts or the subversive “stagist” paradigm that Dipesh Chakrabarty elaborates in Provincializing Europe. While citizenship in Chakrabarty’s model is a goal to be met by appropriating universalist ideals of and about European origin as the colonized sit in modernity’s “waiting-room” (9), Russians and Afrikaners are themselves acutely aware of their distance from supposed civilizational centers. Their rule stems rather from a posture that is defensive, preservationist, and contingent on self-perceived
marginalization from and/or opposition to global power and cachet—in its worst form as apartheid, and in its best, perhaps, as Coovadia’s General Kutuzov example from *War and Peace*. Either way, the comparison turns on a crucial departure from the idea of colonization as an expansion of elite civilization into the aspirational provinces.\(^\text{12}\)

From this angle, too, tsarist Russia is a surprisingly apt precursor to South African and broader postcolonial explorations of how “peripheral” populations internalize the perspectives of various “centers.” Though, for example, Rousseau was famously dismissive of Peter the Great’s eighteenth-century modernization efforts in *The Social Contract*—he claims that “Russia will never be really civilized, because it was civilized too soon” (29)—he becomes a forceful catalyst for Russian literature’s development. As Anne Lounsbury writes in her essay on the constitution of the provinces vis-à-vis Moscow in nineteenth-century Russian literature and Chekhov in particular, “a place can come to experience itself as ‘provincial’ only after it is made acutely aware of some other, central place, and of its own distance from that central place and thus from everything that counts as significant (which is precisely what was accomplished by technologies like the railroad over the course of the nineteenth century).”

Russia is the ideal comparative counterpoint for South African writers because it can take on a paradoxical role that is in keeping with the nature of provincial anxiety itself: Russia produces a world literary tradition from a heightened sense of its own contingency. If Russian writers like Chekhov depict railroad lines and telegraph wires “stretching off into a vague distance,” quoting Lounsbury, to signify “a clear opposition between periphery and center”—between Moscow and its surrounds but by extension between Russia and more industrially advanced Europe—South African writers who invoke Russia make it into a center at the same time as they break down more common conceptions of center-periphery relation (as in the Vladislavic example, South Africa is far more obviously but less organically aligned with England). The center, in other words, becomes not the null-and-void nucleus of oppression

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\(^{12}\) The difficulty of categorizing South Africa in terms of most postcolonial scholarship—which fails to account for that country’s (at minimum) tripartite colonial situation, with the Afrikaner claimed alternately as colonizer and colonized long after the African independence movements of the 1960s—was pointedly expressed by leaders in the ANC as “colonialism of a special type.” See Nicholas Visser’s essay “Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and Its Appropriations in South Africa.”
evacuated by much postcolonial theory, but a sort of \textit{sui generis} “best-in-class” of provincial aspiration.

And yet most accounts of realism’s prominence in either the nineteenth-century or the postcolonial era provide little to explain such cases of productive self-questioning and instability, of realism’s development through open acknowledgment of its own limitations and contestations. For better or worse, realism in its definitive nineteenth-century European (and to a lesser extent, American) incarnations is widely held to be symptomatic of industrialization and the ascendance of a stable middle class, a formal instantiation of a then-nascent “individualism” that to most postcolonial scholars now seems anywhere from normative to exploitative. To survey only a few of its most canonical accounts, realism’s emphasis on both observable phenomena and their effect on the individuals doing the observing (within the text and by way of it)—a conjoined “mastery” of the natural and psychological worlds—expresses an ideology of personal autonomy that is both liberating and naive. As Ian Watt writes in his seminal 1957 study \textit{The Rise of the Novel}:

\begin{quote}
The novel’s serious concern with the daily lives of ordinary people seems to depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough to consider him the proper subject of its serious literature; and there must be enough variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of novels. It is probably that neither of these conditions for the existence of the novel obtained very widely until fairly recently, because they both depend on the rise of a society characterised by that vast complex of independent factors denoted by the term ‘individualism’. (60)
\end{quote}

