

Specters of the past. Antiutopian history and the dystopian reception of the present in Sergei Lebedev's *Untraceable*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of dystopian narrative strategies in Sergei Lebedev's novel *Untraceable* (*Дебютант*, 2020), arguing that the text reconfigures dystopia not as a projection of the future, but as a mode of engaging with the traumatic legacy of the Soviet past. Drawing on a distinction between dystopia and antiutopia, the article situates Lebedev's prose within contemporary Russian literature that employs speculative genres to interrogate historical experience rather than to imagine alternative social orders. While the world depicted in *Untraceable* lacks the overt futuristic imagery typical of classical dystopias, its narrative structure relies on analogous mechanisms: the depiction of total systemic control, the erosion of moral responsibility, and the subordination of individual life to an abstract ideological project. The analysis focuses on the figure of Kalitin, a scientist involved in the development of an undetectable chemical weapon within a closed research town. Through free indirect discourse and retrospective narration, Lebedev portrays dystopia as a condition that has already been realized – embedded in everyday routines, professional ambition, and the internalization of a distorted scientific ethos. The Town functions as a metonymic space of totalitarian power, whose collapse exposes the persistence of dystopian structures beyond the formal end of the Soviet system. The paper argues that *Untraceable* reverses the traditional temporal vector of dystopia: instead of warning against a possible future, it reveals how unresolved historical violence continues to shape the present. In this sense, dystopia becomes an interpretive tool for examining post-Soviet memory, responsibility, and the afterlife of totalitarian utopias.

KEYWORDS

dystopia, antiutopia, Sergei Lebedev, memory studies, Russian literature

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Dystopia and antiutopia are undoubtedly united by their grounding in the image of a failed utopia, that is a (usually seemingly) ideal reality. It is precisely the tension between the imagined ideal and its realized, profoundly imperfect form that has made these two closely related genres exert such a powerful influence on the global literary audience for more than a century. For the purposes of this paper, however, I would like to introduce an important distinction. Antiutopia contains within itself a failed but full-scale systemic experiment (СМИРНОВ 2006: 30). Consequently, in literature, antiutopia takes the form of an imagined future world organized in a manner completely different from the present (and the past). It is also worth emphasizing that this new order typically extends far beyond the boundaries of what is traditionally understood as public space, launching a ruthless assault on the sphere of privacy and intimacy. The division known since antiquity – between *polis* and *oikos*, between community/society and home¹ – under the impact of a realized politico-social experiment, collapses and becomes obsolete. Good examples of such texts include *We* (*Мы*, 1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, and *The Doomed City* (*Град обреченный*, 1972) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. Dystopia, on the other hand, typically depicts a future imagined on the basis of dangerous tendencies that are already germinating in the present. It is therefore an image of a reality that may come to pass if the unifying, system-forming force turns out to be the dark side of today's world – above all, the unrestrained development of technology. In this case, the writers' focus usually falls on an individual besieged by an omnipresent system of control that regulates (or implies total surveillance of) not only their behavior and actions, but also their innermost thoughts and desires.

The above considerations delineate not only a generic (or subgeneric) boundary but also draw a clear distinction between questions of literary taxonomy and of worldview – of the way one thinks about reality. On such a scale, antiutopia may appear as a critical stance toward the utopian attitude itself, as a kind of negation of the very idea of constructing an ideal world (McMANUS–SUVIN 2023: 289–290).² Dystopia, in this light, proves to be an exceptionally effective tool for examining the present and a vehicle for a critical stance toward specific aspects of the current, profoundly troubling state of affairs.

Classic works of this type are set in a more or less distant future, in which the social structure has undergone significant changes brought about by scientific (*We*), technological (*Brave New World*), and ideological (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*) developments.³ Contemporary prose, however, often employs these genres as a means of working through a difficult past. An excellent example of such writing is the works of one of the most promising Russian authors – Sergei Lebedev. In his novels, he explores the theme of post-trauma linked to key events shaping the continually reconstructed Russian national (or historical) identity – Stalinist repressions, the Gulag, the wars in Chechnya, and the activities of security services within the Soviet and post-Soviet state apparatus.

