

GEORGINA BARKER

THE 'COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP' OF IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

The 'Complicated Relationship' of Il'ia Kutik and Homer

At one point in his postmodern epic poem *Epos (Epic)*, Il'ia Kutik declares: 'u menia s Gomerom slozhnye otnosheniia!' ('I have a complicated relationship with Homer!').¹ There is perhaps some irony intended, since Homer is the literary model that Kutik places highest, and most constantly before himself in his writing, but there is also some truth in the statement, as this article will explore. It will follow the shifts in Kutik's reception and representation of Homer in his poetry from his first work *Oda na poseshchenie Belosaraiskoi kosy, chto na Azovskom more (Ode Upon Visiting the Belosaraisk Spit, Which is on the Sea of Azov, 1980-1984, henceforth Oda)*, through his lyric collections *Luk Odisseia (Odysseus' Bow)* and *Persidskie pis'ma, ili vtoraia chast' knigi Smert' Tragedii, vykhodiashchaia pervoi (Persian Letters, or the second part of the book "The Death of Tragedy", issued first, 1993-1999, henceforth Persidskie pis'ma)*, to his epic *Epos*. Throughout, how Kutik portrays his relationship with Homer reflects his current approach to his own poetry and its genre.

Kutik chooses a metaphor from a moment in Homer's *Odyssey* that holds a key position in his work to describe his poetry as syncretising, expansive, yet integral:

a poem [...] is that arrow from Odysseus' bow which passes untouched through all the parts (each strophe is a ring) and hits the target. [...]

¹ Kutik, Il'ia, *Epos*, Moscow, Nauka, 2010, p. 125. All translations my own.

GEORGINA BARKER

The rings comprise *all* cultures – Hellas, Rome, Judea, Byzantium...
'Air' [...] is taken from each of them; it's joined to the sharp air whistle of flight.²

Kutik sees classical antiquity as the pinnacle of inherited culture, and the classical, Homeric epic as the ultimate unifying, transcending genre. Connection of disparate parts of human culture into a unified whole certainly is characteristic of Kutik's poetry, which is conspicuously and densely citational. His poems take place on a sort of poetically levelled referential plane, where various registers and styles of Russian poetic speech, past and present, and elements from world history, literature, and myth mingle and flow uninterrupted one into another. The effect – the integration of antiquity with modernity and many eras in between – creates a picture of a present both formed and informed by the past. An apt description for Kutik is an 'archaist', writing in a style which 'respects the past sufficiently to allow both the modern and the classical to sound simultaneously, in a kind of witty contrapuntal dialogue'.³ Kutik identifies himself by Mikhail Epstein's classification, as a Metarealist, belonging to a movement characterised by a strong interest in inherited culture: 'Metarealism seeks out true value by turning to eternal themes or the arch-images of contemporary themes [...] Its material is nature, history, art, and "high" culture'.⁴ However, although such 'high-brow' references do have a prominent place in Kutik's poetry, his catholic taste in citation and grounding in contemporaneity causes Epstein to designate his style as 'pre-

² Kutik, Il'ia, *Hieroglyphs of Another World: On Poetry, Swedenborg, and Other Matters*, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000, pp. 5–6.

³ Wachtel, Andrew, 'The Youngest Archaists: Kutik, Sedakova, Kibirov', in: Sandler, Stephanie (ed.), *Rereading Russian Poetry*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 272.

⁴ Epstein, Mikhail, Genis, Aleksandr and Vladiv-Glover, Slobodanka, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, New York: Berghahn, 1999, p. 107.

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

sentism, or “the poetry of presence”, “the poetry of the present moment”⁵. This manifests itself both in his poetry, with its plethora of references to modern popular culture, and in the theory behind his poetry, which he has drawn, apparently quite consciously, from reaction against and emulation of his immediate predecessors, analysis of the state of contemporary Russian literature, and interaction with his fellow metarealists.

Kutik’s abiding ambition towards epic is closely tied to his lifelong interest in Homer.⁶ He continues his metaphor of a poem as Odysseus’ arrow by linking it to his early urge to write epic (in an odic form):

An attempt (a personal one) is my ‘Ode on Visiting the Belosaraisk Spit on the Sea of Azov’.

This (in the ode and in general) is, for me, a solution to the problem of the Whole, of nostalgia in an epic key.⁷

He himself sees how emulation of Homeric epic stayed with him from *Oda* through to *Epos*:

I built for myself quite early the model of the line of those epics that, so to speak, have authorship [...] Homer, Dante, and Ezra Pound – ‘Cantos’ [...] it’s definitely the attempt to create something that is beyond what is I, that is bigger than the person who writes. [...] I always

⁵ Ibid., p. 123.

⁶ Kutik, Il’ia, Interview with Georgina Barker, Evanston, Ill., 2014.

⁷ Kutik, *Hieroglyphs of Another World*, p. 6.

GEORGINA BARKER

imagined that, OK, if it's not a Homer, I can create something equal to Homeric for myself.⁸

External circumstances have played a part in the complications of Kutik's relationship with Homer. His choice of form for *Oda* (and resulting portrayal of Homer therein) stemmed from a reaction against the prevailing lyric mode of the previous poetic generation in Russia.⁹ His subsequent turn to lyric forms (and changed portrayal of Homer therein) coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union – itself an epic project – and his ultimately permanent move to the West; his collection *Luk Odisseia* would suggest that these events are linked. His epic poem *Epos* is both the continuation of Kutik's original epic intent in *Oda*, and part of a wider trend in modernism and postmodernism towards long narrative poems.¹⁰ The endurance of Kutik's will to write Homerically must also be connected to the fact that 'the long poem [...] has historically served as the measure of the height of a poet's ambition; undertaking to write one amounted to a declaration of one's designs on canonical status'.¹¹

Yet Homer stays with Kutik regardless of whether he is attempting epic or not – he adapts his Homer to the form of the moment.

Like a Big Fish in an Ancient Sea; or Stepping Stones towards Homer in *Oda*

Kutik's first work, *Oda*, concerns the building and breaking of a great wave over the Belosaraisk Spit, a peninsula at the bottom of Crimea jutting out into the Black Sea.

⁸ Kutik, Interview with Georgina Barker.

⁹ Kutik, Il'ia, *The Ode and the Odic: Essays on Mandelstam, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva and Mayakovsky*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994, p. 16.

