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# Literary Domesticity

Boris Eikhenbaum

Translated by Nora Seligman Favorov

“Literary Domesticity” [Literaturnaia domashnost'] was originally published as the third of a trio of articles in Boris Eikhenbaum’s book *My Chronicle* [Moi vremennik] (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1929). The three articles in order are “The Literary Environment” [Literaturnyi byt], “Literature and the Writer” [Literatura i pisatel'], and “Literary Domesticity.” Irwin Titunik’s translation of the first article, “The Literary Environment,” appeared in the 1971 volume *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed., pref. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, intro. Gerald Brunns (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971, 56-65); the other two articles in the three-article section appear in English translation for the first time in this issue of *Lingua Franca*.

There are two levels of notes to this article: author’s notes (i.e., Eikhenbaum’s own notes) and translator’s notes by Nora Seligman Favorov. The single author’s note appears with no additional designation, while translator’s notes are followed by (translator’s note). Titles are given in translation, followed by the transliterated Russian title at first occurrence. Italics used for emphasis in the original are preserved in the translation. Square brackets are used for the translator’s brief in-text clarifications. All translations of quoted material are by Nora Seligman Favorov unless otherwise indicated.

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There is more to the life of literature than the release of books and journals with new poetry, novels, and stories. The bookstore shelf on which a new book is placed in anticipation of a buyer is not unlike the stage on which a performer appears before an audience. In addition to this “stage” life, literature, like the other arts, has a more intimate life, not quite receding into the realm of *byt* [everyday life] in general but merely intersecting with it. A list of all books appearing within a particular time period does not give us a full understanding of literary life. To say nothing of the handwritten literature that has always existed and has at times been very typical, this list would not include the actual history of how these books came to be, although it is sometimes very important — if not for contemporaries, at least for historians. Every book has not only its destiny but also its past.<sup>1</sup>

Writers do not work in isolation but elbow-to-elbow with others of like mind, comrades of the craft, and so forth. “Circles” and “groups” form, gatherings, meetings, or just “parties” are organized. These forms of interaction change, at some times tending toward the maximally “domestic,” at others, developing in the direction of a large community or of being public — as the type of writer changes, from the dilettante poet to the professional journalist, and as the literature changes, from lyrics inscribed in an album to the newspaper feuilleton.

This is not to imply, of course, that only one form exists in any given era. Throughout history, in any era different forms and types can be discovered coexisting — their abundance and their literary and social significance changes: the mark [znak] of being historically distinctive shifts from one set to another. These forms, like everything in history, are correlative — none disappear entirely and none emerge utterly anew.

Literary circles and salons were particularly characteristic of early-nineteenth-century Russian culture. They had been a part of *byt* earlier, of course, but they did not

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to Terentianus’ famous phrase *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*, “books have their destiny depending on the reader’s capabilities” (translator’s note).

have the significance of being a phenomenon [fakt]. People's private albums had been filled with poems, but these poems never appeared outside the pages of these albums. In the early nineteenth century, these "domestic" forms of poetry, due to a distancing from the court ode, were used as a literary innovation, as a new genre, and at the same time the very forms of interactions within the circle or salon had new implications for literary *byt*. The primary poetic genre of that era was the "album" lyric, and the main type of writer was the dilettante poet who no longer aspired to become a court "bard" but did not yet need a public "stage."

For some poets of this era, "domesticity" as a position on the matter of literary *byt* took a particularly strident and principled form. One such case, for example, was lazykov. The themes of his poetry were drawn from the most minute details of domestic life. The album of Voeikova or the album of Dirina were the main "organs" for which he "worked."<sup>2</sup> About his poem "With what rapture you burn" [Kakim vostorgom ty pylaesh'] he told his brother: "Voeikova, moved by I know not what spirit of the underground kingdom, gave Tiutchev, whom you know by reputation, a glove as a memento: I have written the following poem to my fellow admirer."<sup>3</sup> Having his poetry published was of little interest to him: "If you like, fine, give Bulgarin the poem about the glove," he wrote when his brother asked if he could do so. When lazykov had to write something specially for publication, he did so reluctantly and with difficulty: "The thought that I have to wax poetic on commission [zakaz] for Almanacs could discourage my Muse." When a new request came, he replied: "It's a shame that Voeikova, for example, isn't here: then I would have been able to write something worthwhile even on commission." For him, the concepts of "literature and family life" were close and correlated. After receiving a gift from his sister, he wrote to his family: "I will thank Parasha for the tobacco pouch

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<sup>2</sup> lazykov became acquainted with Aleksandra Voeikova (known as "lazykov's muse"), niece of the poet Vasilii Zhukovskii, and Mariia Dirina during his time as a philosophy student in Dorpat (Tartu) and wrote many poems in their albums (translator's note).

<sup>3</sup> The poem, an expression of jealousy, bears a dedication to Tiutchev (translator's note).

versiffully: this gift is of such importance that it demands poetry to match it, and I am glad for an occasion to compose verse.”