Externally, the worlds depicted in Lebedev's texts do not resemble the dystopian imagery of Viktor Pelevin or Vladimir Sorokin (the contemporary classics of the genre), yet their structure is based on similar narrative mechanisms – alternating between generalization and close-up perspective, synthesizing ideological attitudes, and portraying the “blindness” of individuals

¹ See interesting reflections on this topic in AGAMBEN 1998: 9–10.

² See also SUVIN 2023.

³ In the ideological context one should take into account significant Russian predecessors of the genre – the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, in particular *Demons* (*Бесы*, 1871–1872) and *Notes from the Underground* (*Записки из подполья*, 1864).

entangled in the workings of the system, their utopian thinking. In Lebedev's prose, antiutopia has already taken place, and it is precisely the realization of an imperfect utopia that becomes the source of traumatic (and post-traumatic) experience that is essentially dystopian. These texts thus constitute a depiction of a specific segment of the past – the functioning of a totalitarian social system in Soviet Russia – viewed from the perspective of the present. Such a vantage point, in turn, allows Lebedev to reverse the optic of antiutopia and dystopia as genres and to direct the author's attentive gaze toward the tragic (in many dimensions) fates of people from the past, or of those shaped by that past. The present – understood as the lives of the characters situated after the collapse of the USSR – thus constitutes another stage in the development of a dystopian reality, one that is the result of tendencies germinating in the past.

In this context, the Soviet antiutopian project assumes the features of a hyperbolically rendered total system of enslavement of the individual. As the Russian writer repeatedly shows, the traces of this enslavement are also visible in the consciousness of generations who could only observe it in the attitudes of their relatives or encounter it through reading and listening. Lebedev's characters are often confronted with their ancestors' trauma, a confrontation that introduces elements of shock, disbelief, and a kind of cognitive dissonance associated with the duality of life under a totalitarian regime.⁴ For instance, in his debut novel *Oblivion* (*Предел забвения*, 2012) the author draws on an autobiographical episode related to a carefully guarded family secret. The now-adult protagonist learns that his neighbor, so close to him that he calls him “Второй дед” (“the Second Grandfather”, or “Grandfather 2” as in the English translation),⁵ once held a prominent position within the Soviet Gulag system. The collision of childhood memory with the stark truth of history compels the protagonist to reprocess the 20th century experience of totalitarianism in his own consciousness, as it previously existed as a kind of foreign object and now – through his discovery – becomes an integral part of his identity (LUNDE 2020: 181–182).

In the present paper, I would like to focus on *Untraceable* (*Дебютант*, 2020) – a novel in which Lebedev incorporates dystopian techniques with remarkable subtlety, creating a complex image of overlapping narrative layers. The original title itself acquires new – and not always explicitly stated – meanings as the novel unfolds. At first glance, it may seem to refer simply to the name of a deadly, undetectable chemical weapon developed in Kalitin's top-secret laboratory (a synonym of the infamous Novichok poisonous substances, which probably encouraged the English translator to modify the semantics of the title).⁶ Yet when the reader encounters the story of another character – pastor Trawniczek – it turns out that this very nickname was given to him by the security services that persecuted him. These, however, are only two possible interpretations of the novel's original title, and a careful reading opens the door to further ones. For instance, Kalitin himself may be seen as a debutant at the moment of his own death – he who had previously inflicted death on others indirectly through his decisions to transfer staff to Chernobyl or to continue extremely dangerous experiments, and directly on the animals sacrificed on the altar of Science, understood by him in a distorted way. The *debutant* may also be the FSB agent, the contract killer Lieutenant Colonel Shershnev, who at the novel's end fails his superiors for the first time and, more importantly, makes his “debut” in the role of a prisoner – someone who will now be interrogated rather than conducting the interrogation himself. Finally, the debutant may

⁴ See also KOWALSKA 2022; KAPICIAK–ULBRECHTOVÁ 2023; LUNDE 2022.

⁵ See LEBEDEV 2016.

⁶ See LEBEDEV 2021.

be the reader themselves – any human being who, living their life for the first time, does it in an imperfect manner similarly to Lebedev's characters.

