

# Investigations into the Unpoliced Novel: *Moll Flanders* and *The Comely Cook*

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In “A Few Words Apropos of a Book *War and Peace*,” Lev Tolstoi claimed that the Russian novel, from Aleksandr Pushkin to Fedor Dostoevskii, was a “deviation from European form [отступлени(е) . . . от европейской формы].”<sup>1</sup> With its dual translations as “departure” and “deviation,” the word *отступление* here hearkens back to notions of Russia’s distinctive historical, cultural, and literary path at the same time that it resonates with what Edmund Wilson called the Russian “genius for movement” more generally.<sup>2</sup> The formal eccentricities to which Tolstoi was referring are familiar to any student of Russian literature: the novels in verse and poems in prose, the epic creations that promise continuations and never come to an end. Given that form and content are two sides of the same coin, one may well ask what else is lurking in the Russian deviation, what other forms of deviance are embraced by the Russian canon and what movements are afforded by its difference. The commonplace designation of the Russian novel as a “loose, baggy monster,” for one, touches on questions of the body, sexuality, and social propriety. There is a looseness to the body of the Russian novel, an interest in transgression, a sense of the unkempt and deformed, and a respect for the unendingness of textual desire.

Loose, baggy novels are a nineteenth-century phenomenon, but in the context of Tolstoi’s pronouncement, we might ask what novelistic deviations came before Pushkin. This is a question that I address by turning to Mikhail Chulkov’s 1770 *Prigozhaia povarikha* (The Comely Cook), a text whose dishevelment is arguably imbricated in its status as one of the first novels in Russia. Chulkov’s work is frequently called “the Russian *Moll Flanders*”—the comparison stemming from their episodic structure; their focus on adventure, lawlessness, and sexual license among the lower classes; and the affinities of their narrators, each one, in David Gasperetti’s words, a “mature woman of the world who, looking back from the vantage point of advanced age, delivers a running commentary on her riotous former life.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, as the suppos-

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1. Lev Tolstoi, “Neskol’ko slov po povodu knigi ‘Voina i mir,’” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 16 (Moscow, 1955), 7.

2. Edmund Wilson, *A Window on Russia: For the Use of Foreign Readers* (New York, 1943), 42.

3. David Gasperetti, *The Rise of the Russian Novel: Carnival, Stylization, and Mockery of the West* (DeKalb, 1997), 24. J. G. Garrard claims that the British work was one of Chulkov’s inspirations, though it remains uncertain whether Chulkov read Defoe. J. G.

edly Russian version of a work that, among several others, veritably birthed the English novel tradition, *The Comely Cook* may be a good test case for a study of the Russian deviation precisely against the backdrop of its English counterpart—a text, moreover, that also takes as its subject questions of narrative, social, and sexual laxity.

The proposition that the English canon is an avatar of the “traditional” or “true” novel form is certainly as Anglocentric as Ian Watt’s location of the birth of the novel in England. Nevertheless, Watt’s claim that the novel arose within a complex of philosophical and socioeconomic developments taking place in early eighteenth-century England—as well as his association of traditional novelistic epistemology with the individualism ushered in by the Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment empiricism, the Puritan work ethic, scientific rationalism, and the rise of the urban middle class—remains a compelling framework for both the novel genre and the Russian difference, given that these cultural developments were, needless to say, not indigenous to that country. To Watt, another determining factor in the modern English novel’s trajectory was the cultural force of England’s religious heritage. Subsequent disputes with Watt on the part of English novel theorists notwithstanding, the salient differences between Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy are inevitably at stake in thinking through the divergent shapes of these two literary traditions, particularly between Puritanism’s primordial fallenness of the flesh and Russian Orthodoxy’s relatively more permissive understanding of embodiment, and material life generally, as well as between the individualist ethic instilled by the Reformation and the communal mindset of Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> Russian Orthodoxy further lacks the influence of St. Augustine, whose conversion narrative’s particular mechanics may be read in the contours of modern western self-telling.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the following discussion centers in large part on these two main subjects—the conceptualization of material life and the question of “conversion” as it is either bound up with, or loosened from the hold of, the model of Augustinian spiritual autobiography—as they are bodied forth in these two works.

Also at the heart of these concerns is the subject of the police as a multi-valent literary, and particularly novelistic, construct. If Daniel Defoe’s work

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Garrard, *Mikhail Čulkov: An Introduction to His Prose and Verse* (The Hague, 1970), 124. G. N. Moiseeva and I. Z. Serman categorize the two texts as novels that present life “as it really is.” G. N. Moiseeva and I. Z. Serman, “Rozhdenie romana v russkoi literature XVIII veka,” in A. S. Bushmin, B. P. Gorodetskii, N. I. Prutskov, and G. M. Fridlender, eds., *Istoriia russkogo romana v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1962–64), 1:59. And William Edward Brown calls *The Comely Cook* a “Defoeish novel.” William Edward Brown, *A History of Eighteenth Century Russian Literature* (Ann Arbor, 1980), 64; quoted in Gasperetti, *Rise of the Russian Novel*, 21. Richard Freeborn similarly writes that the heroine, Martona, narrates “in the manner of Moll Flanders.” Richard Freeborn, *The Rise of the Russian Novel: Studies in the Russian Novel from “Eugene Onegin” to “War and Peace”* (Cambridge, Eng., 1973), 1.

4. For a compelling elucidation of the various differences between Eastern Orthodoxy and western Christianity, see Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids, 2003).

5. To both Daniel Clendenin and John Meyendorff, the absence of Augustine’s influence became a foundational difference between western and eastern Christianity. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 122; John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York, 1979), 143.

may be seen as embodying, in nascent form, the thematics of surveillance and authority that D. A. Miller identified as a constitutive element of the Victorian novel, then Chulkov's may equally be understood as an early specimen in a novelistic canon notable for its freedom from (or eschewal of) any such institution.<sup>6</sup> Cultural factors are likely at play once again. According to Miller, Victorian novels embody many of the phenomena pointed to by Michel Foucault in his writings on the relationship between law and discipline in western modernity—punitive forces that the novels themselves then may have gone on to disseminate in the form of a culture of surveillance and of the overactive superego.<sup>7</sup> However, Laura Engelstein has suggested that Foucault's writings cannot be properly applied to Russia, a country that never developed the bourgeois legality on which his argument rests.<sup>8</sup> I premise my argument here on the assumption that just as certain cultural developments were instantiated in the English novelistic tradition, their absence in the Russian context finds its objective correlative in the Russian novelistic imagination, and thus my engagement with the thinking of English novel theorists such as Miller and Watt is carried out, at all times, with an eye to underscoring the Russian difference. What follows will concentrate on both formal matters and various of the texts' thematic clusters—questions of commercialism, capital, and the role of money; the body, gender difference, and the regulation of sexuality and pleasure; Oedipal family arrangements and communal organization; and repetition and the production of the new. These issues are intertwined in the narrative presentation of a culture of discipline, legality, and closure, on the one hand, and one of unregulated lawlessness, movement, and textual opening, on the other: divergent epistemologies and textual mechanics that then act on the bodies and communities that they house. The Russian novel appears in this context as a "deviation" precisely in its refusal of the structuring and disciplinary effects that institute the categories of the normative and, as its corollary, the (sexual and legal) deviant. What results is a presentation of worlds, narratives, and bodies whose very undisciplined formlessness permits the free movements of desire and the (formally related) descent of grace—a set of qualities that may be particularly discernable against the backdrop of an English novel whose apparent liberties are stymied by police in many guises, to which the female protagonist is quintessentially subject.

I would like further to indicate the extent to which the Russian realist novel may be said to embrace what Jack (Judith) Halberstam and others have called "queer time," the queer subject's transfiguring of time—specifically, the queer refusal of industrial time, the march of linear progress, and the temporalities of inheritance, generational succession, and the bourgeois, Oedipal family. These rejections arguably contribute to the Russian novel's character-

6. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, 1988), 5.