This is more or less the line of critique that Franco Moretti continues in his colorful exposition of the European \textit{Bildungsroman} between 1789 and 1848 as the quintessential realist form, the genre in which “the novel’s prerogative” (235) of individual evolution over social revolution is most fully expressed. Moretti adds historical time to Watt’s list of things being mastered, a task achieved through newfound literary interest in “the bland rhythm of everyday reality” in scenes where not much happens, which Moretti associates with a Weberian capitalist preference for “regular trade over the unpredictable seductions of economic adventure” (vi). By the time he launches into a deft
case for the novel in this period as a set of compromises between disparate elements both formal and social (between style and plot, past and future, but more significantly between history and the private person), Moretti has already prepared us for the revelation that the Bildungsroman loses its steam by the middle of the nineteenth century. While he by no means disputes that realism continues to develop long after that point, Moretti convincingly argues that the peak of its maturity has come and gone by the time it is able to admit non-bourgeois ideologies. Its historical innovation, by that point—the success that he defines as the novel’s ability to find a symbolic compromise for real social problems, imbuing it with an insidious non-radicalism—has passed.

By and large, this notion of novelistic “breakdown” from its peak of social moderation and normativity continues to shape the study of colonial and postcolonial writing. Jed Esty’s *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*, a notable recent example, essentially follows Moretti’s logic through to its natural conclusion in the “Age of Empire,” the historical conjunction of Modernism and colonialism from roughly 1880 to 1920 when global expansion reaches its geographical limit. Writers in this period, Esty argues, South Africa’s Olive Schreiner among them, don’t simply break from but rather distort and disrupt the coming-of-age plot and its corollary of national-imperial progress, or the “soul-nation allegory” in Esty’s language. Another heavily cited work at the intersection of postcolonialism and World Literature, Joseph Slaughter’s *Human Rights, Inc.*, develops the inverse of Esty’s claim by reading the problematic persistence of the Bildungsroman in Anglophone writing in tandem with the rise of human rights law after 1948. He demonstrates that the genre and the institution collectively enforce a set of humanist assumptions about citizenship and the individual that strive to erase the more disjunctive realities of the postcolonial world. Neither intervention is wrong, or even really flawed; they both add an essential dose of robust ideological critique to a field that has at points erred on the side of a self-congratulatory and under-examined sense of its own inclusivity. Both works do, however, indicate a critical gap in the trajectory of postcolonial and/or global literature as a field: what do we do with bodies of writing that jump the tracks of European periodicity? In the context of this study, the question might be recoded as: what do we do with the very big problem of Russia?
Studies like Esty’s and Slaughter’s are no doubt necessary for expanding the historical and geographical terrain in which liberal (western) understandings of plot and human development have been “put into practice” and challenged. It is not quite fair to critique them for not having done something altogether different; that is, for stopping short of what I would call a more generative or even positivist exploration of how narrative and literary systems develop in other parts of the world. What themes and forms actually emerge when we shift our focus to a “center” that is not one of the usual suspects, aside from a fairly generic sense that we have somehow aided in a grander project of “center-periphery” reinscription? As I have already indicated, the Russian novel is only partially, and often superficially, included in any larger coming-of-age schema for the novel form itself: even the simplest assumption of an increase in the number of readers sits uncomfortably with Russia’s escalating and self-contained schism between serfs and nobles, agrarian spirituality and urban reformism. Many of the most promising recent studies of Russian literature convey a sense of paradoxical entrapment between national dislocation and the rising pitch of national (and nationalist) agendas. Kate Holland’s *The Novel in the Age of Disintegration: Dostoevsky and the Problem of Genre in the 1870s*, for example, asks how such a “fragmented, chaotic modernity” as I’ve outlined briefly during the Great Reforms might be molded into a unity of form, while Nancy Ruttenberg in *Dostoevsky’s Democracy* frames Dostoevsky’s novelistic innovation with the problem of how to represent “peasant culture as that which could not be fully seen because it had not yet become culturally visible to a reform-minded elite” (28). These are crucially different questions from Esty’s, despite a productive zone of conceptual overlap. Whereas *Unseasonable Youth* tracks what we might call the “opening-up” of English society by way of its dominant narrative forms and its national canon, Holland and Ruttenberg suggest the constitution of both novel and nation through reckoning with social divisiveness.