In the context I have chosen – namely, the use of dystopian tools in constructing the fictional world – the key element of the novel is the storyline of Kalitin's biography.⁷ Kalitin is a scientist developing chemical weapons for the security services, intended to kill people considered enemies of the system ("to eliminate targets," in the language of the novel). The reader follows the protagonist's story through his recollections, which constitute a large portion of the novel. Interestingly, the Russian author chose not to employ the first-person narration typical of this type of plot,⁸ replacing it instead with free indirect discourse. As a young boy, Kalitin was relocated to the Town – a complex of several laboratories with varying levels of secrecy isolated from the rest of the country – because of his father's work. His father, a talented chemist, was unable to crown his career with a position in the most classified and prestigious of the laboratories, for he feared what he studied as the head of the laboratory and his relative stated: "он боится того, что исследует. Боится. Поэтому я никогда не возьму его в свою лабораторию" (ЛЕБЕДЕВ 2021: 19). It was not his inability or insufficient competence, but certain moral standards that made him unfit for the job. At first, Kalitin remembers only a few childhood scenes involving "Uncle Igor", who later turns out to be Igor Zakharievsky, a general responsible for overseeing operations in the Town and a highly efficient officer of the Soviet security services. In his recollections, the protagonist emphasizes two seemingly contradictory facts. On the one hand, Zakharievsky was allowed certain privileges – for example, he could possess forbidden books and express politically incorrect opinions (at the very same time – historically, at the end of 1952 and the beginning of 1953 – a group of doctors were unjustly sentenced to death without any evidence): "В конце концов, сам их покойный патрон Захарьевский был весьма условным идейным коммунистом. Случалось, говорил откровенную крамолу, хотя знал, что могут подслушивать" (ЛЕБЕДЕВ 2021: 67). On the other hand, life in the Town was accompanied by an extremely strict system of permits granting access to specific zones of activity within its territory, as well as by precisely assigned tasks to be carried out within the structure of this micro-community easily understood even for a young boy unaware of the Town's purpose:

Мальчик уже разбирался, как устроена жизнь в Городе, распределил по ячейкам всех известных ему людей. Благо что Город был организован весьма удобно для этого. В его центре, за второй Стеной, был Институт, где работал отец. И все жители – охранники, уборщицы, слесаря, водители, ученые, продавщицы, учителя, врачи в больнице, как мать – прямо или косвенно служили Институту. (ЛЕБЕДЕВ 2021: 14)

An attentive reader will undoubtedly also notice in the passage above vocabulary and attributes characteristic of antiutopian/dystopian poetics. It is no coincidence that this storyline is situated in a metonymic Town surrounded by "walls," meant to separate the New Order from the chaos prevailing beyond the zone. A similar device was employed, for example, by Sorokin in *Day of*

⁷ Another interesting context was used by Aleksandra Ubertowska in her paper on masculine narratives in contemporary post-memory prose (UBERTOWSKA 2020: 3).

⁸ As in Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (*День опричника*, 2006) or in the first Russian antiutopia – *We* (*Мы*, 1924).

the *Oprichnik* (the wall on the western border of the reborn neo-tsarist Russian empire) and by Zamyatin in the novel *We* (the Green Wall encircling the city).⁹

Zakharievsky recognized the potential of his young relative and, without hesitation, initiated him into the very core of the secret program aimed at developing lethal chemical weapons. In his recollections, Kalitin positions himself as a politically neutral scientist, entirely devoted to “discovering the truth” of his discipline:¹⁰

Он стал фанатиком смерти. Изучал, как люди умирают, как это происходит химически и физиологически. Слушал лекции приглашенных специалистов, врачей, которые думали, что доверяют знания разработчику секретного лекарства для Центрального Комитета. В морге Города перенимал науку судебно-медицинских экспертов. Постигал истории эпидемий, исследовал смерть всего живого: растений, грибов, насекомых, планктона, экосистем. (ЛЕБЕДЕВ 2021: 82)

The protagonist strives at all costs to separate the process of scientific research from its morally indefensible applications, as well as from the human and animal victims sacrificed during experiments – victims deemed necessary to achieve the results expected by the sponsor of the entire enterprise: the totalitarian power system of Soviet Russia. To this end, Kalitin constructs a kind of wall between the obvious moral evaluation of his actions and the typically dystopian understanding of the scientific ethos – one that, in its pursuit of discovery, absolves the researcher from the obligation to adhere to the axiological principles binding the rest of humanity:

Он был знающий, толковый химик. Но, в сравнении с другими, не гений. Ему был нужен для существования, для работы этот закрытый, герметичный мир. В нем не было той самой гравитации морали, и он был способен подняться до высот узкой гениальности, создав Дебютанта, лучшее из своих творений. (ЛЕБЕДЕВ 2021: 59)

Kalitin is fully aware of the paradoxical situation in which he has found himself: his ambition, his habituation to independence, and his striving for professional advancement all required, for their realization, the new morality prevailing within the territory of the Town. The project on which he worked – the invention or creation of a reliably effective yet undetectable substance for the purpose of eliminating enemies of the system by the security services – was placed outside the jurisdiction of law (both domestic legislation and more universal frameworks such as human rights or international conventions). Moreover, the venture was consulted with Nazi specialists aiming to achieve an analogous goal. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that Kalitin’s family arrived in the Town while fleeing seemingly inevitable repressions (his mother had worked with one of the doctors accused of treason). Through this narrative move, the author problematizes the question of responsibility for Soviet crimes (LUNDE 2022: 174), preventing the reader from yielding

⁹ Huxley in his *Brave New World* as well as Arkady and Boris Strugatsky in their *Roadside Picnic* (*Пикник на обочине*, 1972) deployed the opposite strategy, i.e. to isolate the chaotic non-systemic part of reality within the enclosed zones.

¹⁰ Bożena Zoja Zilborowicz makes a similar remark in reference to Lebedev’s *Oblivion*: “Как тело жертвы, так и, парадоксально, тело мучителя, клейменное историей. Голос, его тон, взгляд, жесты, позиционирование своего тела в пространстве – весь комплекс невербальной коммуникации и общения героя с окружающей средой выстраивается в цельный портрет палача, фанатика смерти” (ZILBOROWICZ 2022: 117).

to a simplistic notion of *genetic evil*, that is, evil transmitted from generation to generation and independent of the individual choices of perpetrators.

In this context, the antiutopian reality surrounding the protagonist is marked by a kind of original flaw. The obedience it demands unconditionally, the suspension of a traditional value system with human life at its center, and the ease with which death sentences are pronounced not only absolve individuals of moral responsibility for their actions but ultimately lead to alienation and the gradual erosion of social cohesion. Paradoxically, in the total Soviet system this cohesion is provided by the authority and agency of the individual wielding power, the so-called cult of personality, resembling a sectarian faith in the infallibility of a guru. Lebedev depicts the disintegration of this meticulously organized machinery of political enslavement through the fate of the Town itself, which loses its *raison d'être* after the death of its leader. The continuation of the “research” and the expansion of the laboratory complex are driven solely by inertia, while the project’s actual “death” occurs long before it is consciously acknowledged. The protagonist decides to flee and leave the country not as an act of rebellion against the totalitarian system, but quite the opposite: it is the collapse of the old order, the chaos associated with it, and the limited possibilities of artificially sustaining the Town that effectively force Kalitin to make this difficult decision. This, however, is not an ordinary escape, but rather a desperate attempt to continue the project and restore the past order: “Дебютант. Когда Калитин наконец получит полноценную лабораторию, его можно будет переместить из боевого контейнера в стационарную емкость. Изучить – как он перенес время?” (ЛЕБЕДЕВ 2021: 78).

This Mephistophelian or Raskolnikov-like conviction of one’s own genius – combined with a fully conscious understanding of the purpose of the research (for nothing about the intended use of his discoveries was hidden from Kalitin) – deepens the sense of dystopian reality in Lebedev’s novel. The effort invested in the development of the Untraceable, along with the financial and human costs of the project, seems to exceed the bounds of a plausible, non-dystopian reality. Yet the reader must confront this sense of impossibility with the stark historical truth of the facts: the Soviets did, in fact, create towns or cities resembling those depicted in Lebedev’s text, collaborating with notorious German researchers epitomized by Josef Mengele. It is precisely this disbelief – this tension between the real and the unreal, between the conceivable and the inconceivable – that lies at the very heart of the poetics of the novel.

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