7. In *Imagining the Penitentiary*, John Bender similarly sees text and context as intertwined, and he takes the discussion back a century to examine the ways in which the development of the penitentiary in England was influenced by the models of mind and personality being elaborated in the eighteenth-century English novel. John B. Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1989).

8. Laura Engelstein, "Combined Underdevelopment: Discipline and the Law in Imperial and Soviet Russia," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1993): 338–53.

istic refusal of closure, heterosexual and otherwise;<sup>9</sup> and indeed, if, according to Halberstam, “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation,” then the refusal of both achievements in Chulkov’s novel may speak to a certain queering effect undergirding the constitutional disinterest in bourgeois success witnessed in so many later Russian novels.<sup>10</sup> My exploration here, then, helps pave the way for a rethinking of the Russian novel in light of what has often come to be seen as one of the characteristic trajectories of novelistic narrative: the achievement of heterosexual stability and a kind of mature disenchantment, founded on a renunciation of primal and egoistic fantasies, that comes at the end of a successful *Bildung*, with its conversionary ethos—the accumulation of wealth a compromise formation born of the repression of more utopian drives, narcissistic and bisexual impulses among them. That the self and the collective, whose sundering within Protestant individualism is bodied forth in the “defining thematic opposition between self and society” within the “traditional” novel, are rendered somewhat more compatible by the communal ethic of Russian Orthodoxy may account in some part for the insistence on maintaining the pleasures that must be renounced, in the standard *Bildung*, for the sake of the group.<sup>11</sup> It is possible, here, to enjoy oneself among one’s fellows. To the extent that in our own heteronormative, capitalist society we suffer from our successes, what I am articulating here is the refuge the Russian novelistic imagination—with its various forms of failure, lack, and discomposure—might offer western readers.<sup>12</sup>

I must qualify these claims by noting that if some potentially liberating factors, with a queering capacity as well as a special promise held out for the female figure, are at work in Russian novelistic formation, they are undoubtedly elements of the cultural unconscious, to which the contours of the Russian cultural consciousness may be understood as fiercely reactive, at least when it comes to something like the recent proliferation of anti-gay laws. Engelstein’s own account, for one, takes an ironic turn—bourgeois discipline may have its troubles, but Russia could have used some of it—but even her initial premise is far from unassailable. Dan Healey points out that the authoritarian context did not prevent disciplinary mechanisms from penetrating the milieu of the Russian elite and the “men of science,” whose shifting attitudes toward homosexuality contributed to the ways gender and sexual identity staged the power

9. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, 2005).

10. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, 2011), 2.

11. Jerry C. Beasley, “Life’s Episodes: Story and Its Form in the Eighteenth Century,” in Robert W. Uphaus, ed., *The Idea of the Novel in the Eighteenth Century* (East Lansing, 1988), 50.

12. Needless to say, this is an effort that has been underway since the Russian canon was first introduced to the English-speaking public. Arguably beginning with Virginia Woolf’s 1925 essay “The Russian Point of View,” it continues to the present day. See, for example, the *New York Times* article of November 25, 2014, by Francine Prose titled “What Makes the Russian Literature of the 19th Century So Distinctive?,” at [www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/books/review/what-makes-the-russian-literature-of-the-19th-century-so-distinctive.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/books/review/what-makes-the-russian-literature-of-the-19th-century-so-distinctive.html?_r=0) (last accessed May 20, 2015).

relations of tsarist and communist regimes.<sup>13</sup> Harriet Murav has further examined the “Russian literary and political conditions in which writers claim authority not only as the authors of fictive realms, but as lawgivers in the realm of the real, and in which the government turns to the realm of the literary and the aesthetic in order to exercise its power.”<sup>14</sup> This emphasis on the ways Russian writers are implicated in the exercise of intra- and extratextual authority is, of course, somewhat at odds with the present study, as is the undoubtedly well-grounded assertion, by Barbara Heldt and others, that classic Russian prose by male authors tends to kill off female characters literally and figuratively, mortifying their bodies and silencing their voices.<sup>15</sup> These assessments of the role of discipline, whether understood in a specifically Foucauldian sense or more generally, in the Russian context are well taken, and in many ways this article is an exercise in bringing to light a competing countercurrent in the Russian literary and cultural imaginary that may serve as, if not the antidote for, then at least the dialectical correlate of such narrative and real effects. In this way, the permissiveness of materiality in Russian Orthodoxy, as it bears fruit in a fictional universe, may hold out other possibilities for the Russian realist heroines who come after Martona and who, for various reasons, cannot similarly enjoy themselves. My contention is that this imaginary landscape will have to be read alongside whatever it is that actually happens to these women within their plots.

In isolating *The Comely Cook* as an icon of the Russian novel form particularly as it developed in the next century, this study implicitly engages in backward reading. I am admittedly viewing the eighteenth-century Russian text through the lens of its nineteenth-century successors, to which ideas about Russia’s messianic national potential, for example, were considerably more central. Eric Naiman for one has noted the value of studies that “speak of the influence of a living writer on a dead one,” the comparative act allowing the possibility that later texts might “illuminat[e] . . . the poetics of earlier [works],” a kind of *après-coup* in the realm of literary interpretation.<sup>16</sup> The perversity of this method of reading is compounded here by the suggestion that the earlier narrative might be seen as the crystallization of energies that in the later texts have become diffused, as well as by the presentation of Chulkov’s novel as a predecessor of later writers like Nikolai Gogol’ and, especially, Dostoevskii, without detailed engagement with their works. This is backward reading passed off as forward reading, the methodological deviance lurking underneath a more traditionally sanctioned form of scholarship revealing itself as a kind of analytic cross-dressing.<sup>17</sup>

13. Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago, 2001), 10.

14. Harriet Murav, *Russia’s Legal Fictions* (Ann Arbor, 1998), 7.

15. Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* (Bloomington, 1987).

16. Eric Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca, 2010), 269.

17. One of Gasperetti’s central claims is that eighteenth-century prose writers Chulkov, Fedor Emin, and Matvei Komarov were direct predecessors of the nineteenth-century Russian novelists and that the work of Chulkov and Komarov in particular looked forward to the writings of Gogol’ and Dostoevskii. See his “The Carnavalesque Spirit of the



With *Moll Flanders*, the English novel begins in error. If Defoe's heroine is a loose woman—both ethically dubious and narratively unconstrained, having lived “a Life of continu'd Variety . . . [as] Twelve Year a *Whore*, five times a *Wife* . . . [and] Twelve Year a *Thief*”—then the novel presents itself as a loose text: a run-on sentence, constructed piecemeal.<sup>18</sup> Yet many readers have also noted the various markers by which the complex patterning latently at work announces itself, as well as the extent to which the narrative's apparent liberties are systematically countered by governing principles that urge the correction of the various errors of the novel's inception. Born in Newgate prison, the offspring of a convict, Moll is behind bars from the get-go, and thus if *Moll Flanders* can be understood as an early archetype of the English novelistic tradition, perhaps its exemplary status consists above all in the notion that this apparently lenient text, like its apparently loose heroine, is in fact anything but.

Among other things, the prison represents the fact of origins as they anchor lived life, as the place of reciprocal beginnings and endings and the home that beckons return: a destination, when Moll is incarcerated there as an adult, whose double valence is telling in terms of a larger consideration of novelistic form and the tenor of its organizational methods. On the one hand, Newgate offers not only birth but also potential rebirth. As the site at which Moll's personal history is revealed to have been governed by a larger moral and aesthetic coherence, it is where the protagonist, in an apparent conversionary moment, expresses repentance and redemption. On the other hand, the prison is also the emblem of a punishing temporal authority whose obduracy only inflames an intractable criminal element—a locus of spiritual, moral, and actual inertia, a place where no one is corrected, and “a point,” as Hal Gladfelder puts it, “on which nothing turns.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, as the symbolic center of a deceptively loose narrative about a deceptively loose woman, Newgate is the axis of a fictional universe governed by an insistently centripetal force, representing not only the modern sciences of criminology and the burgeoning sophistication of the English police but also the innumerable forms of psychic, material, and narrative determination that ensnare the subject.

