

THE NOVELS OF
MARK ALEKSANDROVIČ ALDANOV

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THE NOVELS OF
MARK
ALEKSANDROVIČ
ALDANOV

by

C. NICHOLAS LEE

University of Colorado



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To my wife

PREFACE

Many will object to the explicitness with which the action of Aldanov's novels and philosophical tales has been spelled out in the study to follow. A careful look at these plot analyses will suffice to convince the thoughtful reader, I hope, that I have tried as much as possible to avoid mere paraphrase. Percy Lubbock, in *The Craft of Fiction*, very astutely separates the "argument" of a book from the author's intent on the one hand, while on the other asserting that "the well-made book is the book in which the subject and the form coincide and are indistinguishable".¹ Aldanov himself states, "A plot may be dispensed with only in the case of superhuman linguistic beauty (style) as in Pascal or *Ecclesiastes*."² Given the enormously complex structure of Aldanov's *belles-lettres*, where in the framework of concrete reality historical and fictional story lines mingle, and in yet another dimension a philosophical superstructure is symbolically suggested, it seemed less clumsy to follow the movement of the action step by step than to try separating action from artistic devices or dismembering the plot and simply calling attention to a few striking scenes. Instead, the whole narrative skeleton has been sketched as impassively as possible, in imitation of the original, yet so as to bring out what appeared to me the author's explicit or implicit intent, with simple notations of causal transitions reduced to a minimum.

The plot in Aldanov's fiction is constructed to be engrossing for its own sake, at the same time carefully developed for causal credibility, yet so presented that it may also be viewed as a pretext for the deeper philosophical arguments constituting the author's ultimate concern. In analysis I have tried to concentrate not only on the devices which move the story along but also on those significant details which mark 'the well-made book' and particularly characterize Aldanov's fiction at its best, all the while viewing the parts in relation to the whole, the context

¹ New York, Scribner, 1955, pp. 40-42, *passim*.

² "O romane", *Sovremennye zapiski*, LII (1933), 436.

of events providing their narrative framework. At appropriate spots I have also noted recurring motifs of construction, characterization or philosophy, since in their many-faceted mutations they impart a special, often elusive, unity to Aldanov's vast fictional output. Thus, detailed plot analysis aims not to destroy the pleasure of those consulting it without first having read the novels in question, nor to irritate those already acquainted with this body of rich, sober prose, but rather to put each book in proper perspective, to define the author in terms of himself and in the larger framework of Russian literature as a whole, and to point out some of the varied delights and challenges involved in studying a writer not yet adequately appreciated by the reading public.

The names of Russian fictional characters are transliterated according to the system used by the *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*. Proper and place names in other languages have been rendered in the orthography of the languages in question, while the names of Russian rulers, so familiar to English readers, appear in Anglicized versions.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to my family and all professors, colleagues and friends who have contributed, each in his own way, to the conception and completion of this study.

Nicholas Lee

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INTRODUCTION

Of the sixteen novels and philosophical tales written by Mark Alexandrovič Aldanov and forming the basis of this study, nine are set in historical periods ranging from 1762 to 1881. Of those in which the action occurs within the author's lifetime, the three treating life in Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution may be considered as concerned with a closed, and therefore past, period of history. Aside from the fact that even those novels with a contemporary setting have already become historical as the issues of which they are "unconscious testimonials"¹ have lost their immediate urgency, L. Sabaneev, a close friend of Aldanov's for many years,² observes the writer's avid "zoological curiosity" for modern politics was prompted by the instinct of a journalist, historian and novelist to find historical figures in contemporary life.³ It is obvious then that Aldanov must be considered primarily as a historical novelist.