To linger on Esty’s work for just a moment longer, *Unseasonable Youth* provides an illuminating example of this difference in focalization in its reading of Olive Schreiner’s 1883 novel *The Story of an African Farm*. Esty’s introduction to that book is worth quoting at length for how it crystallizes the confoundedness of his task:
To describe the novel to new readers requires an entire glossary of both exotic and familiar generic categories; it is one part South African *plaasroman* (farm-novel), one part New Woman fiction, one part Dickensian farce (featuring pale, sentimental orphans and ruddy, sadistic adults), one part naturalist tragedy (with a merciless rising sun and a pitiable fallen woman), one part colonial gothic, one part Victorian melodrama (featuring hopeless love and missed letters), one part allegorical tale, one part satire of provincial manners (with its dusty Boer wedding scene), one part spiritual autobiography, one part neotranscendentalist novel of ideas. Moreover, *The Story of an African Farm* now holds a firm place in both British and South African literary canons and, despite its nineteenth-century date of publication... seems to anticipate a number of modernist fictional techniques. Combining these problems of periodization, literary geography, and stylistic taxonomy, this chapter reads Schreiner’s *sui generis* African novel in relation to the history of yet another genre, the European *bildungsroman*. (74)

At first glance, Esty’s choice of the European or British context over the South African one to address the novel seems perfectly apt. It is a hybrid creature, after all, and we can presume that any one of the generic or historical lenses suggested might yield fruitful readings. And yet upon encountering this deliberately overwhelming description, my first reaction was to chuckle and think, “Welcome to life in South Africa.” Much like Leon de Kock’s essay with which I began this chapter, Esty (perhaps inadvertently) articulates the incommensurabilities of the lived reality from which South African writers nonetheless try to forge narrative. Schreiner in particular was born and raised in South Africa’s remote Eastern Cape (also the birthplace of Nelson Mandela, among many illustrious others) and made her first trip to England only at the age of twenty-five. This biography is by no means incidental given Esty’s representative bias toward (and, frankly, training in) global literatures’ mediation through European discursivity, which does not admit the implicitly crude notion of an “organic” realism other than the imperialist-individualist variant that it is now compelled to dismantle.

*South African Literature’s Russian Soul* maintains that all realisms are not created equal. *The Story of an African Farm* is often seen by Africanist scholars not just as a part of the South African canon, per Esty’s note, but originary of it. (Stephen Gray’s field-defining 1979 work *Southern African Literature: An
Introduction makes this claim.) Whereas European realism is often now faulted because it cannot accommodate the mass confrontation with “Difference” that imperialism invites, this book’s underlying supposition is that Russian and South African realisms—and, I suspect, those of many other traditions and places of which I know little—evolve precisely in order to convey their sense of foundational disorientation. This does not mean that nineteenth-century Russian literature was free of imperialist subtexts or that South African writing is unscarred by the racism that defines its history into the twenty-first century. It means, rather, that the hallmark forms that emerge from these periods—and by extension, that unite them—thwart the generalizing or unifying logic that the realist paradigm so often seems to assume. Russian novels often considered to mark the zenith of world realism have given rise to robust lines of inquiry about why their parts just don’t quite add up. Vladimir Nabokov, in his novel Pnin, inaugurated a debate about temporal relativity in Anna Karenina that reflects the irreconcilability of Russian life as it historically wrestles with industrialization: “There is a significant difference between Lyovin’s spiritual time and Vronski’s physical one,” he wrote: “When, on a Sunday evening in May 1876, Anna throws herself under that freight train, she has existed more than four years since the beginning of the novel, but in the case of the Lyovins during the same period, 1872–76, hardly three years have elapsed” (128–9). War and Peace, moreover, is a work as generically fraught as The Story of an African Farm, and yet one can hardly imagine a scholar suggesting that the novel is equal parts Russian, German, and French.