In this sense, Newgate prison can be considered the place where the picaresque elements of *Moll Flanders* are converted into a novel proper and, specifically, a specimen of the English novel, in which the conversionary ethic of spiritual autobiography reveals its origins in the police and a certain effort at closure and roundedness of form is inextricable from social control.<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of the narrative, the child Moll declares that she intends to be a “Gentlewoman” when she grows up, and her caretakers respond with

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Eighteenth-Century Russian Novel,” chap. 2 in his *Rise of the Russian Novel*. J. D. Goodliffe similarly claims that “Culkov especially is likely to provide a foretaste of the nineteenth century ‘realistic’ novel.” “Some Comments on XVIII Century Narrative Prose Fiction,” *Melbourne Slavonic Studies*, nos. 5–6 (1971): 130.

18. Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (Mineola, 1996), iv, emphases in the original; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley, 1965), 99.

19. Hal Gladfelder, *Criminality and Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England: Beyond the Law* (Baltimore, 2001), 124.

20. Miller, *Novel and the Police*, ix.

mockery. Her understanding of gentility is undoubtedly naive, since she uses the word “negatively”—defining it as an avoidance of domestic service.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, like the prototypical novelistic hero or heroine, she does achieve a position of social legitimacy by the end: having reunited with her son and her one beloved spouse, she inherits a fortune and, after sojourns in America, returns to her native soil. The narrative that was propelled by adulterous liaisons, unwanted pregnancies, and the abandonment of illegitimate children adopts the estate-building itinerary of a Jane Austen novel, and the ambivalences that the ending enshrines testify to the violence inherent in the compulsory achievement of narrative and behavioral coherence—novelistic closure that is also the requisite heterosexual closure sanctioned by the marriage plot. Home is a prison. Indeed, to the extent that Moll’s prison confession, the lynchpin of the narrative’s conversionary force, is figured as a rape at the hands of the prying Christian minister, it is merely one more child born of punitive violation. But the disciplinary agencies that pursue her are also introjected, her self-censorship especially evident in her oblique references to the sexual act: a form of narrative withholding that mirrors the ambivalence with which she carries out the deed itself. In this sense, an internal culture of enforcement ensures that her every sexual encounter both repeats the circumstances of her prison birth and looks forward to her rape-as-rebirth, her every bedroom activity—like the confinements of childbirth that perpetually stall her movement—a form of arrest carried out at some distance from desire. Thus, of all of the text’s various Newgates, the most intransigent is the female body, with the mother’s womb serving as the primordial agent of confinement and the protagonist’s adult corpus a replica of that captivity.

The tensions documented in the novel between release and restraint, or looseness and composure, are especially evident in Moll’s attitude toward property. If in one sense she seems to live a life of perpetual casting off (of husbands, offspring, social personae), she is just as strenuously engaged in keeping. A number of critics have commented on the frequency with which she lists her assets, as well as her surprisingly methodical housekeeping and bookkeeping streak.<sup>22</sup> The Bank of England was founded in 1694, about thirty years before *Moll Flanders* was published, and in many ways the heroine’s obsessive stock-taking reflects the nascent capitalist marketplace, a system characterized not only by circulating motion but also by its arrest. Any instances of apparent generosity in the narrative are undermined by intimations of human relations as mercantile transactions, in which all bestowals incur a debt and nothing comes for free. This is a capitalist architecture instituted in the womb (as the unwitting agent of her mother’s stay of execution, received by “Plead[ing] her belly,” Moll discharges her filial debt in utero, before she has even taken her first breath) and to which the human subject is always already bound.<sup>23</sup>

21. Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 4–6.

22. See Virginia Ogden Birdsall, *Defoe’s Perpetual Seekers: A Study of the Major Fiction* (Lewisburg, 1985), 81; and Samuel L. Macey, *Money and the Novel: Mercenary Motivation in Defoe and His Immediate Successors* (Victoria, 1983), 18.

23. Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 2.

There are further parallels between the exchanges of goods and money in the text and the circulation of Moll herself as a commodity among men, the quintessential woman on the market, such that the joylessness of the capitalist infrastructure both determines and conspires with the objectification of the female body to inhibit Moll's desire. This is indeed a woman for whom even the composition of autobiography does not confer the ability to write what she wants. In the novel's preface, the self-identified Daniel Defoe explains that "the original of this Story is put into . . . modester Words than she told it at first," such that while giving Moll "leave to speak," the author also asserts his authority as her editor, the supervising intelligence that not only introduces her tale but also "wrap[s] it up . . . clean," "finishing [it, and] . . . put[ting] . . . it into a Dress fit to be seen."<sup>24</sup> Her memoirs are one more punitively confined space in which she is disciplined and objectified by the corrective and closural force of a (male) Other, who spruces her up before sending her out into circulation—this time on the literary market, where she will be ravaged by readers, placed in their turn in the position of rapist or john. The form-fitting frock into which Moll's narrative is squeezed thus reveals the obscene contours of the closural tactics of the English novel, whose compulsory domestic settlement—the housewife's attire—comes also to look like the get-up of the prostitute, with the heroine the object of the market and the marriage market in turn.

Moll makes two journeys to America: once with her third husband, and again after her (re)incarceration in Newgate, when her apparent repentance entitles her to transportation rather than execution. This latter turn of events, by which she follows her mother's trajectory from Newgate to America, is a literal return rather than a fresh start, a reenactment of both her own first voyage and her mother's and a clear indication of the repetition compulsion under which she labors. Even her reunion with her mother during her first trip is, manifestly, a meeting of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, Moll having unwittingly married her own brother back in England—the transgression of the incest taboo, that primordial law and institutor of legality, conditioning rather than abrogating the disciplinary mechanisms at the heart of the narrative. It should be clear here that of the many things that Newgate represents, one of them is the force of psychic repetition and the Oedipal organization of the early personality. The police force at the center of the text, as well as the guilt pervading it, is tied to the prohibition against incest: that primal "no" in the life of the individual whose liberty is always curtailed by the existence of parents, the child's first institution. If Newgate here is anything but a gateway to the new, the same is true of the so-called New World itself, America appearing as not only the site of Moll's personal return of the repressed but also a regime of transported criminals who have been "burnt in the Hand" with the felon's mark, material evidence of the transmission to the New World of the Old World's misdeeds. Though Moll's mother reassures her that "some of the best Men in this Country are burnt in the Hand," those

24. *Ibid.*, v–1. On Defoe as Moll's editor, see Thorell Porter Tsomondo, *The Not So Blank "Blank Page": The Politics of Narrative and the Woman Narrator in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (New York, 2007), 13.



marked hands are reminders not only of the barriers to personal regeneration and moving on but ultimately of the elusiveness of a workable communal order.<sup>25</sup> Even America is haunted by its history, forever marked by the crimes of its founding fathers (and mothers).

I would like now to address the question of what, in the broadest terms, is holding Moll and her narrative back. It was Watt who made famous the notion that Defoe, along with Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, invented literary realism: the specificity of person, time, and place that would become the hallmark of the developing novel form.<sup>26</sup> Novel theorists frequently consider this commitment to verisimilitude an aspect of novelistic freedom, demonstrating the genre's ability to chronicle the randomness of lived experience alongside its various acts of patterning. But Defoe's text belies the sturdiness of that theoretical duality, since here the novel functions under a reality principle that delimits the realm of the possible, and realism fetters the subject to the "intransigence of materials":<sup>27</sup> the physical scars and remainders that preclude transfiguration for both the individual and the collective.<sup>28</sup> The constraints of material reality and realistic detail are conveyed in an episode toward the beginning of the novel in which Moll filches a bundle from a child: "I . . . turn[']d] . . . into *Charter-house-Lane* . . . then cross'd into *Bartholomew-Close*, so into *Little Britain*, and thro' the *Blue-Coat-Hospital* into *Newgate Street*."<sup>29</sup> Of the entire book, this topographic survey gives us what is perhaps the most concrete view of the real urban scene. The termination of the passage, and of Moll's passage, in yet another Newgate speaks volumes about her position as a character imprisoned in a realist novel, a form whose adherence to reality amounts to bondage to the facts of matter, a drive toward endings that are determined by beginnings, and a route that always leads back to one prison or another.