A few theoretical distinctions pinpoint some of the problems involved in the writing of the historical novel. One of its best known practitioners, John Buchan, called it the most difficult form of fiction⁴ and at the same time gave a succinct definition of it: "An historical novel is simply a novel which attempts to reconstruct the life, and recapture the atmosphere, of an age other than that of the writer."⁵ The general consensus of critical opinion is in harmony with Georg Lukács in his assertion that "an analysis of the work of the important realists will show that there is not a single, fundamental problem of structure, characterization, etc. in their historical novels which is lacking in their other novels, and

¹ Alastair MacDonald Taylor, "The Historical Novel as a Source in History", reprinted from the *Sewanee Review*, October, 1938, p. 9.

² L. Sabaneev, "Moi vstreči s Aldanovym: I", *Novoe russkoe slovo*, May 21, 1957, p. 4.

³ Sabaneev, "Pamjati M. A. Aldanova", *Novoe russkoe slovo*, February 28, 1960, p. 4.

⁴ Alfred Tressider Sheppard, *The Art and Practice of Historical Fiction* (London, Humphrey Toulmin, 1930), p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

vice versa".⁶ Therefore, in his brief discussion of the historical novel Ian Watts proceeds from the most general definition of the novel, taken from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, as "a fictitious prose narrative or tale of considerable length (now usually long enough to fill one or more volumes) in which characters and actions representative of the real life of the past or present are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity".⁷ Of the historical genre he specifies, "Fiction dealing with times long past, the historical novel, has a special name, and is surely felt to be rather a special case, probably because we cannot be so sure of the reality of things which neither we nor the author have directly experienced. ...⁸ It has three fairly distinct kinds. In one, where actual historical persons and actions are the basis of the novel, the work is really fictionalized history. At the opposite extreme is the historical romance or period novel in which the past is used merely as an exciting and exotic background for adventures. ... Between the two extremes of antiquarianism and romantic fantasy is the historical novel proper, where there is an authentic historical background but where the chief characters and action are fictional."⁹

H. Butterfield distinguishes between novels incorporating incidents or anecdotes from history and those where history and fiction dovetail less strictly.¹⁰ He further separates novels in which history merely provides the backdrop for action from those in which it directly affects the plot;¹¹ episodic historical narrative is differentiated from that in which history is represented dramatically, in terms of cause and effect;¹² historical novels where events dominate the action are opposed to those where personalities play a decisive role;¹³ and finally the epic novel, in which history is interpreted as the collision of abstract human forces, is singled out from the bulk of fiction concerned primarily with concrete human interaction.¹⁴

Edwin Muir, in *The Structure of the Novel*, builds a theory of the

⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, tr. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London, Merlin Press, 1962), p. 242.

⁷ Ian Watts, "Novel", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XIV (Chicago, Wm. Benton, 1961), p. 571.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 573.

¹⁰ H. Butterfield, *The Historical Novel: An Essay* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1924), pp. 30-31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-49, *passim*.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 54-62, *passim*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-79, *passim*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-100, *passim*.

chronicle specifically to accommodate *War and Peace*. Having elaborated principles for the organization of the character novel, which is primarily concerned with a stationary spatial world, and for the dramatic novel, where time is the dominant element,¹⁵ he classifies the chronicle as a special genre combining the novels of time and space under particularly defined conditions.¹⁶ "Space and time seem equally real in *War and Peace*, but in fact its action takes place in time and time alone. Places are evoked, it is true, ... definite and recognizable, ... but they alter, like the characters, and altering become mere aspects of time."¹⁷ The organizing conception in the novel of character Muir considers to be society, whereas the dramatic novel is dominated by the idea of fate resulting from an inevitable linking of cause and effect between character and action. "The point of general reference" in the chronicle is seen to be more inclusive: "life, or more comprehensively, change."¹⁸ Time in the chronicle moves along two antithetical planes, relative and absolute, in contrast to the dramatic novel, where its speed is "psychological, determined by the slowness or rapidity of the action",¹⁹ subordinated to destiny and terminating with the resolution of the plot.²⁰ In the chronicle, however, time is "generalised and averaged ... it is regular, arithmetical, and in a sense inhuman and featureless. It has one kind of necessity, that of increasing the ages of all the characters arithmetically, of continuing to change them at a uniform rate without paying attention to their desires."²¹ In this rigid progression of astronomical time, independent of action and characters and continuing beyond them, the chronicler sees by a process of faith the workings of a transcendental Fate.²² This indifference of generalized time to the specific incidents in the chronicle makes its action accidental rather than inevitable, as in the dramatic novel. A balance between these two antithetical elements — accidental action portrayed in all its freedom and variety against the uniform background²³ of the rigid progression of arithmetical time apprehended as necessity — Muir sees as essential to the chronicle as an esthetic form.²⁴ Within this framework the chronicler