When he was compelled to publish his poems (publishers and friends refused to take no for an answer), lazykov preferred to submit them to almanacs rather than journals, seeing a very distinct and fundamental difference between these types of publications. He welcomed the appearance of the [almanac] *Polar Star* [Poliarnaia zvezda]: “I like *Polar Star* very much: it largely seizes the new year of 1823 from the journalists,” while he spoke of the [journal] *Moscow Telegraph* [Moskovskii telegraf] with irritation (“The *Telegraph* is becoming worse and worse: what stupidity and lack of enlightenment in its presumptuous verdicts!”) — and this was exactly when Pushkin, breaking with “domesticity,” was fighting to promote the journal over the almanac. The difference between their two respective positions on literary *byt* is clearly reflected in an emblematic letter that lazykov wrote January 2, 1827:

Pushkin is now in Moscow; he writes to me that my “Trigorskoe” will be published in the second issue of the *Moscow Herald* [Moskovskii vestnik], and he is inviting me to submit my future poetry there.<sup>4</sup> He seems to be actively involved in that journal; I do not mean to insult the revered poet in saying it, but poets have no business taking part in a journal; the journal is to literary *byt* what the post wagon is to the material world: it is pleasant, even beneficial, for our full-blooded fellow man to take the occasional ride on it, but it is something quite different to drive it or manage its horses.

He wrote similarly to A.N. Vul'f on January 21, 1827:<sup>5</sup>

He (Pushkin) wrote to me from Moscow: he is enticing me and inveigling me to send my poems to *The Moscow Herald* and wants, it seems, to fully draw me into this monopolizer of Russian literature.<sup>6</sup> He says that it's time to smother Almanacs — and of course this future smotherer of these pygmies is *The Moscow Herald*. I will

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<sup>4</sup> “Trigorskoe” is the estate of Praskov'ia Osipova that neighbored Pushkin's Mikhailovskoe estate and where the two poets first met in 1826 (translator's note).

<sup>5</sup> Anna Vul'f was another neighbor of Pushkin's Mikhailovskoe estate and a close friend of the poet (translator's note).

<sup>6</sup> The word translated here as “monopolizer” is *edinotorgovitsa*, a made-up word based on a prefix suggesting singularity or unity and the root of the words for “commerce” or “merchant” (translator's note).

note in passing that it can hardly be claimed that the almanacs are undermining the successes of Parnassus more than the journals.<sup>7</sup>

That contemporaries did not understand or agree with one another is a historical fact. Here was a clash between differing systems of *byt*: Pushkin was moving toward professionalism, toward journalism, toward “the stage”; lazykov was defending forms of intimate “domesticity” that were archaic for the late twenties. In 1826, he gave his brother an outline of his future life: “I will permanently move, permanently live in the country, with books, with ardent desire and vigorous strength to further educate myself; I will spend my time on high-minded occupations, on sacrifices to study and the Muse, utterly free, having no circumstances and proprieties, forsaking everything but the lofty and beautiful.” Incidentally, in lazykov’s letters cited here our topical terms “commission” [zakaz] and “literary *byt*” are already evident: further confirmation of the fact that in history it is not so much the phenomena and the words that change as their significance.

A reverence for “family life” [semeistvennost'] gave way to a “salon culture” [salonnost'], which in turn lost its importance for literary *byt* in the journal era. The album once again became an entirely domestic matter, although “domesticity” itself, in new forms, has quite recently made a reappearance in our literature — if only in the books of [Vasilii] Rozanov. Symbolist circles and the poems they produced, which were infused, especially in the early years, with a literary-circle semantic [kruzhkovaia semantika], also attest to a particular degeneration of the traditions of the old literary *byt*. The Acmeists had a tendency to resurrect the album genres and create a “domestic” lyric (Anna Akhmatova).

The revolution brought with it not just new odic genres but also large-scale organizations of the labor-union sort; however the need to create other forms of literary

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<sup>7</sup> On November 21, 1826, Pushkin had written to lazykov: “Your Trigor’skoe, with your permission, will be published in our second issue of *Mosc. Her.* — are you pleased with this journal? It’s time to smother [zadushit'] the Almanacs.”

*byt* can be keenly felt. This partially explains, most likely, the heightened interest in literary memoirs and biographical material. Publicness and domesticity are correlative. The poetry read at evening gatherings and circles that is entirely “local” in nature, handwritten epigrams, parodies and improvisations, which enjoy the same legitimacy as jokes — everything that is continuously present in *byt* can at any moment be called to the service of literature.

History does not rank among the disinterested, purely theoretical sciences (if there is such a thing). Someone has jestingly called it “prophecy in reverse.” That is by no means as strange as it may sound. Yes, we prophesize in reverse as a means of figuring out the present — because we are unable to prophesize forward. We seek in the past answers and analogies — we establish the “laws” governing phenomena.

History is a special method of studying or interpreting the present.