*The Comely Cook* is a text that does not appear to have undergone much editing. Unlike the disciplinary force that tidies Moll's extravagance, Chulkov's author figure trumpets the laxity of the narrative, which he identifies as an element of a material universe in which "everything . . . is perishable . . .

25. Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 60.

26. Watt was not the first to point out this quality of Defoe's prose: according to Maximilian Novak, it was Sir Walter Scott who first noticed the "general charm . . . [in] the romances of De Foe" that was conferred by the "appearance of reality to the incidents which he narrates." Quoted in Maximilian E. Novak, *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe's Fiction* (Lincoln, 1983), 9. From the persona of Moll Flanders herself, who most likely was based on one or another female criminal from Defoe's time (such as Moll King, Moll Harvey, Mary Godson, and Moll Cutpurse), to the affinities between his style and the scientific prose of the Royal Society in the eighteenth century, Defoe's novels appear firmly grounded in the material world and the here and now. See Gregory Durston, *Moll Flanders: An Analysis of an Eighteenth-Century Criminal Biography* (Chichester, 1997), 5.

27. Carol Houlihan Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), 6.

28. Hence Virginia Woolf's claim that Defoe's "matter-of-fact precision" is characterized by a quality of "dryness" or "dull[ness]" and Martin Price's sense of the "bleakness of Defoe's world of measurables." Virginia Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," in *The Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, 1984), 15–16; Martin Price, "Defoe as Comic Artist," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views: Daniel Defoe* (New York, 1987), 37.

29. Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 172. Emphases in the original.

mutable . . . and . . . decaying[ing]” as well as a document in which “all of my errors” are readily apparent.<sup>30</sup> There is a palpable sense here of the pleasures of mess, of the refusal of mastery, and of errors which no one intends to correct. In part, this exuberant spirit is related to Chulkov’s place in the Russian literary establishment of the latter half of the eighteenth century, which saw prose narrative—previously, in D. E. Budgen’s words, “a bastard, orphaned and outlawed literary type”—challenge the more rigid, convention-bound Russian classicists for literary ascendancy.<sup>31</sup> In Martona’s story, the bastards, orphans, and outlaws do indeed have their day, and this is accomplished in part thanks to the author’s refusal to squeeze Martona into formal literary dressings. Novelistic efforts of literary liberation thus align themselves with a loosening in the realm of gender difference, whose injunctions are, at least in some part, evacuated of their force. The story then traces a wandering trajectory that, unlike Moll’s repetitive embarkments, moves perpetually forward, and whose ending is so lacking in closure that some scholars have assumed that the text is a fragment of what was intended to be a larger work.<sup>32</sup> If Moll’s enclosure in a tightly patterned narrative is one manifestation of her ontological imprisonment, the unregulated inconclusiveness of Martona’s story may be seen as an epiphenomenon of her liberation from those very forms of narrative, social, material, and psychic stricture.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, unlike the hulking police force in Defoe’s text, civil supervisory

30. Mikhail Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha, ili Pokhozhdenie razvratnoi zhenshchiny, in Povesti razumnye i zamyslovaty: Populiarnaia bytovaia proza XVIII veka* (Moscow, 1989), 288–89.

31. D. E. Budgen, “The Concept of Fiction in Eighteenth-Century Russian Letters,” in Anthony Glenn Cross, ed., *Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth Century: Contacts and Comparisons* (Newtonville, 1979), 65. It is generally agreed that throughout much of the early eighteenth century, prose writing, as Moiseeva and Serman write, “occupied a second-tier position.” Moiseeva and Serman, “Rozhdenie romana v russkoi literature XVIII veka,” 1:40. According to Irwin R. Titunik, “During approximately the first half of the eighteenth century prose fiction, though produced in quantity, was considered of little or no account by the leaders of sophisticated Russian literary culture. . . . [But] this attitude began to be challenged toward the end of the 1750’s . . . [when] the proponents of novel writing directed their efforts toward establishing the right of prose fiction to be regarded as a legitimate branch of high, serious literary culture in Russia.” Irwin R. Titunik, “Mikhail Chulkov’s ‘Double Talk’ Narrative (*Skazka o rozhdenii taftianoi mushki*),” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 31. To Gasperetti, in their efforts to elevate Russian prose and the Russian novel, Chulkov and his contemporary Komarov in particular took aim at the Russian classicists (Mikhail Lomonosov, Aleksandr Sumarokov, Vasilii Trediakovskii), whose convention-bound rigidity and dutiful moralizing bespoke, in their estimation, a slavish imitation of foreign models that were “incapable of representing Russian cultural reality.” Gasperetti, *Rise of the Russian Novel*, 4.

32. On the question of the finished or unfinished nature of *The Comely Cook*, see Alexander Levitsky, “Mikhail Chulkov’s *The Comely Cook*: The Symmetry of a Hoax,” *Russian Literature Triquarterly: Eighteenth-Century Issue*, part 2, no. 21 (1988): 107; Harold B. Segel, introduction to Harold B. Segel, ed., *Literature of Eighteenth-Century Russia: A History and Anthology* (New York, 1967), 26; and Gasperetti, *Rise of the Russian Novel*, 78.

33. Gasperetti for one understands the “noticeabl[e] . . . lack” of authority figures in Chulkov’s novel—the extent to which Martona “refuses to enforce a punitive view of the world or dictate how readers should interpret the text” and the novel’s championing of “freedom and pleasure against the more austere demands of constancy, authority, and truth”—as representative of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, whose prevalence, he argues,

institutions in Chulkov's work are mentioned only in the context of their ineffectualness. Near the beginning of the novel, Martona has embarked on a romantic liaison as part of a transaction that is described as an "auction," but "since such contracts are never registered with the police [в полиции], it remained binding . . . without any official notarization."<sup>34</sup> We have here indication of the radically different system informing the Russian novel—one in which the nonexistence, or the ostentatious impotence, of civil authority stands in for a refusal of judicial, domestic, psychic, and narrative resolution. *Pace* Martona's claim, there is nothing "binding" about this early attachment, and indeed she proceeds among her successive male partners without any of the discomfort that plagues Moll. As we will see, this demurral to internalized policing is related to a certain freedom from the impositions of Augustinian spiritual autobiography, as both a narrative model prescribing a necessary conclusion and a behavioral ethic demanding detailed self-revelation. The openness of Martona's future is further matched by her freedom from any anchoring to the past: "I told him so well about my family," she writes of an effort to deceive a lover, "that neither he nor I could tell for certain what my origins were."<sup>35</sup> Here, the facts of her history are obscured in the act of storytelling, any fixity of origin effectively nullified, and the injunctions of male authors and male audiences alike evaded. In this instance, Martona appears virtually to author herself.

Put briefly, *The Comely Cook* lacks the anchoring node of Newgate, a conceptual absence that accounts for the works' divergences on all levels: in the personae, trajectories, and physical movements of the heroines; in the shapes of the pictured communities; and in the narratives' construction. Though Martona does get locked in a dungeon, the incarceration is neither conclusive nor lawful; an act of personal revenge rather than a grand social and psychic reckoning, it is a temporary predicament from which she quickly escapes. Whereas the prison is a multivalent cultural icon in *Moll Flanders* (the emblem of a regulated society, the burden of heritage, the punishments of conscience, original sin, and the closural requirements of novelistic narrative),

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would become a characteristic of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Gasperetti, *Rise of the Russian Novel*, 106–12.

34. Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha*, 292. It is worth reviewing here the meaning of the word *politsiia* in the context of eighteenth-century Russia. The first incarnation of an independent, specialized police force was introduced to Russia by Peter the Great; although police functions had existed before his rule (mostly informal law enforcement supervised by elected civilians), it was only with the Petrine reforms that a specialized police bureau under a police chief—charged with such matters as supervising building construction, maintaining street cleanliness, pursuing loiterers and drunks, ensuring fire safety, and the like—came into being. The first organized police forces were established in St. Petersburg in 1718 and in Moscow in 1721; in the provinces, specialized police organizations did not emerge until later. Under Catherine II, there was a general relaxation of investigative methods, but even under her reign there was a significant police presence, especially concerning matters of censorship and, of interest for the present discussion, prostitution. On the history of the police in Russia, see V. M. Kuritsyn, ed., *Istoriia politzii Rossii: Kratkii istoricheskii ocherki i osnovnye dokumenty. Uchebnoe posobie* (Moscow, 1998); and S. P. Zviagin, A. B. Konovalov, and S. V. Makarchuk, *Politsiia i militsiia Rossii v XVIII–nachale XX vv.* (Kemerovo, 2001).

35. Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha*, 306.

Martona's cell is divested of cultural, psychic, and textual weight; its permeability matches not only the amorphousness of the narrative form but also the leniency of a disorderly community populated by many so-called comely cooks. Hence, the titles of the two novels are instructive. *Moll Flanders*, precisely in privileging the individual heroine, also represents the dramas of generational affiliation that underwrite her binding to a specific criminal lineage. By contrast, *The Comely Cook* positions Martona as one of a band of sisters: an unregulated collective whose communal embrace rests on a reciprocal refusal to distinguish between citizens and criminals and, as we will see, between exclusive kinship groups.

Thus, in *The Comely Cook*, whose universe is absent the structuring principle that creates both a subject population and a well-made text, we are presented with a collection of equals or peers, a horizontal community unburdened by the hierarchies that determine social and familial law. Conspicuously missing, for example, are any parent-child relations; this is a text without parents, in which the absence of civil and parental authority is presented as structurally and reciprocally interimplicated. Whereas Moll is ensnared in patterns of repetition that the mother-daughter bond both determines and figures, the inhabitants of Martona's community are emancipated from the burdens of origin, inheritance, and genealogical determination. In other words, this is emphatically *not* an Oedipal plot documenting the criminality of the child who, with the respect to her parents, desires what is illegal because it is illegal, thus creating legality and impossible desire as dialectical correlates. Instead, as we will see, the foundational family position in Chulkhov's text is that of the sibling, and my suggestion here is that this particular social organization has bearing on narrative form. Just as textual organization, in the English novel, was an Oedipal symptom, narrative disarray in the Russian text is aligned with a flattening of the social as well as the absence of the Oedipal plot. That something more is possible in the status of primordial desire in Chulkov's text may be further borne out by the text's refusal of the marriage plot, that trajectory meant to remediate or at least cover up early Oedipal crimes.

Yet *The Comely Cook* is not a free-for-all or an unending picaresque; rather, it offers a certain amount of the formal roundedness that tends to be associated with novelistic narrative. That the text's organizing fulcrum is precisely the dungeon is of particular note.<sup>36</sup> As J. G. Garrard points out, it is in her cell that Martona witnesses the flourishing of love and generosity (from Akhal' and Svidal', who collaborate in her release), sentiments that inform her behavior throughout the rest of the story.<sup>37</sup> The episode in the dungeon is also a pivotal point in the plot, the jail serving as the birthplace of the love triangle between Martona and her two rescuers. Incarceration thus not only results in both literal and emotional liberation but also represents a "turn-

36. In "Narrative Technique in Chulkov's *Prigozhaia Povarikha*," *Slavic Review* 27, no. 4 (December 1968), J. G. Garrard speaks of the "subtle transformation in her character" (561) after her experience in prison. Viktor Shklovskii also notes that "she becomes different" and refers to the "change in her relationship to life [перемена жизнеотношения героини]." V. B. Shklovskii, *Chulkov i Levshin* (Leningrad, 1933), 116.

37. Garrard, *Mikhail Chulkov*, 133; Garrard, "Narrative Technique," 561.

ing point” whose narrative and spiritual momentum is generated precisely via the absence of enforced confession or repentance.<sup>38</sup> Whereas the culture of enforcement represented by Newgate guarantees the criminal obduracy of the captured subject, the Russian prison, via this softening of its disciplinary effect, is a genuine penitentiary, just as the novel’s permissive narrative ethic ushers in the achievement of a loose formal coherence. We might think of the Dostoevskian narrative here, in which incarceration is so often the prelude to spiritual rebirth. If in later Russian texts a certain cultural counterpart to Newgate is indeed established in the conceptual omnipresence of Siberia, it is precisely as a space of opening up rather than closing in—sometimes, as in the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*, a literally wide-open landscape and an environment that generates narrative and spiritual possibility and uncertainty.

Thus, Martona’s “conversion” gets things moving without guaranteeing any particular conclusion, her trajectory a series of ups and downs in which neither the heights nor depths are a definitive achievement. In this context, it is the demand that the conversionary experience provide the final word on the human personality that Moll labors under in the latter sections of her story—an expectation that accompanies the complex set of cultural assumptions that inform Defoe’s text, particularly in its imbrication of the mechanisms of western Christian spiritual autobiography. Many scholars have noted what John Freccero has called “the definitiveness of Augustine’s conversion” in his *Confessions*, the episode under the fig tree marking the story as “complete” by allowing the passage from “a narrative of empirical events to a closure that [is] . . . ideal, conjectural or speculative.”<sup>39</sup> Undoubtedly, this linear progression toward a fixed conclusion is based in part on Augustine’s complex linguistic and literary theology, whereby God is equivalent to the accumulation of meaning at the end of a linear, syntagmatic chain, “the ultimate end of signification . . . whereby all things may be understood.”<sup>40</sup> But it is also an epiphenomenon, as Freccero tells us, of the text’s Oedipal underpinnings, as a narrative whose emphasis on “oedipal separation” (and the subject’s conflicts with various father figures) is mirrored in the formal separation “between the self as protagonist and the self as narrator.”<sup>41</sup> Closure, the linear progression of language, retrospective enlightenment, and Oedipal guilt go hand in hand in the Augustinian model and determine a narrative trajectory that has contributed enormously to the formation of the western self—its constitution and the shape of its narration reciprocally intertwined. Peter Brooks has claimed that the practice of confession, adopted by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, represents the institution of requisite moral cleansing in the Roman Catholic Church as well as the enactment of “moral discipline”: as a practice that “works both to console and to police,” the confessional is the place where “the

38. Garrard, *Mixail Čulkov*, 133.

39. John Freccero, “Autobiography and Narrative,” in Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery, eds., *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford, 1986), 18; Eugene Vance, “The Functions and Limits of Autobiography in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Poetics Today* 5, no. 2 (1984): 401.

40. John Freccero, “The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch’s Poetics,” *Diacritics* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 35.