¹⁵ Edwin Muir, *The Structure of the Novel* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

is not limited in narrative construction or character development: "Action in the chronicle is accidental, since the progress of time itself is so certain that only by episodic treatment can chance, uncertainty, freedom come in, holding the balance and making the picture true. Development of character in the chronicle is predominantly wrought by astronomical time; accordingly it cannot be explained by specific things, but only by the things time might bring forth. Therefore the novelist must describe a sufficient number and variety of these, and that, indeed, is all he must do. He must explain ... change by filling in roughly the stretch of time in which it was taking place. To obtain variety, however, he will have to be ... untrammelled by a strictly developing plot. ... He will not build up an action; he will fill in a picture."²⁵ "The known attribute of the unseen fate — its regular progression — must be rigidly held; the rest must be given as an image of all that is conceivable. Time dominates the dramatic novel, Space the novel of character, Causality the chronicle."²⁶

Georg Lukács, in *The Historical Novel*, is less theoretical than Muir and more inclined to Butterfield's method of dividing approaches to historical fiction into categories. However, he singles out as the most perfect manifestation of this genre the classical historical novel as it developed from the English social novel of the eighteenth century in the works of Sir Walter Scott. The central figure in the classical historical novel is always "more or less mediocre ... 'middling', merely correct and never heroic".²⁷ His psychological neutrality heightens his typicality and makes him the ideal middle ground on which "opposing social forces can be brought into human relationships with one another".²⁸ He serves as the connecting link between the fictional and historical characters of the novel, defined respectively by Lukács in the Hegelian terms of "maintaining individuals" and "world-historic individuals",²⁹ or more simply as the "below" and "above" of society.³⁰ The plot is so constructed as to provide a "broad prehistory" to explain fully the significance of any historical figures involved in the action. When they do appear, they always occupy a minor but important compositional role, heightened by details which humanize them.³¹ These details, how-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

ever, may not weaken their principle function in the novel, which is consciously to “concentrate and generalize”³² the unconscious aspirations of the “below” in society. The classical historical novel views the past as a prehistory of the present³³ and has a popular character. Lukács considers the most important nineteenth century classical historical novelists to be Scott, Puškin, Manzoni, Balzac and Tolstoj. Though he discerns no direct influence of Scott on Tolstoj, he maintains that *War and Peace* “in terms of the *most general and ultimate* creative principles” constitutes “a brilliant renewal and development”³⁴ of the classical historical novel. Tolstoj here, Lukács asserts, is close to Scott in the popular character of his book, based on the contradiction between the protagonists of history and the living forces of popular life.³⁵ In the later novels of Tolstoj and Balzac, with their contemporary setting, Lukács discerns proof of his axiom that “the classical historical novel arose out of the social novel and, having enriched and raised it to a higher level, passed back into it. The higher the level of both the historical and social novel in the classical period, the less there are really decisive differences of style between them.”³⁶