¹⁰ McHale, Brian, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems*, Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2004, passim.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

The setting, which was in the part of the Soviet Union with closest ties to Ancient Greece and Rome,¹² also gives rise to the attendant ‘characters’ to the ‘plot’ – sea creatures mingle with classical allusions. Wachtel designates *Oda* a ‘neoclassical dialogue’, in which the ‘new’ and the ‘classical’ ‘sound simultaneously, in a kind of witty contrapuntal dialogue’.¹³ *Oda* is a formally faithful imitation of an eighteenth-century Russian ode, written in ‘the ten-line stanza, the rhyme scheme (aBaBccDeeD), and the metre (iambic tetrameter) that Lomonosov used in all his solemn odes’.¹⁴ But it is also Kutik’s first attempt at an epic poem: ‘our own form of epic [...] mine was [...] my “Ode”. In the course of writing this work, I began to feel the necessity to prove [...] that the odic genre is both the Russian epic past and epic genre’.¹⁵ Although the ode does retain associations for Kutik with the classical tradition, he sees it as a primarily Russian genre, embodied by Derzhavin, Lomonosov, and other such poets of Russia’s eighteenth-century odic tradition, rather than by Horace (in *Oda*, at least) and classical antiquity. Kutik’s conception of epic, as opposed to the ode, is definitely classical: he refers to Nikolai Gnedich’s translation of the *Iliad* to illustrate the ‘epicness’ of the odic poetry of Derzhavin and Mayakovsky, and to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* for Tsvetaeva’s.¹⁶ Kutik’s ode expresses its epicness, and its classicalness – neither of which are borne out by its strict eighteenth-century Russian odic form – through references to Homer.

When writing about the ode, Kutik connects the foundational role of eighteenth-century ode-writers Derzhavin and Lomonosov for Russian literature with that

¹² Kalb, Judith E., *Russia’s Rome: Imperial Visions, Messianic Dreams, 1890-1940*, Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, p. 9.

¹³ Wachtel, ‘Youngest Archaists’, p. 286.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹⁵ Kutik, *Ode and the Odic*, pp. 16–17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175 179-180, 183-184, 197, 201, 130-131.

of Homer for literature in general: ‘Derzhavin forms the same universal past (“first source”) for Russian poetry as Homer did for world poetry’:¹⁷

А под напудренным париком старился череп осьмнадцатого столетия, [...] грозил расколоться как череп Зевса, из которого в полном вооружении вышла на свет Афина. Не то же ли произошло и с эпическим космосом Гомера, распавшимся на миры великих античных трагиков, лириков (в частности, родоначальников оды Пиндара) и даже – Вергилия? [...] великий гнедичевский перевод «Илиады», тесно связанный с открытиями русского одического классицизма, ведь именно на его языке заговорил по-русски Гомер, оказав столь потрясающее воздействие на судьбу всей последующей нашей литературы!¹⁸

But under [Lomonosov’s] powdered wig the aging cranium of the eighteenth century [...] threatened to split open like Zeus’ skull, out of which emerged Athena in full armour. Did not Homer’s epic cosmos fare likewise, breaking up into the worlds of the great ancient tragedians, lyric poets (ancestors, amongst others, of Pindar’s ode), and even Virgil? [...] Gnedich’s great translation of the *Iliad* was closely linked with the breakthroughs in Russian odic classicism, for it was with his voice that Homer first spoke in Russian – with such staggering effects for all subsequent Russian literature!

The prominence of Homer in *Oda* is to be expected, given the poem’s joint odic and epic ambition, and the fact that it is an attempt at a foundational text for both

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁸ Kutik, Il’ia, ‘Slovo ob ode’, *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 6/1983, 149.

Kutik's œuvre and his era. But Kutik's attitude to Homer's influence on his own poetry is more complex than simple emulation. When planning his ode Homer was both the model for his epic approach and an overshadowing predecessor: 'ia i reshil sozdat' svoi sobstvennyi kontekst. To est', vyiti iz situatsii "kak" Gomer i – odnovremenko – poslegomerovskaia poeziia. To est' sozdat' etot samyi bol'shoi plan (epos)' ('so I decided to create my own context. To escape the situation of writing poetry that is simultaneously "like" Homer yet also post-Homeric. That is, to create that same big plan (epic)').¹⁹ Some of Kutik's ambivalence can be seen in his placement of Homeric references within *Oda* and the attitude he displays towards Homer in the final stanza.

Having alluded to Euripides in the very first stanza and Ovid in the third stanza, Kutik introduces Homeric references only in the final third of *Oda*, at its most dramatic, violent – epic – point. In the build-up to the climax of *Oda* Kutik unleashes the most recognisable weapon in the epic arsenal: the Homeric simile. One accompanies the wave at its greatest height in stanzas 42-43; one when it hangs suspended in its fall to earth in 45-47; and one during its final union with the land in 51-52. Each instance is expressed in the conventional Homeric wording of 'kak...tak' ('just as...so'). Kutik is very aware that he is employing Homeric similes, clearly following – or subverting – the rules of the form. As in Homer, Kutik's similes come at a crucial point in the text, and draw attention to it; they are similarly expansive, and prolong the already prolonged breaking of the wave; they take the reader away from the events of the narrative.

Oda's final simile is the most typically Homeric. The epic meeting of land and wave conjures up a distinctly unepic comparison: 'i kak, kogda ot staroi pyli / kover

¹⁹ Quoted in Bavit'skii, Dmitrii, 'Sny-podstrochniki', *Topos*, 2003, <http://www.topos.ru/article/1231/> (accessed 30 October 2013).

vytriakhivaiut' ('and just as when old dust / is shaken out of a rug') (54).²⁰ This follows the Homeric convention in which the basis of the simile is so far removed from its source as to be incongruous: 'juxtaposing "low" or unheroic similes with heroic or dignified action in the narrative [...] creates a powerful tension between the normal or everyday experiences described in the simile, and the extraordinary or shocking experiences of the hero'.²¹ A similar instance occurs in *Iliad* 12:433-435, comparing the Greeks' tenacity in battle to a woman spinning. Yet Kutik is aware that his poem is *not* the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, and plays with this. In Homer similes usually derive from the natural world to contrast with men battling, whereas Kutik's work is already about the natural world; he therefore inverts the traditional Homeric simile, and compares the epic clash of natural elements with Homeric warfare. The first group of similes in stanza 42 concludes with a comparison of the giant fish with a bow: 'a telo, vygnutoe v muke, / s khvostom somknulos', – tak na luke / natiagivaiut tetivu' ('but its body, curved in torment, / joined up with its tail – just as a bow / is strung and drawn') (45). This refers to Homer's famous simile where Odysseus strings his bow in *Odyssey* 21. Kutik thus associates the awesome destructive power of Odysseus' bow with the fish. This simile continues beyond the fresh simile in the ensuing verse, as the fish/bow lets loose a cry/arrow: 'strela shal'nogo krika / pomchalas' s Iuga na Vostok' ('the stray cry's arrow / sped from South to East') (46). Kutik marks the central of his three similes as Homeric, directly referencing the *Iliad*:

²⁰ All Russian excerpts in this section are from Kutik, Il'ia, *Ode on Visiting the Belosaraisk Spit on the Sea of Azov / Oda na poseshchenie Belosaraiskoi kosy, chto na Azovskom more*, trans. Kit Robinson, New York: Alef Books, 1995.

²¹ Rutherford, R.B., *Homer: Odyssey Books XIX and XX*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 75-76.