41. Freccero, “Autobiography and Narrative,” 19.



religious model and the legal model” may be seen to “emerge . . . in a reciprocal influence.”<sup>42</sup> Though St. Augustine’s *Confessions* precedes the practice of oral confession as Moll would have been subjected to it, then, in its qualities of retrospective self-reproach and its insistence on the definitiveness of the conversionary moment, Augustine’s text may also be seen as a contributor to the birth of Foucault’s “bête d’aveu”—the western legal, confessing selfhood to which Defoe’s novel testifies.<sup>43</sup>

Such, then, are some of the influences informing the confessional shape and closural regime of the early English novel. Without the influence of the Augustinian model (or the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods that saw its absorption into western individualism), Russia developed its own indigenous form of spiritual autobiography whose characteristics are instructive for this study. Though the seventeenth-century *Life of the Archpriest Avvakum* is hardly a perfect representative of the *zhitie* genre, its place in the development of the Russian literary canon and in the formation of Russian self-telling is comparable to Augustine’s in the west. It also bears the marks of undisciplined narration and unpoliced subjectivity to which Martona is later privy. Avvakum makes reference throughout the text to his “wanderings,” a term that refers not only to his physical peregrinations but also to a narrative method that V. V. Vinogradov has called “a guileless oral improvisation,” similar to *skaz* and characterized by “spontaneous movement.”<sup>44</sup> In this sense, Russia’s oral culture appears a constitutive factor in its canon’s characteristic textual looseness, with Avvakum’s itinerary, like Martona’s, comprising a zigzag alternation of fortune and misfortune that breaks off rather than achieving closure.<sup>45</sup> We might compare here this jagged oscillation, as well as this chatty narrative disorder, to the centripetal force of Augustine’s tale, which draws all events into a single conversionary moment that then, retrospectively, reveals the ordering principle guiding the life whose path had appeared aimless. (It might also be noted that in the realm of Russian culture, Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii have characterized these kinds of binary alternations as an aspect of Russian Orthodoxy’s rejection of Purgatory, the

42. Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago, 2001), 2–3.

43. *Ibid.*, 5.

44. *Zhitie protopopa Avvakuma, im samim napisannoe i drugie ego sochineniia*, ed. M. Gordon (Moscow, 1959), 90; V. V. Vinogradov, “On the Tasks of Stylistics: Observations Regarding the Style of *The Life of the Archpriest Avvakum*,” in *Archpriest Avvakum: The Life Written by Himself*, trans. Kenneth N. Brostrom (Ann Arbor, 1979), 120. Avvakum himself refers to his narrative throughout as a form of “conversation” and “gabbing.”

45. In Priscilla Hunt’s words, Avvakum’s narrative comprises a “series of symbolic deaths . . . from which he is always reborn.” Priscilla Hart Hunt, “The Autobiography of the Archpriest Avvakum: The Outer Limits of the Narrative Icon” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1979), 11, 17. Hunt further considers Avvakum’s successive resurrections, whereby grace descends during a moment of “sensual disorientation,” as instantiating the apophatic orientation of Russian Orthodoxy, with its emphasis on “divine unknowing” as well as its “non-rational path to union with God” (85). This is a God, moreover, who is conceived “primarily as motion or process” and thus exists at a far remove from the retrospective enlightenment that marks Augustine’s arrival at a static deity, perched at the end of a sentence. Hunt, “The Autobiography of the Archpriest Avvakum: Structure and Function,” *Ricerche Slavistiche* 22–23, nos. 22–23 (1975–76): 169.

space of labored working-through whose ideational significance, in western self-tellings, is evident.)<sup>46</sup> In his discussion of Augustine's text, Freccero contrasts the "linear, conflictual, and . . . oedipal" male life story with the less linear, less separation-oriented female self-telling, as represented in the "perpetual series of ups and downs" that composes, for example, St. Theresa of Avila's autobiography.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, Avvakum's and Martona's narratives appear distinctly gendered, not only in the raggedness of their trajectories, but also in the communal emphasis in each, and one may wonder whether there is something indigenously feminine to the Russian life story and its novelization, just as the trajectory of the English novel's heroine may paradoxically conform to an inherently masculine model.<sup>48</sup>

I turn now to questions of capital, since if one of the prime arenas in which novels give play to the contours of subjectivity is their presentation of the marketplace, then the economics of *The Comely Cook* bear out the various forms of laxity that I have been elaborating in the Russian system. If in *Moll Flanders* larceny, the offense that lands the heroine in jail signals the legally punishable underbelly of capitalist regulation and commodity fetishism, in Chulkov's chaotic marketplace, property changes hands freely and wealth is a temporary state. Thus, despite the manifold financial indiscretions enacted in the text, theft—the procuring of what is properly and lawfully someone else's—is an ontological impossibility. For every instance of loss in the novel, there are corresponding examples of good fortune, with the community apparently participating in Martona's brand of transactional insouciance. One of the most prevalent words in her vocabulary is *раздавать* (to distribute, to spread around, to give out to many), and one senses that Martona both gives and receives with pleasure, in both the commercial and sensual sense. Where Moll is born into a system of symmetrical repayment and debt, Martona's environment is a space of bounty, excess, and gift.<sup>49</sup>

46. Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspensky, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (to the End of the Eighteenth Century)," in Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone-Nakhimovsky, eds., *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* (Ithaca, 1985), 30–66.

47. Freccero, "Autobiography and Narrative," 18.

48. Avvakum's text, for one, is a composite work that opens itself up to the voice of the other (Avvakum's spiritual father, Epifanii, who contributes a paragraph mid-text); that ends on a plea for dialogic response; and that, as Hunt explains, centers on a complex process by which multiple textual and metatextual subjectivities are metaphorically conflated. In Hunt's telling, Avvakum's efforts to achieve cosmic wholeness even see him "merge with [both] . . . Christ and the Mother of God," such that he comes to virtually "encompass . . . the nuclear family—mother, son and father." Hunt, "The Autobiography of the Archpriest Avvakum," 18. This is hardly a male story of Oedipal separation; rather, an ethic of intersubjective incorporation is implicitly represented as the workings of a womb, with Avvakum's progress through the narrative equivalent to "giving symbolic birth to himself on increasingly transcendent levels." Hunt, "Structure and Function," 159.

49. This subject touches, *mutatis mutandis*, on Jacques Derrida's famous disquisition on the gift as it necessarily exists outside of any economy of equivalence or one-to-one give and take. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago, 1992). It further relates to a broad philosophical discourse on the gift, reciprocity, gratitude, and the like, carried out by thinkers such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Georg Simmel, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, and Marcel Mauss, that is beyond the scope of this article but relevant to it.

The most extravagant gesture of this sort is Akhal's declared intent to transfer his estate to Martona, his original filching of her possessions early in the novel now rectified and the value of the property having increased tenfold in the interim. Given the uncertainty of Martona's romantic future, discussed below, it hardly appears that the text will require her to pay him back, so to speak. Think of the difference between this picture and Austen's novels, in which a woman never gets her manor without giving something up. In the Russian context, the possibility of possession without loss exists in tandem with the acceptance of radical ontological dispossession. No matter that Akhal' may be lying and Martona merely wishing, or that acquisitions in this novel are rarely kept; having and holding are not the point. In this sense, the recuperative trajectory of Akhal's offering—the bestowal acting as a revision of his earlier appropriation—is a red herring, since the gift guarantees precisely nothing. There is also, as we have seen, no “sprucing up” of Martona's messy narrative—there is no one pimping her out—such that, as opposed to the reader's private violation of Moll, our experience of this genuinely loose and baggy Russian text participates in the scene of communal enjoyment that Martona fosters through the gift of a body that is used but not capitalized on. Norman O. Brown, following the Freudian association, has linked the anality of “the prudential calculating character”—and the extent to which this “partial impulse” inevitably becomes a “tyrant organizer of the whole of human life”—with the “morbidity” of modern western civilization.<sup>50</sup> The erotically charged world of Chulkov's novel may thus represent precisely the “nonmorbidity” economy that Brown for one seeks as a source of western reanimation: “Erotic rather than (anal) sadistic in aim,” whose means are not “economizing but erotic exuberance,” this system is “based on the whole body and not just a part; that is to say . . . based on the polymorphously perverse body.”<sup>51</sup> If there is something regressive in the Russian novel's presentation of an anticapitalist economy as it is associated with infantile polymorphous sexuality, then this is all the better, since polymorphous perversity, that dis- or pre-organized form of sexuality, touches on utopia.