Where does Aldanov stand in relation to these diverse approaches and theories of the historical novel? His own writings plainly establish his place in the development of the Russian historical novel, both negatively and positively. On the negative side he expresses his disapproval of modern writers who he feels improperly mix incompatible literary genres, remarking that since more contemporary authors are writing in the manner of Andrej Belyj than of Puškin, consequently Odoevskij, Hoffmann and even Marlinskij are much less dated than Čexov; what with the rapid changes in literary traditions he sarcastically envisions in the next twenty or twenty-five years critics writing in the style of Brambous and writers in the manner of Zagoskin’s *Jurij Miloslavskij*.³⁷ Reviewing the fragments of Tolstoj’s Peter the Great novel, Aldanov confesses he finds it unclear what the author wanted to say in them, comparing them in style with a mixture of A. K. Tolstoj’s *Knjaz’ Serebrjanyj* and *Jurij Miloslavskij*.³⁸ He criticizes Turgenev’s novella “The

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 285-286.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 00.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

³⁷ M. Aldanov, Review of *Puti tvorčestva: stat’i o xudožestvennom slove*, by A. G. Gornfel’d, *Sovremennye zapiski*, XIV (1923), 430-431.

³⁸ Aldanov, “Posmertnye proizvedenija Tolstogo”, *ibid.*, XXVIII (1926), 430.

Song of Triumphant Love" for being too operatic, reminiscent of *Knjaz' Serebrjanyj*.³⁹ Leon I. Twarog asserts: "Briusov and Merežkovskij ... put the historical novel into artistic settings and used authentic historical material as a medium for the deep universal truths they wished to communicate. It is this conception that the historical novels of Aldanov represent and perpetuate."⁴⁰ Gleb Struve holds an entirely different opinion. Emphasizing the importance of character development in Aldanov's novels, he sees the dominance of psychology even over history as the basic difference between Aldanov and Merežkovskij, in whose historical works there is little psychology, and history is subjugated to an *a priori* religious-historical conception.⁴¹ In a necrology for Merežkovskij, Aldanov clearly indicates his attitude to his illustrious contemporary's historical writings: "Dmitrij Sergeevič was free in his treatment of history, by no means because he did not know it, but rather because his religious idea was dearer to him than both historical and artistic truth."⁴² From these remarks it is obvious that Aldanov rejected as models both the earliest representatives of Russian historical fiction and its more advanced contemporary manifestations.

As the positive inspiration for his approach to the historical novel, there can be no doubt that Aldanov took L. N. Tolstoj as his model. He practiced a real, though not entirely uncritical, cult of Tolstoj the writer throughout his life. L. Sabaneev notes that he "tenderly" referred to Tolstoj as "Lev Nikolaevič"⁴³ and G. Adamovič observes that he used his literary master as the final authority on nearly all literary questions, referring to him in something like the way religious persons allude to The Lord God.⁴⁴ Aldanov himself clearly states that "the divine nature of Tolstoj's genius for me is more than an ordinary literary metaphor."⁴⁵ More than once he called *War and Peace* the greatest book in all of world literature,⁴⁶ in which "Tolstoj was the first really to create in literature

³⁹ Aldanov, "Pri čtenii Turgeneva", *ibid.*, LIII (1933), 415.

⁴⁰ Leon I. Twarog, "Aldanov as an Historical Novelist", *The Russian Review*, VIII, no. III (July, 1949), 234.

⁴¹ Gleb Struve, *Russkaja literatura v izgnanii: opyt istoričeskogo obzora zarubežnoj literatury* (New York, Izdatel'stvo Imeni Čexova, 1956), p. 117.

⁴² Aldanov, "D. S. Merežkovskij", *Novyj žurnal*, II (1942), 372.

⁴³ Sabaneev, "Moi vstreči s Aldanovym: II", *Novoe russkoe slovo*, June 2, 1957, p. 4.

⁴⁴ G. Adamovič, "Moi vstreči s Aldanovym", *Novyj žurnal*, LX (1960), 112.

⁴⁵ Aldanov, *Zagadka Tolstogo* (Berlin, Izdatel'stvo I. P. Ladyžnikova, 1923), p. 61.