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

И как когда-то, в оны лета,
Арес – сраженный наповал
копьем аргосца Диомеда –
кровавым криком закричал,
так содрогнулось тело рыбе (46).

And just as one time, long ago,
Ares, felled by one blow
of the spear of the Argive Diomedes,
bellowed a bloody cry,
just so shuddered the fish's body.

It is an allusive joke on Kutik's part that for his own Homeric simile he uses an event in the *Iliad* which is itself subject to a Homeric simile. The structure also mirrors that of Homer's version, in book 5:859-868, where Ares first cries out, then shoots through the sky. Again, Kutik reverses the original simile: the material of Homer's simile, the chaos of the elements, is *Oda's* reality; as opposed to that of the warriors, whom Kutik appropriates from the *Iliad* for his own simile.

Homer's influence is evident in more than just the Homeric similes. Kutik maintains that Metarealism inherited its narrative style from classical epic: 'Meta in Homer and Vergil has to do with the simultaneity of the epic and the subjective, [...] which thus produces an *intimate* perspective on *what is, without bringing into view a perceiving lyric subject*'.²² This is achieved through the use of metaphor, which links the objects and references that make up *Oda* in the absence of an evident narrator. Yet metaphor indicates the narratorial consciousness behind the text, as Homer's similes

²² Gibbons, Reginald, 'On Russian Meta-Realist Poetry: A Conversation with Ilya Kutik', *American Poetry Review*, 36/2007, 23.

do. The narrator also becomes visible in the structuring of the poem. The unbroken flow of associations in *Oda* is modelled on Homer's narrative style: 'The Homeric narrator [...] sees the plot as a continuous succession of events [...] and] goes to great lengths to construct his plot [...] by unfolding a chain of actions in which each link [...] leads naturally to the next'.²³ Kutik's pacing of the wave's progress with minutely detailed descriptions at particular points and digressions at others parallels Homer's manipulation of the battle scenes in the *Iliad*.

Kutik returns to Homer in the final stanza: 'vykhodit muza Kalliopa / na bereg pervoiu v riadu / kamen, vedia ikh cherez kamni' ('out comes the Muse Calliope / onto the shore, first in the ranks of Camenae, / leading them through the stones'). Although Calliope was not strictly one of the Camenae, Kutik plays upon the similarity of the name for the Roman Muses and the Russian 'kamni' ('stones'). Calliope's significance is as the epic Muse – Homer's Muse. The acclamation of the Muse is a hallmark of classical epic. Just as in Homer it is the only point at which the narrator refers to himself in the first person,²⁴ in *Oda* it is the only point at which the narrator appears in the poem. It shatters the illusion of narratorlessness:

The invocations to the Muses are directed neither to the level of the story nor to that of the discourse, but to the sphere that oversees the construction of the narrative discourse out of the fabric of the story. In calling on the goddesses to show him the story, he subtly directs our attention to his own act of creation.²⁵

²³ Richardson, Scott Douglas, *The Homeric Narrator*, Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1990, p. 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

By showing himself at this point Kutik signals the ending of the poem, paralleling the only other occurrence of the authorial 'I' in the second stanza. Kutik's closing declaration, 'Za nimi zhe ia i poidu' ('I shall follow them') (63), indicates his intention to pursue the goal of writing epic poetry, specifically with a Homeric influence. This statement complicates the effect achieved through the preceding Homeric similes. In epic poetry it is usual to place the acclamation of the Muse at the beginning of the poem, rather than the end. This suggests that Kutik does not consider *Oda* the pinnacle of his achievements in the epic form, but rather a prelude to a later, greater epic. Moreover, the offhand tone in which Kutik declares his intention to follow the Muses indicates either humility or ambivalence – he is just tagging along. This conflicts with the arrogance implied both in the acclamation of the Muse, 'thrusting his "I" upon us in association with the goddesses of narrative' to confer authenticity,²⁶ and in the presumption of rivalling Homer.

Homer has a crucial yet ambivalent place in *Oda*. Homeric techniques and references abound, but only from the middle of the poem, and they are then undercut by Kutik's contradictory placing and casual wording of the acclamation of the Homeric Muse. *Oda* can be seen as a statement of Kutik's future intent to write an epic with a Homeric influence, but also that the present poem is not this epic and is therefore a work more or less independent of Homer.

The Mole-Homers Go Underground in *Luk Odisseia*

After *Oda*, Kutik's poetry shifts into lyric forms. Despite their smaller scale, Kutik's lyric poems still play frequently with Homer. The collection *Luk Odisseia* (1989-1991) declares with its title that Homer remains a crucial reference. Kutik pairs Homer with

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Horace to explore various changes of state, which were plentiful in the years of its composition: Kutik's first travels beyond the bounds of the USSR, starting in 1988;²⁷ the Soviet Union's suddenly precarious standing following the fall of the Berlin Wall; and Kutik's move away from his earlier ideal of odic/epic poetry towards lyric forms. Of *Luk Odisseia* Kutik says 'mne nuzhno bylo dat'-pokazat' svoi sub''ektivnye – po mere vozmozhnogo – ob''ektivnye obrazy svoei "vita nuova" ' ('I needed to convey a subjective – so far as possible – objective likeness of my "vita nuova" ').²⁸ Moments symbolic of these changes recur through the collection. From Homer: the eponymous episode of the stringing and shooting of Odysseus' bow from the end of the *Odyssey*, and the fall of Troy from the Epic Cycle, which, although not from Homer's *Iliad* itself, is the natural conclusion of the story of the Trojan War. From Horace: the image of Horace on the sandy sea shore, symbolising the poet of *Oda* (Kutik before he left the USSR and abandoned *Oda*).

In 'Vospominanie ob ode' ('Remembrance of the Ode') Kutik plays in passing upon the similarity between 'Danes' and 'Danaeans' to parody the famous phrase from the *Aeneid* referring to the Trojan Horse, 'timeo danaos, et dona ferentis' ('I fear Greeks even when they bear gifts'):²⁹ 'Danaitsev Danii, dary / ne prinosiashchikh, – chto boiat'sia?' ('Why fear the Danes of Denmark, / not bearing gifts?') (58).³⁰ This comments on Kutik's emergence from behind the Iron Curtain into Scandinavia of his own free will, in contrast to the Trojans' loss of their city walls through deception. In

²⁷ Baviľ'skii, 'Sny-podstrochniki', p. 10 of 59.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 27 of 59.

²⁹ Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 318.

³⁰ All poems in this section quoted from Kutik, Il'ia, *Luk Odisseia: tret'ia kniga stikhotvoreniĭ*, St Petersburg: Sovetskii pisatel', 1993.

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

'1991-...' Kutik links the digits of the date with Hecuba's 19 children, many already dead and the others scattered after the fall of Troy:

Эпос-Гомер.
Гекуба,
бедная-бедная, все 19
детей разлетелись //
в смерть (72).

Еpic-Нomer.
Poor, poor
Hecuba, all 19
children have flown away //
to death.