Early in the novel, we witness an episode in which Martona, having exchanged a lover for his master, boasts that “amazingly, one night transformed me into a lady and mistress [госпожю и повелительницею] over my former master [бывшим командиром].”<sup>52</sup> Unlike Moll's frustrated yearning for gentility, Martona, by her own declaration, experiences an instantaneous transubstantiation: a social leap enacted by fiat, or perhaps by games of dress-up, since much of what allows her to consider herself a lady is the finery with which she ornaments herself. If the promises of upward mobility offered by early capitalism, with its vast accumulations of stuff, are countered in *Moll Flanders* by an entrenched social hierarchy that reveals all those possessions to be material and psychic obstruction, the imagined amorphousness of the

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For a collection of such thinking, see Aafke E. Komt, ed., *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam, 1996).

50. Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, 1959), 235.

51. *Ibid.*, 236.

52. Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha*, 294.

social realm in *The Comely Cook* makes room for the fantasy that miraculous ascents—escalations that are the obverse and corollary of radical lack—might be accomplished overnight. Certainly, the takeaway from this social picture is partly dubious, since what is revealed above all is the essential vacuity of a post-Petrine secular culture that just might allow such absurd movements. Yet Russia has always had a simultaneously self-castigating and self-aggrandizing vision of its own forms of lack—at once a source of shame and an element of national promise, as well as a cultural instantiation of Russian Orthodoxy’s particular attachment to the kenotic Christ, who empties himself. Chulkov’s text appears to look forward to the likes of Gogol’ in its participation in this particular national drama. Lack, after all—from Plato to Jacques Lacan—is the prerequisite of desire, and when social ranking is not a longstanding or indigenous phenomenon, no one’s place is fixed at birth. One might glimpse a radically democratic and utopian urge inherent in *samozvanchestvo*: upward mobility supercharged and the Russian form of dress-up carried out in the political arena.

Above all, Moll is constricted by language: by the wrapping- and sprucing-up of her editor; by the intransigence of Newgate, as much a linguistic as it is a social, psychic, and physical construct; even by her very name, which, as a pseudonym invented to sustain her liberty, winds up both revealing and enacting her entrapment in plots of others’ making.<sup>53</sup> In *Moll Flanders*, language, as an entrenched system, creates criminality as much as do prisons; thus, the child-heroine’s incorrect use of *Gentlewoman* early in the novel only underscores the word’s fixity of meaning in the British cultural imagination, the strictures of language and of social class interimplicated. By contrast, the imagined indeterminacy of the Russian social structure is reflected in Martona’s vague vocabulary when she speaks of her overnight social ascent: *повелительница*, *командир*, and *госпожа* carry a variety of connotations ranging from the military to the regal to the sacred.<sup>54</sup> Martona exists in a culture of verbal lability and a text infused with a spirit of linguistic play, in which language, in its inability to signify with exactitude, is a genuinely creative medium. Her exotic, un-Russian name, for instance, represents nothing like the fettering to reality to which Moll is condemned by her supposedly invented pseudonym; as Alexander Levitsky writes, Martona’s name rather testifies to the linguistic emancipation offered by a work composed

53. Though Moll appears to choose her pseudonym herself, its appropriation is in fact overdetermined. Not only is “Flanders” the trade name of the embargoed lace whose theft landed Moll’s mother in jail, but “Moll Flanders” is also the signifier assigned to her, in an act apparently unrelated to her own self-naming, by the Newgate convicts, which coincidence eventually marks her as a repeat offender and leads to her felony conviction. Meta-textually, the name is also bestowed by the real-life criminals on whom her persona is based (see footnote 26).

54. See the entries for these words at *Tolkovy slovar’ russkogo iazyka V. Dalia* ON-LINE, at [vidahl.holm.ru](http://vidahl.holm.ru) (last accessed May 30, 2015). For more discussion of questions of social class and rank in Russia (especially as compared to England), see Dominic Lieven, ed., *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 2, *Imperial Russia, 1689–1917* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006), 228–29. For an exploration of the Table of Ranks as it affected the composition of the Russian nobility, see Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature* (Stanford, 1999), 56.

of “*imaginary* (fictitious, irrelevant, nonexistent) *words* (*nebyl'nye slova*) or simply *lies*.”<sup>55</sup> It is possible here to create something new with language, to lie and get away with it. Thus, the proverbs that Martona inserts throughout her account—discursive enactments that are as close as the novel comes to an articulation of cultural or psychic policing—represent the products not of superego or social imperative but rather of an environment in which no voice is authoritative and one can do what one wants with words. That Martona appears to invent many of these sayings out of thin air testifies to the creative freedom she is able to assert amid this linguistic bedlam, even under the guise of social obeisance.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, with respect to creativity conceived as fertility—that is, the biological production of novelty—the texts are positioned as paradoxical correlates. Moll’s compulsive childbearing leaves her a barren woman, with little to show for her labors. The one child she does not discard is both her son and her nephew: a profound testament to the imagined impossibility of putting forth the perfectly new, with the radical originality of the early novel genre belied, perhaps, by the sad fate of newborns generally within the text. Martona’s lack of children, on the other hand, figures both her genuine and enduring promiscuousness and her productive potential, her childbearing years existing in an eagerly anticipated future. Thus, the two novels are also opposed in their paradoxical constructions of domestic settlement: Moll’s avowed pursuit of “a settled State of Living” appears to be a reaction-formation against her fear of imprisonment, while Martona’s uncertain domestic future leaves open the possibility of a homecoming free of all determining factors.<sup>57</sup> Martona ends the story with not one but two potential romantic partners—after her release, she remains faithful both to Akhal’ and Svidal’ in alternation—with the love triangle at the conclusion figuring the simultaneity of family happiness and continued narrative potential and with pleasure conspicuously unfettered from traditional kinship arrangements.

Early in *The Comely Cook*, one of Martona’s lovers speaks more than he knows when he remarks that “I had . . . a brother, who . . . didn’t look a bit like me,” for “one father does not always produce similar children.”<sup>58</sup> The unwitting admission of maternal impropriety, in this explosively libidinal milieu, is accompanied by a vision of a flexible and generously extended family circle in which all offspring, however their arrival is explained, are embraced and children are not replicas of their parents. We begin to see here that the Russian novel offers the potential joy of relaxed standards, as well as a deconstruction of the Oedipal structures by which our lives are circumscribed, a freedom of affiliation made possible by the absence of overbearing parental figures or the primacy of filial ties. Unlike the hereditary criminality that marks Moll as her mother’s daughter, here maternal malfeasance liberates the younger generation from repetition and permits the undetermined flourishing of lateral associations. One wonders whether the feebleness of

55. Levitsky, “Mikhail Chulkov’s *The Comely Cook*,” 101. Emphasis in the original.

56. For an in-depth discussion of Martona’s use of proverbs, see *ibid.*

57. Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 90.

58. Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha*, 183.



parental models may indeed be precisely what vouchsafes the sibling embrace as it is represented in Chulkov's text and, perhaps, the later nineteenth-century Russian novel generally, with its constitutional and utopian preoccupation with sibling and brotherly love, often conceived as a counter to Oedipal conflict.<sup>59</sup>

It is also in this context that we may look at one of the more peculiar episodes in Chulkov's narrative, in which Martona dresses Akhal' as a woman and claims him as her sister, announcing, "I began to call my sister husband, and she [called] me wife."<sup>60</sup> This is a reversal of Moll's unwitting marriage to her brother, in which the romantic attachment proves incestuous and hereditary endowment reveals itself as the curse of never moving on. In Martona and Akhal's case, what appears to be an affiliation based on family likeness (the love of two biological sisters) is in fact predicated on difference (the love of a man and a woman from separate lineages), and the sibling bond is imbued with all the forward-looking potential of a budding romance. If Moll's incest is a foundational moment for the Oedipal underpinnings of the English novel, with its characteristic demand for and interest in heterosexual marriage and inheritance, perhaps Martona and Akhal's polymorphous antics, like the ménage à trois of the novel's final scene, are an explosion of the very notion of a fixed family circle, with all of its conflicts, prohibitions, categorizations, and taboos. We see here another element of the lawlessness of the Russian novel as it is associated with untraditional kinship arrangements, to the extent that, for Lacan, the Symbolic—that register of Law, binding desire to the Oedipus complex—is derived from the pulsations of the incest taboo. Without that taboo or the parental figures that condition it, law loses its hold. Judith Butler has called these slidings the "utopian effort . . . to reconfigure kinship at some distance from the oedipal scene," an endeavor that she associates with the ministrations of Antigone, whose "confound[ed] . . . position within kinship" makes her a potential corrective to the reign of Oedipus and the assumption, stemming from his legacy, that the incest taboo sanctions only certain kinds of (heteronormative) family structures.<sup>61</sup> As the daughter of incest, Antigone reveals the contingent character of kinship terms precisely by rendering them unintelligible, and in this sense, the corollary to the English novel's Oedipal preoccupations is a certain Antigonean orientation to the Russian novel, in which it appears that the mess—on the discursive level that aligns the system of language, law, and kinship—has, in a sense, already been made. In other words, I suggest that in some deep way, in these texts, *the incest has already occurred*.