It seems appropriate, given this book’s self-proclaimed interest in generating specific but broadly challenging new connections, to wind toward this chapter’s conclusion with a question instead of an answer. What do we gain by doing transnational literary scholarship outside the overdetermined and maximally expansive framework of transnationalism? Is “transnationalism” really an argumentative end in itself? The chapters that follow demonstrate how the fault lines of Russian and South African life are harnessed to a set of aspirations that far transcend the nation, as such: timelessness, totality, truth, and redemption. I do this not by de-historicizing these traditions or glossing over their sometimes sordid disjunctions (as my discussion of Marlene van Niekerk’s Afrikaner incest-epic Triomf should well indicate) but by showing how their inbuilt local struggle to equate the very big and the very
small makes the task seem even more urgent. Instead of ascending from the individual to the collective, the home to the nation, or even from the subject to “subjectivity,” a more holistic portrait of South Africa as it first uses and then echoes Russia permits an organic convergence of the concrete and the philosophical. A chapter on the Russian Formalist concept of estrangement (остранение) as it evolves from its inception in a Tolstoy novella through J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* is as much about social reality as it is about hermeneutic method. A structural comparison of Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* with a black resistance novel called *Amandla* by Miriam Tlali is likewise essential to understanding the “whirling, stamping, swaying” society (“Interregnum”) in which she invoked Turgenev and the Russian revolutionary writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky.

The Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole, in his keynote speech at the 2013 Melbourne Writer’s Festival, quotes the American poet and critic Randal Jarrell to suggest that a literary as opposed to a popular novel is one that “has something wrong with it.” “There might be a homing instinct inside the novel that is carrying it back home to its wild origins,” Cole supposes, before embarking on a discussion of correspondences between the nineteenth century and the postcolonial-to-present moment. With this in mind, I end this introduction with an anecdotal example of this study’s relevance to South African writing and, in turn, its relevance to the slippery concept of global literature. During the Australia-based Afrikaans novelist Eben Venter’s recent interview (with Leon de Kock) in a private Facebook group for South African literati, he was asked “whether writing from far away [affects] his view in the telling.” In response, Venter referred to his method of organizing the elements of the novels he writes: pictures, reality prototypes, then plot, and character notes transcribed on index cards, a “trick he picked up from Nabokov.” He then uploaded a photo of a fish-and-chips shop from my own Cape Town neighborhood. “That’s the actual location,” Venter typed. A homing instinct, indeed.

The chapters that follow are structured in roughly chronological order on the South African side of things, from Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* in 1981 to Mark Behr’s *Kings of the Water* in 2009 (with an Epilogue that

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13 Archived as personal correspondence.
Russia in the South African Imaginary

The gambit applies primarily to individual chapters that treat “moments” in South African writing defined within a few years’ radius, so that, for example, the discussion of Marlene van Niekerk’s 1994 novel Triomf in Chapter III comes after discussion of Coetzee’s 1999 work Disgrace, and my reading of Lewis Nkosi’s 2006 book Mandela’s Ego comes after that of Behr’s Kings of the Water. I intend this design to capture the deep resonances between the two traditions that I believe explain the frequency of South Africans’ “use” of Russia rather than seeing either archive or influence as ends in themselves. In this sense, South African Literature’s Russian Soul tries to start each chapter with a key referential symptom and then works toward a larger formal and epistemological condition.

Chapter Two begins with Nadine Gordimer’s series of references in the early 1980s to the ideological fault lines of the 1840s–60s Russian intelligentsia. She gestures to a fear that the realist novel is incompatible with revolution, a pressing concern, too, for the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev as caught between more proactively political writers. “The Novel at a Crossroads” thus triangulates Gordimer’s pivotal 1981 work July’s People—which marks a turning point in her career and the structure of her novels—with reference to the larger intellectual “moment” of Turgenev’s 1862 classic Fathers and Sons, as well as to Miriam Tlali’s contemporary black resistance novel Amandla. The chapter argues that the development of the anti-apartheid novel in South Africa proceeds along two formal trajectories that are complementary of rather than oppositional to one another: one that “exhausts” social types in a break with mainline thinking about realist form’s “weak” individualism, and one that generates new types to favor form that is radical, actionable, and yet not quite non-linear (or collective) in shape. The chapter shows that neither line of development is theorizable without the other and thus situates the South African novel more holistically outside of either a Western European or an indigenous genealogy.