'1991-...' is paired with '1978-1991', implying a clear divide between the first part of Kutik's adult life and the rest, from 1991; the significance of this date is doubtless the break-up of the Soviet Union, which was already in progress by the October when the poem was written. In 'Pustynia troikh' ('Desert of Three') Kutik links the fall of Troy with the battle between lyric and epic in Soviet literature, which epic won:

Если между нами трещина пробежит
по сухой земле, как змея,
мы ее уьем (переступим), и этот вид
пре-ступления я
готов приравнять ко взятию Трои,
к победе Эпоса над собой,
т. е. – Лирикой... (82).

GEORGINA BARKER

If a crack runs between us
across the dry earth, like a snake,
we will kill (transgress) it, and
I am prepared to liken that kind of
trans-gression³¹ to the capture of Troy,
to the victory of Epic over itself,
i.e., Lyric...

This generic conflict came to be embodied by Pasternak (lyric, championed by Bukharin) and Mayakovsky (epic, imposed by Stalin).³² Kutik has written in similar terms about the Pyrrhic victory of epic over lyric: ‘In Mayakovsky, the odic genre found its highest epic conclusion, to the prejudice of its own lyric potential’.³³ Kutik’s interpretation of epic’s victory here as Pyrrhic suggests his own generic indecision. The ‘crack’ is construable also as a split between Russia and Europe (this interpretation is facilitated by Kutik’s reference to himself as Janus earlier in the poem). His reference to a moment that defined the literary aesthetic of the Soviet Union, as well as to its division from the West, within a collection discussing his emigration and the fall of the USSR, makes the ‘transgression’ in the poem redolent of Kutik’s crossing the border into Europe.

The episode of the stringing and shooting of Odysseus’ bow is hugely significant for Kutik, appearing not only in this, eponymous, book, but at other crucial points in his poetry and criticism. In the essay which opens the book, also named ‘Luk

³¹ Kutik is punning on ‘perestupim’ (‘we will overstep/transgress’) and ‘prestuplenie’ (‘crime/transgression’).

³² Cavanagh, Clare, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West*, New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 15.

³³ Kutik, *Ode and the Ode*, p. 206.

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

Odisseia', he likens Odysseus' preparation to shoot the bow with 'the creative process', and the result with 'a poem'.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, this image recurs in *Luk Odisseia*. In the first poem, 'Slukh i golos' ('Hearing and Voice'), Kutik reduces poetry to its raw components, and equates his voice with Odysseus' arrow:

Голос – ты почерк от точки слуха,
только по воздуху. Т.Е. сей
путь – как маршрут отлетевшей с лука
Вашего – Одиссей – //
да, той стрелы (11).

Voice – you are the writing from the point of hearing,
only through the air. I.E. that
path is like the trajectory – flown forth from a bow,
yours, Odysseus – //
yes, of that arrow.

Kutik uses the Homeric reference to explain the gathering principle of his poetry: his voice (the arrow) draws together 'everything' (the air inside the axe heads), transforming heard things (references) and surroundings (the present moment) into the singular, directed thread of a poem. In 'Predmet' ('Subject') Kutik compares the flow of poetry through rhyme with an arrow, which is stuck in his throat:

Это А в горле
Как наконечник – торчит – стрелы
и не дает – «Ы» – выдохнуть

³⁴ Kutik, *Hieroglyphs of Another World*, p. 5.

GEORGINA BARKER

[...] Но течение
языка и круги, как в тире,
и стрела... (74)

That A in the throat
Like the tip – sticks out – of an arrow
and does not let – ‘U’ – exhale
[...] But the flow
of language, and circles, as in a shooting range,
and an arrow...

The fact that Odysseus’ arrow (poetry) is stuck in his throat, stopping him speaking, combined with the poem’s general incoherence and frequent Swedish interjections, suggests that Kutik is struggling to write poetry in emigration. It also comments on his abandonment of *Oda*. Kutik calls *Oda* his attempt at creating a poem like the arrow flying from Odysseus’ bow; yet with *Luk Odisseia* Kutik is moving on from this ideal form to lyric, which he had previously decried as unproductive, and declared dead. His perceived betrayal of *Oda* becomes a central issue for the collection, ‘Prozaicheskii postskriptum’ (‘Prosaic Postscript’). In this final word, Kutik answers the accusation made implicitly in the preceding poetry that he has betrayed the ode by turning to lyric: ‘Dazhe s toboi ia ne izmenial *Ode*. Ot Ody kak *zhanra* – k *Ode* kak *stiliu*’ (‘Even with you I have not been unfaithful to “Oda”. From the Ode as a *genre* – to the Ode as a *style*’) (86).

‘Vospominanie ob ode’ tackles Kutik’s progression away from his first work, through references to *Oda* and the figures who embody its odic and epic influences, Horace and Homer. The first line quotes *Oda*’s first line word for word, after which the poem diverges into contemplation of another coastline: not Ukraine, as in *Oda*, but

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

Denmark. Unlike *Oda*, the focus of the poem is not the landscape and associations evoked by it, but the poet himself, reflecting the change from more grand-scale poetry to subjective lyric. Kutik depicts himself as a former 'writer of odes', literally immersed in Horace:

Писатель од, он жил здесь сам,
вдали от их цивилизаций,
и тек по (так сказать) усам –
не попадая в рот – Гораций... (58)

The writer of odes, he lived here himself,
far from their civilisations,
and there flowed through his (as it were) moustache –
missing his mouth – Horace...

Third person, past tense, and adaptation of a traditional fairytale closural formula ('po usam teklo, a v rot ne popalo', 'it flowed through my moustache, but missed my mouth') all suggest distance from the ode, and farewell to it; even an unwilling, forced parting. Kutik depicts the ode's very substance (sand, one of the main components of *Oda*) slipping between his fingers as he tries to cling on to it:

Язык его песочных од
(он размышлял свежо и горько)
как бы меж пальцами течет,
и – глядь! – внизу другая горка...//
Как между пальцами песок,
уходит – несмотря на сжатье... (58).

GEORGINA BARKER

The language of his sandy odes
(he brooded freshly and bitterly)
seems to flow through your fingers,
and – look! – below there’s another mound...//
Through your fingers like sand,
it *runs away* – no matter how tight you grasp it...

This same imagery and wording appears in ‘Tri pustyni’: ‘ody Goratsiia, chei pesochnyi / stikh mezhd u pal’tsev ukhodit’ (‘Horace’s odes, whose sandy / verse runs through your fingers’) (69). The penultimate stanza of ‘Vospominanie ob ode’ reprises the theme of sand as a symbol for time’s flow:

Писатель од, он жил здесь с
Горацием, и шторм-истерик
словно песочные часы
перевернул однажды берег (59).

The writer of odes, he lived here with Horace,
and one day a hysteric-storm
like an hourglass
overturned the seashore.