This suggestion is undoubtedly speculative, but it may articulate a basis for the kinds of unlockings that the Russian novel seems to offer as a matter of its constitutional backdrop. The kinship play and gender-bending involved in these shiftings may, furthermore, speak to an element of liberation

59. For a discussion of the role of siblings and sibling love in the novels of Tolstoi and Dostoevskii in particular, see Anna A. Berman, "Siblings: The Path to Universal Brotherhood in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2012).

60. Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha*, 93.

61. Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York, 2000), 20, 2.

not only from social restriction but from the very encumbrances of the body as material enclosure and symptomatic testament to the past: Martona escapes from the dungeon with no physical reminders (“совсем не было тех знаков”), no scarring or branding of the hand.<sup>62</sup> It is here that we recognize the full force of the Russian Orthodox heritage, with its investment in matter as the location of the divine, and a faith in which the physicality of the human body is eminently transformable. As Christoforos Stavropoulos writes, “If people were only spirit and consequently sinned as spirits, they could not be redeemed since the spirit cannot change. . . . But human beings also have bodies. And [so] they are changeable and can be transformed.”<sup>63</sup> In the Russian Orthodox imagination, corporeality, even or especially at its most debased, is precisely the condition for transfiguration, and in this sense the narrator’s early announcement that “everything on earth is mutable” and “decaying” comes to look less like impiety than like a faith that locates potential in physical abjection and grotesquerie. We might return here to the comparison between Augustine and Avvakum, since if Augustine’s squeamishness about the body and the sexual self is a constitutive element in his narrative’s closural demand that conversion leave the body behind for good, Avvakum’s text evinces an embrace of corporeality as inherently productive—a pathway to God.<sup>64</sup> Hence, he equates resurrection with corporeal mutability, specifically with the vision of “being eaten by birds and beasts” and incorporated into their bodies, and he palpably delights in open bodies and their leaking contents—the notion that “human bodily processes such as eating, defecation, and symbolic copulation” represent “the self-regenerating processes of the world.”<sup>65</sup> The body is further embraced not only for its moments of degradation but also for its sensual heights, whereby “ascent to God (in prayer)” is akin to “a sensual caress by an angel,” and the experience of grace is a sexual thrill.<sup>66</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin’s grotesque appears to be a direct successor of such fascinations, despite the necessary suppression to which his Orthodox influences were subjected.

This is a passion for the body and its potentialities, then, that becomes translated into Martona’s corporeal exuberance as well as into the Russian novelistic tradition generally, and if this is all good news for sexuality, then it may be female sexuality and the quintessentially open female body in particular that is privileged. This is evident in the novels under discussion, since if Martona shares with Moll a dependence on men that drives the narrative forward, she is at least spared the problem of ontological objectification and commodification that forecloses pleasure for the English heroine. Indeed, if

62. Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha*, 313.

63. Christoforos Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (Grand Rapids, 2003), 187.

64. Augustine turns to God for a “circumcis[ion]” of the lips, a castration that would make all his delights “chaste”; evinces horror at his own debauched, pre-conversion form, “sordid . . . deformed and squalid”; and maintains that grace descends only when “the tumult of a man’s flesh . . . cease[s].” St. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis, 2006), XI.ii, VIII.vii, IX.xi.

65. Hunt, “The Autobiography of the Archpriest Avvakum,” 84, 35.

66. *Ibid.*, 85.

the rape of the heroine—not only Moll’s metaphorical rapes but Clarissa’s literal one—was foundational for the early English novel as it documented, in part, the effects of capitalism on (female) subjectivity, the fate of the female figure in the early Russian text is considerably more cheerful: though Martona’s body is undoubtedly the object of male desire, in a cultural atmosphere in which it is the object status of the body that is its privilege, the female position as body-object may very well be a locus of grace. Hence, the notion that the two scenes in the novel that involve sojourns in the sickbed—the symbol of female submission to which Moll is subjected again and again—find *men* suffering the indignities of the flesh is multivalent: on the one hand, bodily suffering becomes a human, and not just a female, endowment, a leveling of the field; on the other hand, as the prelude to acts of forgiveness, these scenes of corporeal torment suggest that the universality of the feminine position brings with it a kind of general social softening.<sup>67</sup> The quality of mercy, displayed exclusively, and to little effect, by women in Defoe is in Chulkov’s text equally a male endowment.<sup>68</sup> If the law-and-order universe of *Moll Flanders* is bound up in the intransigence of sexual difference, then in the world of *The Comely Cook*, compassion replaces law precisely because gender roles have the same indeterminate quality as all other social, governmental, and kinship arrangements. The vision of civil law, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as an embracing mother rather than a punishing father—as well as that novel’s founding proposal that to be a good father one must become a good mother—may not be far from these imaginings.

Olia Prokopenko has hypothesized that *The Comely Cook* is a fictionalized biography of Catherine I, based primarily on what she discerns to be biographical affinities between the heroine and the historical figure.<sup>69</sup> We might argue that Martona is the least qualified person imaginable to ascend the throne—and yet, so was Catherine. Perhaps it is indeed only appropriate that in a novel in which the human trajectory is uncertain and unconstrained and in a universe whose “inconstancy,” as Martona calls it, maintains the ever-present possibility of transfiguration no less for women than for men (as well as in a cultural environment in which such sudden social leaps are a genuine historical phenomenon), Martona should be offered the possibility of that title.<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Martona becomes in Chulkov’s hands the fictional correlate of the Russian novel, that orphaned literary bastard whose desire propels it to the heights of legitimized narrative forms. As Viktor Shklovskii writes, “Chulkov’s book is . . . [the kind of] low literary genre . . . that wants to become high.”<sup>71</sup> Unlike the unambiguously criminal connotations of *loose* in

67. These sickbed scenes are Akhal’s forgiveness of Svidal’ at the former’s supposed deathbed and the merchant’s forgiveness of his wife in the interpolated tale.

68. In response to the theft from a married couple that eventually lands Moll back in Newgate, the wife is “mov’d with Compassion, and enclin’d to . . . let me go,” while the husband is intransigent. Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, 197. By contrast, in an interpolated tale toward the end of *The Comely Cook*, it is a husband who chooses not to punish his wife.

69. Olia Prokopenko, “The Real-Life Protagonist of Mikhail Chulkov’s *Comely Cook*: A Hypothesis,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 225–46.

70. Chulkov, *Prigozhaia povarikha*, 303.

71. Shklovskii, *Chulkov i Levshin*, 115.

English, the word *вольный* in Russian implies not only messy licentiousness but also liberty and transcendence. In Defoe's text, Moll may wind up settled, but she does so as both mother and aunt of the same young man, who serves as a constant reminder of the marginality and guilt conditioned by lawful society, and also as a perpetual prisoner of the female flesh, which in the New World as well as the Old seems to be preferentially afflicted. (There is no indication, for instance, that the best *women* in America have been burnt in the hand.) In Chulkov's novel, Martona's future remains unwritten. And, with an eventual flourishing of luck—or grace—whose potential is housed in the indigenous Russian disarray, she just might get to be the queen.