⁴⁶ Aldanov, "Posmertnye proizvedenija Tolstogo", p. 432: "War and Peace is the greatest work of world literature; this book is perfection." Cf. *Ul'mskaja noč': Filosofija slučaja* (New York, Izdatel'stvo Imeni Čexova, 1953), p. 247, where *War and Peace* is again called the greatest creation of world literature.

three-dimensional space".⁴⁷ Aldanov not only saw this novel as "a revolution in art",⁴⁸ but as the standard by which all historical novels should be measured: "Tolstoj's artistic devices are an eternal achievement of art which every historical novelist must master, just as every poet must master the music of the Puškinian verse and every composer Wagner's orchestra."⁴⁹ In his own definition Aldanov stated that "the art of the historical novelist (in its first approximation) amounts to the 'illumination of the interior' of the characters and their proper disposition in space — a disposition whereby they explain their historical period and it them."⁵⁰ However, for all his Tolstoj worship, Aldanov in the same article vigorously declares his literary independence: "The use of these devices ... of course, does not indicate 'imitation': an author's individuality is defined by whether he brings something of his own into the form and content of what he writes."⁵¹ The essence of the novel Aldanov defined concisely as "action, characters, style": in the clarity and simplicity of this formula he saw "everything".⁵²

This study, following the clear indications set by Aldanov himself as to his place in the development of the Russian historical novel and his conception of the art of fiction, aims to examine carefully and in detail the action, characters and style of his novels and philosophical tales, always keeping in mind his debt to Tolstoj as a literary master, but concentrating even more on what he has brought of his own to enrich the tradition of the realistic Russian historical novel.

⁴⁷ Aldanov, "O romane", *Sovremennye zapiski*, LII (1933), 436.

⁴⁸ Aldanov, "Pri čtenii Turgeneva", p. 417.

⁴⁹ Aldanov, Review of *Egerija*, by P. Muratov, *Sovremennye zapiski*, XV (1923), 404.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 404-405.

⁵² Aldanov, "O romane", p. 436.

BIOGRAPHICAL REMARKS

The salient features of Aldanov's life are worthy of attention, since they explain many distinguishing features of his approach to his writings. He was born Mark Alexandrovič Landau in Kiev, November 7, 1886, in a non-Russian Jewish family.¹ After completing studies in physics, mathematics and law at the university in Kiev, he went on to receive a diploma at the Ecole des Sciences Sociales in Paris. His advanced studies in such a variety of academic disciplines contributed significantly to making him one of the most widely and deeply cultivated writers in all of world literature.² Among his scientific works are articles published in such journals as the *Žurnal ruskogo fiziko-ximičeskogo obščestva*, *Zeitschrift für physikalische Chemie* and *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Sciences*. Published as separate books are his *Zakony raspredelenija veščestva meždu dvumja rastvoriteljami* (St. Petersburg, 1910),³ *Actinochimie* (Paris, 1937) and *De la possibilité de nouvelles conceptions en chimie* (Paris, 1950).⁴ In the field of historiography he has written *Lénine* (Paris, 1919) and *Deux révolutions* (Paris, 1920). *Ul'mskaja noč'* (New York, 1953) is a philosophical treatise.

Aldanov's career as a writer of *belles lettres* began after his emigration to Paris from Odessa in April, 1919.⁵ Before the October Revolution, aside from the scientific writings mentioned above, he wrote a monograph, *Tolstoj and Rolland*, in 1915, and a collection of literary and political observations under the title of *Armageddon*, published in the fall of 1917 and removed from publication by the Bolsheviks. During his residence in Paris, from 1919 to 1941, he was an active contributor to the émigré journals, *Grjaduščaja Rossija*, *Sovremennye zapiski*, *Russkie zapiski* and *Poslednie novosti*, where many of his novels were published

¹ Sabaneev, "Moi vstreči s Aldanovym: III", *Novoe russkoe slovo*, June 9, 1957, p. 4.