Kutik returns to this image of Horace and the sand-filled hourglass in ‘Prozaicheskii postskriptum’, and overturns it: ‘Ody Goratsiia – kak pustynia: v pesochnykh chasakh. Pereverni stranitsu... Pereverni chasy...’ (‘Horace’s odes are like a desert: in an hourglass. Turn over the page... Turn over the hourglass...’) (86). The hourglass sands symbolising the passing of time undergo a change of import be-

tween the poems and the afterword: from loss to the potential for renewal. The encapsulation of *Oda* in 'Vospominanie ob ode' into an hourglass miniaturises Kutik's earlier grand work: words like 'isterik' ('hysteric') and 'odnazhdy' ('one day') trivialise *Oda*, and the stanza as a whole sums up *Oda* in dismissively concise fashion. Along with the relegation of Horace (representing *Oda*) to the past, and the diminishment of *Oda* itself, *Oda*'s Homeric references are also diminished: Homer and the great fish (whose appearance in *Oda* was heralded by Homeric similes) become a 'podzemnyi krot' ('subterranean mole') and a 'sardina' ('sardine'), respectively (58).

Elsewhere Kutik problematises the diminishment of epic. 'Elegiia na tserkovnom kladbishch' ('Elegy in a church graveyard') again imagines Homer as a mole, digging foundations for future literature, of which the only visible sign is his epics, portrayed as a molehill and a burial mound: 'ot krotov-Gomerov / nam ostaetsia lish' kurgan Akhilla, / no ne poimesh': gde – epos, gde – mogila...' ('from the mole-Homers / all we have left is the burial mound of Achilles, / but you can't tell where the epic ends and the grave begins...') (22). This is an ambiguous image, trivialising and burying Homer, whilst affirming his legacy. Just as Homer's poetry had turned into a grave, in the epitaph Kutik's description of the poem's setting, a graveyard, becomes a description of his poem, as it literally becomes a gravestone, inscribed with words: 'ZDES' VSIUDU – KIRKEG[ARD]. A POSEMU / ELEGIEI NE ODURCHIT' ODU...' ('HERE, ALL IS KIERKEGAARD.³⁵ AND THIS IS WHY / THE ODE CANNOT BE FOOLED BY ELEGY...') (23). Kutik suggests that his turn to elegy cannot lessen his earliest work. Literalising generic conflict reminds the reader of the genres' usual purposes, elegy 'mourning the past', and ode 'praising the

³⁵ The Danish 'kirkegard', meaning 'cemetery', sounds identical to 'Kierkegaard', as Kutik discovered when he went to visit the grave of Kierkegaard in Copenhagen and asked the person working at the cemetery where it was: Kutik, Interview with Georgina Barker.

GEORGINA BARKER

new'.³⁶ The reminder of Kutik's odic vitality prepares the reader for the poem's movement away from death towards continuing creation at the end of the poem. This occurs in the person of a snail, a representation of Kutik, crawling through the poem from beginning to end. It carries the spiral of history on its back (the Marxist interpretation of Hegel), but declares itself free of this (Communist) ideology, choosing to carry instead literary influences. These are specifically the elegiac influences of the present poem, Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' and Vasilii Zhukovskii's translation 'Sel'skoe kladbishche' ('Village graveyard'), a foundational text in the development of modern Russian literature:³⁷

Я не улитка, чтоб тащить спираль
дьялектики за Гегелем марксизма.
Мой домик-томик, где Жуковский-Грей
[...] открыт... (22).

I am not a snail to drag the spiral
of dialectic behind the Hegel of Marxism.
My home-tome is where Zhukovskii-Gray
is open...

At the end the snail overtakes Achilles, representing Homer and epic: 'ULITKA OBGONIAET CHEREPAKHU, / A TA – AKHILLA...' ('THE SNAIL OVERTAKES THE TORTOISE, / AND IT – ACHILLES...') (24). As Kutik comes after Homer (in

³⁶ Ram, Harsha, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire*, Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, p. 233.

³⁷ Ciepiela, Catherine, 'Reading Russian Pastoral: Zhukovsky's Translation of Gray's Elegy', in: Sandler, Stepannie (ed.), *Rereading Russian Poetry*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 31, 36.

the 'race' of life – alluding to the tortoise and the hare and Zeno's paradox), he is able to make use of the foundations the mole-Homer had dug and so surpass him.³⁸

Homer and his odic counterpart Horace are depicted throughout *Luk Odisseia* as fallen, diminished, surpassed, passé. The obsolescence of these two figures signals Kutik's leave-taking of *Oda*, his own epic project, and of the Soviet Union, the fallen epic project.

The Fat-Cat Homer in *Persidskie Pis'ma*

Homer is a notable presence in just one other of Kutik's lyric collections, *Persidskie pis'ma*, which has five poems referencing Homer. Its (Montesquieuesque) title refers to Kutik's Persian Blue cat Anton, who is the central figure of many of the poems. Whereas in *Oda* and *Luk Odisseia* his Homeric references pertained mostly to the nature of the poetry or to politics, in this collection Kutik takes a far more familiar approach to Homer.

The cat in Kutik's lyric poetry is not simply a depiction of a beloved pet, but also a representation of Kutik himself: 'kot snachala prosto kot, a potom – ia sam' ('at first the cat is just a cat, and then it is me').³⁹ In placing Homer alongside his cat Kutik brings Homer close to himself. 'Pamiati Antona i Allena' ('In memory of Anton and Allen'), a joint obituary for his cat and his friend and fellow poet Allen Ginsberg, states: 'poet est' Gomer, i ne v khor ono' ('the poet is Homer, and not for the common chorus') (77-80).⁴⁰ Not only is the cat on a par with Kutik and his contemporary poets, they are all on a par with Homer.

³⁸ I am grateful to Kutik for clarifying elements of this poem: Kutik, Interview with Georgina Barker.

³⁹ Baviľskii, 'Sny-podstrochniki', p. 29 of 59.

⁴⁰ All poems in this section are quoted from Kutik, Il'ia, 'Persidskie pis'ma, ili vtoraiia chast' knigi Smert' Tragedii, vkhodiashchaia pervoi', *Sovremennaia russkaia poeziia*, Moscow: Kommentarii, 2003.

GEORGINA BARKER

In bringing the cat into the Homeric world in three closely grouped poems, 'Kot: pokidaiu bitvu' ('Cat: I desert battle', 42-4), 'Kot obrashchaetsia k bogu' ('Cat addresses god', 49), and 'Preemnik' ('Receiver', 51), Kutik brings Homer into his world, both literary and personal. 'Kot: pokidaiu bitvu' parodies and belittles the hero-against-hero combat that is the basis of much of the *Iliad*:

Битва – на Гектора падающий Ахилл,
на Ахилла – Парис, на Париса – Аякс, т.д.
Это карточный домик, который хил
изначально, что б умные не гадали.
Дайте бойцам кота – прижимать как щит,
что не от боли, а от любви трещит...