In its third chapter, South African Literature’s Russian Soul constructs another conjunction of familiar world writer with a lesser-known contemporary using the template of nineteenth-century Russia. “Making Animals Work in Tolstoy, Coetzee, and Van Niekerk” begins by surveying J.M. Coetzee’s debt
to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, a source of insight into his oeuvre that has not yet been followed to its full hermeneutic conclusions. Starting with the clearest relationship, that between *Master of Petersburg* and Dostoevsky’s 1872 novel *Demons*, the chapter argues that both writers are haunted by the problem of who, or what, can be considered “sacrificeable” in times of social tumult. A Tolstoy novella called *Strider*—a key source for the Russian Formalist concept of estrangement, or defamiliarization—suggests a way out of this bind: it uses an animal narrator to enact a capacity for self-sacrifice that humans are denied. The chapter then traces the failure of this ideal through Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and by looking back at *Waiting for the Barbarians*. I show that animals in his work, while still isolated from a wider spectrum of alterity (rather than revealing of one, per broad critical consensus), are “used” without Tolstoy’s redeeming moral pedagogy. The chapter ends with a reading of Marlene van Niekerk’s explosive 1994 Afrikaans novel *Triomf*, a portrait of shunned, “poorwhite” subjects on the eve of Nelson Mandela’s election. This groundbreaking work, often invoked alongside *Disgrace* in South Africa but lacking that book’s international traction, more candidly foregrounds animals’ exclusion from (or elevation over) human generalities. The chapter thus presents the rare possibility of a sacrificial imagination that disavows conscious sacrifice but, as a result, sacrifices its own reception as “world literature” on a grand scale.

The book’s fourth chapter capitalizes on Van Niekerk’s role in the third to extend discussion of Russia’s significance to Afrikaans literature in particular, in its grappling with social moribundity and global exclusion. In the plays of her *Russian Trilogy* (1996–2001), the influential but little-studied Afrikaans dramatist Reza De Wet explores the trans-historical appeal of rural Chekhovian domesticity. Rather than adapt classic works to local circumstances in a now-conventional gesture of postcolonial appropriation or rewriting, De Wet’s plays mark a failed but fascinating attempt at preserving the “timeless” private sphere from a “timely” public one. The chapter advances a central idea of “micro-narrative” over three parts that show how concepts of narrative tension such as *fabula* and *syuzhet* or kernel and satellite evolve from Chekhov’s major dramas to De Wet’s sequels: they identify (1) the temporality of Chekhov’s plays as contradicting long-held ideas that they are non-narrative; (2) the formal and thematic breakdown that results from De Wet’s struggle to resist historical overdetermination; and (3) the significance of this contrast, in
light of political expectations for South African fiction, for the limited and conflicted reception of De Wet’s work both in South Africa and abroad.

In its fifth and final chapter, the book confronts postcolonialism’s recent “recoding” as global literary studies. This chapter departs from the cross-century structure of the first four to explore the implications of the Russia-South Africa pairing for recent South African novels that buck trends in global writing by prioritizing local genres such as the farm novel (plaasroman) and liberation autobiography. I use Vladimir Nabokov’s acclaimed fictionalized memoir *Speak, Memory* as the quintessential text of national displacement, and through it arrive at a model of émigré narrative based in the “binding” of national spaces and literary traditions instead of their de-territorialization. Post-apartheid novelists like Mark Behr and Lewis Nkosi similarly complicate critical tropes like “border-crossing” and “post-nationhood” by revisiting apartheid adolescence to uphold the formal productivity of confined local spaces imbued with national significance. Behr’s *Kings of the Water* (2009) and Nkosi’s *Mandela’s Ego* (2006) thus share Nabokov’s struggle to pin down meaning in an era that celebrates flux, all capturing the challenge of this book as a whole.

I conclude *South African Literature’s Russian Soul* with an Epilogue that considers the vexed question of generative violence and its implications for the question of a South African canon. Where does the nationally constitutive realist novel go—literally, what spaces do its writers choose to occupy—when it outlives its archetypal moment? In moving beyond the era of its global celebration, a bygone feedback loop of national and international stature, South African writing reconfigures its sense of relation among the global, local, and the universal. The hyper-local, even neighborhood, scale on which many of the country’s most “literary” novelists now engage with South African life makes wide global acclaim a distant prospect. Perhaps, this book suggests, *that* is the clearest legacy of a previous era’s globalized resistance.