² Struve, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

³ A. Žerbi, "Beseda s M. A. Aldanovym", *Novoe russkoe slovo*, October 9, 1956, p. 4.

⁴ "Ot izdatel'stva", *Ul'mskaja noč'*, p. 7.

⁵ M. A. Landau-Aldanov, *Deux révolutions* (Paris, Imprimerie Union, 1921), p. 103.

serially. At one time he also directed the literary section of the Parisian Russian newspaper *Dni*.⁶

The years 1941 to 1947 he spent in the United States, where he played an active part on the editorial staff of *Novyj žurnal*.⁷ Even after his return to France, where the last ten years of his life were spent, the Russian New York newspaper *Novoe russkoe slovo* serialized several of his works, among them *Živi kak xočeš'*, *U' mskaja noč'* and *Samoubijstvo*. He died suddenly in Nice, February 25, 1957, a little over two months after his 70th birthday jubilee celebration.

⁶ Struve, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

I. SAINT HELENA, LITTLE ISLAND¹

A. ACTION

The first venture into historical fiction of Aldanov's career prompted the following reaction from one critic: "The main subject of *Saint Helena, Little Island* is the last days of Napoleon — if, really, this curious little *tour de force* can be said to have a main subject. For M. Aldanov has dispensed with the ordinary devices of plot and even of form"; nevertheless the book is "distinctly readable — and this, in view of the voluminous literature of Saint Helena, is surely an achievement".² Leon I. Twarog finds that "*Saint Helena, Little Island* has no conventional plot or form, but an extreme degree of unity by means of the simplicity and mellow timbre of the story."³ These judgments raise the question as to the precise nature of both subject and form. Percy Lubbock defines the one in terms of the other: "The best form is that which makes the most of its subject — there is no other definition of the meaning of form in fiction."⁴ He further distinguishes the subject, the novelist's intention in writing his book, from the "argument" or action of the novel, and sees it as a prime essential to any novel: "If it cannot be put into a phrase it is no subject for a novel; and the size or the complexity of a subject is in no way limited by that assertion ... it is anyhow expressible in ten words that reveal its unity. The form of the book depends on it, and until it is known there is nothing to be said of the form."⁵ What then

¹ In Russian, as a book: *Svjataja Elena, malen'kij ostrov* (Berlin, Izdatel'stvo Neva, n.d.); in English: *Saint Helena, Little Island*, tr. A. E. Chamot (New York, Knopf, 1924); in Russian, serially: *Svjataja Elena, malen'kij ostrov, Sovremennye zapiski*, III (February 27, 1921), Chaps. i-vi, 46-88 and IV (April 15, 1921), Chaps. vii-xviii, 41-85. This is Aldanov's shortest work, comprising only 86 pages in serialization and 118 pages in the book, the only one of his novels to be published with illustrations.

² J. L. D., *Literary Review of the New York Evening Post*, August 9, 1924, p. 953.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 235-236.

⁴ Percy Lubbock, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

is the subject of *Saint Helena, Little Island*, and is its form, however unorthodox by standard artistic criteria, adequate to the subject?

The subject of this little book is not only the last days of Napoleon, but also the basic theme of all Aldanov's writings: the irony of fate set against eternal human vanity; and all this is masterfully compressed into the laconic and ambiguous title. Aldanov greatly admired the simplicity of the titles to Tolstoj's books, indicating the protagonists, as in *Anna Karenina*, *The Cossacks*, or *Master and Man*; or the subject, as in *The Death of Ivan Il'ič*, *Childhood*, *Boyhood* and *Youth*.⁶ Obviously Aldanov imitated his literary idol in the choice of his titles, which always either concisely define the climactic action or summarize the subject of the whole novel. *Saint Helena, Little Island* is the longest title in all of Aldanov's literary works. Its length is determined by its source, a notation in one of Napoleon's school copybooks, as an introductory note explains. This clarification strips the title of its first ostensible ambiguity and throws it immediately into a new light: the limits of the story in time and place are fixed, and the irony of Napoleon's final fate is suggested before the action of the story even commences. The unity of the plot and aptness of the title are further enhanced near the end, as Napoleon shortly before his death is made to recall this notation from his school notebook and with this recollection come suddenly to a full realization of the horror of his exile.