Battle: Hector attacked by Achilles,
Achilles – by Paris, Paris – by Ajax, etc.
A house of cards, which was shaky
to begin with, as if it takes a genius to guess that.
Give the warriors a cat, to press close like a shield,
which cracks not from pain, but from love...

The ludicrous suggestion of taking a cat into battle as a shield proves, surprisingly, effective. The overpowering of strife by love shows the lyric, rather than epic, focus of the poem. Kutik casts his cat as Menelaus, with himself in the role of the slain Patroclus:

Битва протяжна, как песий лай...
Заливаются в небе стрелы...

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

И КОТ ВЬНОСИТ, КАК МЕНЕЛАЙ,
ИЗ БИТВЫ МОЕ ЖЕ ТЕЛО...

The battle is drawn out, like a dog's baying...
Arrows pour out in the sky...
And the cat carries my body
out of the battle, like Menelaus...

These lines have behind them *Iliad* book 17, in which Menelaus fights the Trojans for Patroclus' body. The cat's effortless accomplishment of this hard-won, long-drawn-out epic feat again shows the lyric setting. In 'Kot obrashchaetsia k bogu' the cat enters an area of Homer that Kutik often uses to express his own biography – Odysseus' exile: 'sdelai tak, chtob vernut'sia v svoiu itaku / mog vseгда ia!' ('make it so that I can always return / to my Ithaca!'). 'Preemnik' presents a highly irreverent and familiar depiction of the cat as Homer, playing on the minced oath 'bliakha-mukha': 'tolstym gomerom, raskrytym na korobliakh, – / zabyvaia i mukh i bliakh' ('a fat Homer, splayed over the ships, / forgetting both f-lies and shi-iields'). The reference to the Catalogue of Ships from *Iliad* book 2 is triangulated via Mandel'stam's 'Bessonitsa. Gomer. Tugie parusa' ('Insomnia. Homer. Taut sails'): 'U tebia poiavilsia priemnik, kot, ot moei bessonitsy. / Gomer nikogda mne ne sposobstvoval, kak O.M.' ('Cat, you have developed a receiver, tuned to my insomnia. / Homer never worked for me like for O.M.'). Kutik enjambes the first two words of Mandel'shtam's poem, drawing attention to his reference. Refracting the Homeric allusion via a more recent, Russian, reception of the same passage 'domesticates' the reference, bringing Homer further into Kutik's own literary tradition. Kutik uses this particular dual reference knowingly, for in his reception of the *Iliad* Mandel'shtam brought Homer into his personal sphere just as Kutik does here.

Kutik uses Homer to explore a failed relationship in 'Razryv' ('Rupture'), one verse of which invokes both of Homer's epics. Kutik parodies perhaps the most famous line in classical literature, the first line of the *Iliad*: 'Gnev vospoi, o boginia, Il'i, Vital'ina syna!' ('Sing, o Goddess, the anger of Il'ia, son of Vitalii!') This equates the loss of his lover with Achilles' loss of Briseis, an incongruous comparison which mocks Kutik's inability to react as an epic hero would, but implies an Achillean level of petulance nevertheless. In the following stanza Kutik equates himself with Odysseus and his lover with Penelope, undercutting this, however, by implying that she was not as chaste as the exemplary Penelope: 'prished v lokhmot'iakh – kak Odissei v Itaku / (poskol'ku s ee zhenikhami ia dazhe ne voznikaiu – / uzh slishkom ikh mnogo na karte...)' ('arrived in rags, like Odysseus in Ithaca / (insofar as I do not even bring up her suitors – / there are just too many of them on the map...)'). The themes of this poem, and Kutik's identification with Achilles and Odysseus, draw very close to Kutik's reception of Homer in *Epos*; however the irreverent, personal spirit is still avowedly lyric.

Persidskie pis'ma's Homeric references are occasionally refracted through a reference to a poet closer to Kutik, are often humorous, usually appear in the context of events in Kutik's personal life, and frequently involve Kutik's cat. This irreverent, intimate take on Homer brings him into the poet's inner sphere.

Making Homer an Accomplice in *Epos*'s Epic Action

The mere fact of *Epos*'s existence is the fulfilment of the statement of intent made in the final stanza of *Oda*, and apparently renounced in *Luk Odisseia*, to create a post-modern Russian Homeric epic. However, with its 300 plus pages of verse there is nothing 'mere' about *Epos*, published between 2009-2010. Kutik defines *Epos* as

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

'personal epic'.⁴¹ Il'ia Kutik, the poet's own persona, is the epic's hero. Kutik planned *Epos* as the 'hypertext' embracing all his previous works.⁴² The personal nature of *Epos* is also expressed, as in *Persidskie pis'ma*, in its representation of Homer.

Kutik cites the main generic influences of *Epos* as Homer, Dante, Pound, and Akhmatova.⁴³ Unlike the precision of Kutik's shaping of postmodernist citational narrative into a neoclassical form in *Oda*, in *Epos* the epic form expands uncomplainingly to include a multitude of themes, references, styles, and genres, until it is more like the idea of an epic. In this, *Epos* is typical of postmodernist narrative poems:

postmodernism adopts, to a degree unprecedented in 'high-art' poetry, the conventions of popular narrative genres – science fiction and gothic, the Western and the adventure story, comic books and animated cartoons, soap opera and pornography. [...] it strives to recover, through pastiche and parody, narrative modes that flourished *before* the imperialist expansion of lyric [...] including [...] ancient epic.⁴⁴

Seven books of lyric and odic poems follow 'Rama' ('Frame'), the first half of *Epos*, corresponding to the events in 'Rama's' epic narrative. Kutik has said '*Epos* is any epic':⁴⁵ it becomes so by gathering and syncretising all preceding traditions, from antiquity to modernism.

While many classical and non-classical authors appear in *Epos* as both influences and characters, Homer is Kutik's paramount intertext in terms of characters

⁴¹ Kutik, Interview with Georgina Barker.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ McHale, *Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, p. 258.

⁴⁵ Kutik, Interview with Georgina Barker.

and citation. The plot and structure of the poem are determined by joint reference to Dante and Homer. Kutik appropriates Dante's plot and position as author-narrator-protagonist, and Homer's main characters as fellow characters. This presumptuous familiarity is echoed in the narrative: Homer and Dante's names occur so often as to seem like invocations rather than citations: Kutik exclaims 'u menia s Gomerom slozhnye otnosheniia!' ('I have a complicated relationship with Homer!') (125),⁴⁶ and Dante's appearance is mocked: 'alligator – (portret ego videli?) Alig'eri' ('alligator (have you seen his portrait?) Alighieri') (44), as is his masterpiece, which is characterised as 'sploshnoi BiBiSi na nebesi' ('one long BBC on high') (67). They are so fundamental to the construction of *Epos* that they become more than just influences: 'Sozdat' nechto novoe na territorii Gomera i Dante – eto sdelat' ikh ne epicheskoi model'iu, a souchastnikami epicheskogo deistviia' ('To create something new on the territory of Homer and Dante is to make them not an epic model, but accomplices in the epic action') (8). Basing his epic on Dante's *Divina Commedia* (Divine Comedy), the most famous post-classical national epic, implies a claim for similar status for *Epos*. Significantly, Kutik attributes the same influences to the closest Russia has to a national epic, Gogol's unfinished trilogy: 'writing *Dead Souls*, he was rewriting both Homer and Dante'.⁴⁷ Although as 'personal epic' it comes out of a Russian context, Kutik has said he does not see *Epos* as a national epic (2014) – the action occurs mostly in America and Greece, and addresses international, rather than specifically Russian, themes.

Kutik introduces *Epos*'s Dantean principle on the very first page of the poem, in the introduction: 'A ia vas poprobuiu provesti / cherez zhizni geroev – v vide *ada*,

⁴⁶ All excerpts in this section are quoted from Kutik, Il'ia, *Epos*.

⁴⁷ Kutik, Il'ia, *Writing as Exorcism: The Personal Codes of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol*, Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2005, p. 82.

chistilishche i raia – u Eposa moego' ('I shall try to lead you / through the lives of the heroes – in the guise of *hell, purgatory, and paradise* – of my "Epos" ') (9). This structure gives the text a very definite teleology, in keeping with Kutik's wish 'to create something that has a beginning and an end'.⁴⁸ Homer is the other half of this: Kutik merges the Dantean structure with that of the *Odyssey*: Kutik's heroic path mimics that of Odysseus; the absent heroine, Kutik's wife, is simultaneously Beatrice and Penelope; the meeting with her, which is the epic's *telos*, is the attainment of both Paradise and Ithaca. Kutik says that he started *Epos* in the same place as Pound started his *Cantos*: with the *Odyssey*.⁴⁹ Kutik selects Swedenborg as his guide through the underworld, over Dante's guide Virgil. This has the effect of promoting Homer, who remains the sole representative of classical epic. Virgil is seldom mentioned in *Epos* (and then generally in the context of Dante), and Aeneas is included only reluctantly in Kutik's list of epic heroes who had preceded him on his journey into the Underworld: 'niskhozhdenie v te glubiny, kuda Orfei, Odissei i, ladno, Enei / soshli (khot' poslednii – iz pal'tsa vysosan! On – voobshche ledenets dlia Avgusta...' ('descent into those depths which Orpheus, Odysseus, and, fine, Aeneas / penetrated (although the latter was plucked from thin air! He was basically a lollipop for Augustus...') (75).

Homer first appears in *Epos* in the second chapter of 'Rama', under the unpromising title 'Vospominanie ob epose-Gomere, i pochemu ego net teper'' ('Recollections of Homeric epic and why it no longer exists'); he and his kind of epic have disappeared along with Ancient Greece. There is a constant tension in *Epos* between past and present; indeed, one character, Daffy, dies because he mistakes modern Greece for Ancient Greece (93). A Hollywood reimagining of Ancient Greece illus-

⁴⁸ Kutik, Interview with Georgina Barker.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

trates the paucity of epic in modernity, and sets up a fundamental binary for the book – between anger and restraint, Homer and Plato:

Но что был бы эпос у греков, т.е. их *Илиада*, без гнева? –
что если бы, как на Гулливера, *тысячи тысяч пуд*
наложили на Ахиллову *страсть* по Патроклу или Брисеиде –
платоноведы? –
где был бы эпос, а? – *а в нигде!* (19)

But *what would have become* of the Greeks' epic, i.e. their *Iliad*, without anger?
What if, like Gulliver, *thousands of thousands of fetters*
were put on Achilles' *passion* for Patroclus or Briseis by *platonists*?
Where would *epic* be then, eh? Why, *nowhere!*

The Homer-Plato binary is embodied in Kutik and the object of his quest, his missing wife, who is modelled upon a real-life Platonist:⁵⁰ 'ona – uletela – k Platonu' ('She... flew away... to Plato') (50); 'mozhet, strastei / ty ne prinimaesh' – po *nauchnym* eshche prichinam, / a? nu, kak platonovedka?' ('Perhaps you reject / emotions for *intellectual* reasons? / You know, as a platonist?') (329).

Having established that anger is vital for epic, Kutik makes his own Iliadic acclamation of the Muse – undercut somewhat by its belated placement halfway through chapter 5, and comically generic, informal phrasing: '*Gnev teper' vospoi, Kto Ty Tam Est' Dlia Etogo Naverkhu! – O, pomogi vospet!'*' ('Now sing my anger, Whoever You Are Who Does That On High! – O, help me to sing it!') (44) Yet Kutik claims the same Muse as Homer nonetheless: 'k Kalliope ia / by vzvyl, muze Eposa moego!' ('I

⁵⁰ Ibid.

would have howled to Calliope, / the Muse of my *Epos!*') (76) The importance of anger becomes clearer in chapter 7, at the gates of Hell, which are compared with those in Dante (79). Mimicking Odysseus' sacrifice of sheep to gain entrance to the Underworld in *Odyssey* book 11, Kutik sacrifices the 'bumaga-baran' ('paper-sheep') which he has been holding as a torch, and to which he has been telling his story: 'tak barashek belyi – stanovitsia chernoii ovtsoi v Gomere, / i Odissei – spuskaia's' v Aid – pererezaet emu glotku' ('Thus the white lamb becomes the black sheep from Homer, / and Odysseus, descending into Hades, cuts its throat') (79). This sacrifice sparks the epiphany of the Homeric heroes' identity, settling the question of the authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*:

А Одиссей – кто он? – а Лев он, как
и Ахилл! – Так и написано в Песни 22-ой – «Подобился льву он
(это после убийства женихов!) [...]
– А знаете, что Одиссей
значит, как имя? – В Песни 19-ой прямо сказано:
Одиссей означает: «сердитый», «гневный» – От глагола
«одиссомай», т.е. «сержусь», «гневаюсь» – он происходит! – Т.е.
гнев, гнев Одиссей! –
как – точь-в-точь Ахилл, так ведь получается? – Вот вам и
доказательство! – *авторства!* (79-80)

And Odysseus – who is he? He's Lion, like
Achilles! This is written in Book 22: '*He was like a lion*' (this is after
the killing of the suitors!)
But do you know what the name Odysseus
means? In Book 19 it says directly:

GEORGINA BARKER

Odysseus means 'angry', 'wrathful' – it comes from the verb 'odusso-mai', i.e. 'I am angry', 'I hate'! I.e. anger, anger is Odysseus!
Just like Achilles, *isn't it?* There's your proof of *authorship!*

Kutik takes his proof from *Odyssey* 19:407-409, in which the story of how Odysseus got his name is recounted. However, the etymology Kutik cites is ambiguous, as it is unclear whether the participle is active or passive, 'one who is angry' or 'one who incurs anger'.⁵¹ Kutik chooses the former interpretation in order to unify Odysseus with the more traditionally Homeric Achilles under the single idea of epic anger, allowing him to take on the heroic mantle, descend into the Underworld, and begin the epic proper.