The title of *Saint Helena, Little Island*, in symbolically summarizing its subject, limits it not just spatially, but with respect to its action as well. As has been previously noted, the wealth of minutely documented literature on Saint Helena presents the beginning novelist with a formidable problem which requires not only courage but skill to solve successfully. Setting a primarily fictional action against such a familiar background was obviously impossible: a plot in which fictional characters were the protagonists could only suffer by occurring on the island inhabited by Napoleon, and bringing invented figures into contact with the dying emperor would overstrain any serious reader's credulity. Thus *Saint Helena* falls into that subclass of historical fiction Ian Watts designates as "fictionalized history, where actual historical persons and actions are the basis of the novel".⁷

The restricted setting of a small tropical island, with Napoleon as the inevitable center of attention, obviously precludes any important action not already documented. The challenge offered by the limitations of

⁶ Aldanov, "Pri čtenii Turgeneva", p. 413.

⁷ *Supra*, Introduction, p. 12.

the subject, then, is to avoid monotony and simple repetition of facts already known by presenting the principle figure in the highest possible dramatic relief, by illuminating it from as many sides as possible. And this challenge Aldanov has met with impressive resourcefulness by disposing of both time and space in a wide variety of ways. One reviewer complains, "The first half of the book consists almost wholly of digressions and it is not until well towards the end that the chief character enters the scene in person."⁸ It is indeed rather disconcerting to find a story supposed to treat Napoleon's last days beginning with the life history of Suzy Johnson. But in only eleven paragraphs Aldanov not only explains how Suzy comes to Saint Helena, but outlines her whole childhood and, in the details used to describe it, the attitude of the average middle-class Briton to the whole stormy tragedy of Napoleon's rise and fall. These paragraphs constitute not merely a masterfully ironic delineation of character, they are also a *tour de force* in the artistic treatment of time.

Aldanov specially praised the theoretical works of Edwin Muir and Percy Lubbock for their discussion of time as treated by Tolstoj.⁹ Some of Muir's analysis has already been summarized in the introduction. Lubbock notes that the effects of time in *War and Peace* are observed in the context of "the noiseless regularity of life; (the characters') mutability never hides their sameness, their consistency shows and endures through their disintegration. They grow as we all do, they change in the only possible direction, that which results from the clash between themselves and their conditions."¹⁰ The secret of Tolstoj's "tempo" is lost, Aldanov asserts,¹¹ yet he has obviously tried to guess some of these secrets and incorporate them into the treatment of time in *Saint Helena*. Time is used in a variety of different aspects to advance the action throughout the book. It is skillfully telescoped in the few paragraphs introducing Suzy Johnson, and yet it is shown slipping by Suzy in her childhood with the same "noiseless regularity" as Percy Lubbock discerns in *War and Peace*: "on the island of Saint Helena imperceptibly to all but herself, Suzy changed from a little child into an enchanting girl". Suzy's childhood criteria for measuring time are by no means peculiar to her alone, but obviously typical for the regular uneventful course of life in any politically stable country. After rapidly motivating Suzy's

⁸ J. L. D., *loc. cit.*

⁹ Aldanov, "O romane", p. 437.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹¹ Aldanov, "O romane", p. 436.