Soon afterwards, Olen, supposedly the earliest poet,⁵² exhorts Kutik to behave like a true epic hero and slaughter his enemies: 'Ty / dolzhen byl ubit' ego i napit'sia ego krovi' ('You / should have killed him and drunk of his blood') (85). Olen intimates that Kutik cannot be a true epic poet without embracing epic's primal, Homeric savagery:

Муз
[...] Уста ты и есть! – ты только должен [...]
вспомнить [...] Гомера! – Т.е. – взять том
«Одиссеи» и перечесть то место
перед казнью женихов, где даётся описание Денницы и её –
колесницы!.. Вот и всё... Там
ты найдёшь свои лампочки (85).

⁵¹ Stanford, W.B., 'The Homeric Etymology of the Name Odysseus', *Classical Philology*, 47/1952, 209–213.

⁵² Cherkasskii, Daniil, in: Kutik, *Epos*, p. 389.

IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

You *are* the Muses' Mouthpiece! You must just [...] remember Homer! I.e. take a volume of the 'Odyssey' and reread the place before the execution of the suitors, where there's a description of Dawn and her chariot!.. That's it... There you will find your lamps.

The promised reward, 'lamps', are revealed in the final chapter of 'Katai' ('Cathay'), 'Lampochka: Vstrecha' ('Lamp: Meeting'), to be his wife/Beatrice in Paradise (374).

Plato is *Epos's* anti-Homer. Kutik often cites, in the context of an argument with his wife, Plato's heinous act of excluding Homer from his Republic:

ТОЛЬКО ВОТ ЭТО
качество — Гнев — а, то есть, по-твоему, *несдержанность!*.. —
...Платон уж так
ненавидел, что даже любимого им Гомера
из-за Ахилла — изгнал из Государства! (100)

only that
quality, Anger – that is, in your opinion, *unrestraint!* – Plato so
hated, that he even banished his beloved Homer,
because of Achilles, from his Republic!

He insists that Plato was conflicted between his poetic passions and his philosophy, and exiled Homer because of this:

Платон-то — *сам поэт!* — а поэт и ученик Сократа вместе —

GEORGINA BARKER

это трудно, даже с *пока-*
тым лбом и выпученными глазами! — ибо как совмещать страсти
(что и есть, как-никак, поэт) и их полное забвение (что и есть
Сократ), а?
— ведь оксюморон, *да ведь*, получается?
[...]
— ... Поэтому – всегда легче выгнать Гомера, чем – себя самого из
Государства, так ведь? (100-1)

But Plato was *himself a poet!* A poet and student of Socrates simulta-
neously –
that’s difficult, even with a
sloping forehead and bulging eyes! For how can you combine passions
(he was, after all, a poet) with total disregard for them?
– you get an oxymoron, *don’t you?*
[...]
Therefore – it is always easier to banish Homer from the Republic than
yourself, is it not?

Kutik’s quest in ‘Rama’ is staged as a detective thriller, and his opponent, the murderer hunted over the course of the book, is eventually revealed to be Plato. Kutik sees Plato as ‘providence’, a ‘demigod’ ruling people’s fates, resolving conflicts either by killing or rewarding, and describes providence as ‘the frame in which we live’;⁵³ this links Plato with the title of the main, epic narrative, ‘Rama’, or ‘frame’. As the murderer, Plato is identifiable with the eponymous frame as the character creating and controlling the context for Kutik’s quest in ‘Rama’.

⁵³ Kutik, Interview with Georgina Barker.

Suitably for a semi-divine character representing providence, Plato becomes a key figure once again in the final book of Purgatory and the book of Paradise, 'Loto Platona' ('Plato's Lotto') and 'Katai'. There is a rapprochement of sorts between Homer and Plato. An exculpatory anecdote shows Plato acting contrary to his anti-epic stance: at the performance of Antimachus' epic *Thebaid*, Plato was the only person who stayed through the night to the end of the poem. The description of the lengthy epic, its 'stroki plius siuzhety smeshany – kak v loto!' ('lines plus themes jumbled, like in lotto!') (321), is reminiscent of Kutik's own *Epos*, and he seems to feel an empathetic gratitude for Plato's patience, perhaps hoping that his own readers are doing the same. Moreover, Homeric anger is no longer held up as the ideal, and in a condemnation of the immorality of Homer's heroes Kutik concludes that he is stuck between Homeric passion and Platonic restraint: '*poet est' geroi s sovest'iu*, potomu i zazhatyi – ukh! i / kak eshche! – mezhdv dvukh logik' ('a poet is a hero with a conscience, and therefore squeezed – oof! / and how! – between two logics') (334). This balance between Homer and Plato only becomes possible in the Paradise parts of *Epos*, 'Katai' and the end of 'Rama'; indeed, it is necessary to facilitate the movement of the poem away from epic anger towards harmony. This can be seen in the revision of the placing of Kutik's goal within the *Odyssey*: in Olen's speech towards the beginning of 'Rama' the reward precedes the epic violence; it is later revealed that he actually referred to Odysseus and Penelope's prolonged night together after Odysseus has killed the suitors: 'V odnom lish' oshibsia Olen: mesto vziato / iz Pesni 23-ei – posle ubiistva uzhe zhenikhov, a ne do! – / vo vremja liubovnoi nochi Odisseia i Penelopy' ('Olen was mistaken about just one thing: the place was taken / from Book 23 – after the killing of the suitors, and not before! – / during *Odysseus and Penelope's night of love*') (113). Homer and Plato must be harmonised in order for Kutik to attain

the level of tranquillity and introspection required to enter Paradise and be reunited with his beloved.

The fundamental, underlying ‘plot’ of *Epos* concerns a relationship – that of the epic hero and his beloved. Correspondingly, Homer is cast in personal terms, as someone in a ‘complicated relationship’ with not only Kutik, but (metapoetically) with the other influences upon the epic, such as Dante and Plato.

Conclusion

As a poet constantly aware of and sensitive to literary influence, whose works are a postmodern patchwork of conspicuous citation, Kutik uses references to classical authors, the archetypes of the genres he works with, to indicate and formulate the genre of his current work. Homer, especially, is a constant in Kutik’s poetry; from the fleeting references to him up to his capacity as the primary model of Kutik’s epic, Kutik engages with Homer as a foundation, with which to play and from which to depart. The changing reception of Homer is indicative of Kutik’s intentions within the given work. Kutik’s ‘complicated relationship’ with Homer has developed over the course of his thirty-plus-year career. In that time, Homer has been a stylistic model – for epic similes, for acclamations of the epic Muse, and for, simply, epic; Homer has been a negative influence – an overshadowing predecessor, or a way to express (paradoxically) obsolescence; Homer has also been something more personal – an alternative self, as cat or fellow poet, and an ‘accomplice’ in poetry.

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IL'IA KUTIK AND HOMER

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