appearance in the story by condensing her whole childhood in a few pages, Aldanov abruptly slows the tempo of the narration and changes its perspective, focusing it on the dinner party given by Suzy's stepfather, Sir Hudson Lowe, governor of Saint Helena, for the island's Austrian, French and Russian commissioners. It is here that the Russian commissioner, Count Aleksandr Antonovič de Balmain, meets and falls in love with Suzy. Attention in the dinner scene is divided between the political conversation of the participants and the rapidly developing romantic interest between Suzy and Count de Balmain. Following the detailed description of the dinner comes some more brief narration, describing the events leading to the Count's proposal for Suzy's hand in marriage.¹²

Time, which has been progressing steadily forward to develop the Suzy-Balmain action, is now turned backwards. After rapidly moving the story line along to the point where Suzy and Balmain are engaged, Aldanov suddenly "digresses" for four chapters before further advancing it. These pages are devoted to the "inner illumination" of de Balmain's mind, and to a skillful summary through his memories of the various currents at work in the world outside Saint Helena: worldly vanity in English high society and rumblings of dissatisfaction in Russian society against the abuses of Alexander I's obscurantist and immoral autocracy. The political attitudes in these musings complement those indicated in the preceding dinner party scene: the narrow self-satisfaction of the victorious English typified in Sir Hudson Lowe, and the ferocious reactionary climate in Restoration France represented by the French commissioner, Marquis de Montchenu. In these chapters an intimate personal portrait of the count is blended with his political thought by means of a subtle play of associations. Balmain is another in the line of Russian dandies established in Russian literature by Puškin and Lermontov, with his interests directed mainly towards Europe, especially England. In the second chapter he is pictured tying his cravat for the third time, in imitation of Beau Brummel, then reflecting that the three most important men in Europe all have last names beginning with B: Bonaparte, Byron and Brummel. From there his thoughts wander to more gen-

¹² Twarog, *op. cit.*, p. 244, has uncovered a minor but surprising historical inaccuracy Aldanov committed in marrying Balmain off to the wrong Johnson sister. The source he quotes says Balmain wed not Susanna Johnson, but her sister Charlotte. Cf. A. A. Balmain, *Napoleon in Captivity*, tr. Julian Park (New York, Century, 1927), pp. xvi-xvii. This is even more surprising in view of Aldanov's note mentioning as one of his sources the information of J. J. Balmain, a descendent of A. A. Balmain. This note also indicates that *Saint Helena* contains historical data before unpublished.

eral considerations and to various celebrated people he has met, though they constantly return to himself and the two principal questions absorbing him: how to resist advancing age, and whether to marry sixteen-year-old Suzy. The flashback technique passes in the third chapter from Balmain's memory as the center of focus to the viewpoint of the omniscient author. The Count's early life is related up to the time of the murder of Paul I, in which he played no part. His visit to Paul's corpse in the Winter Palace gives the opportunity for a dramatic picture rich in psychological gradations as the reactions of various people present and involved in the murder of the mad czar are contrasted. Chapter Four brings Balmain's history up to the present with emphasis on one side of his personality: he is pictured as a handsome, vain, worldly and correct but basically unprincipled dandy who dreads more than anything in life aging and boredom. The arrival in Chapter Five of the mail, with permission from Alexander I for Balmain to leave the island; a letter from Krivcov, Count Voroncov's secretary in London, giving the latest news from his recent visit to Saint Petersburg; and another from the Count's Mason friend Rževskij in Russia, inviting him to join a secret pro-constitutional society, all advance the action and uncover yet another side of the Count's personality. Count de Balmain up to this point has been leisurely beginning a typical day, thinking idly in a vein which reveals the wellsprings of his psychology, when suddenly something occurs to change the habitual tenor of his thoughts. This is the first instance of a device which Aldanov uses repeatedly in later novels: he gives character exposition on the one hand, in the framework of his creature's everyday musings, and dramatic development on the other, as an unexpected factor interrupts the even tenor of existence and moves events along another course. Krivcov's letter makes it clear that the prevailing dissatisfaction in Russia is favorable for a repetition of the court conspiracy which ended in the murder of Paul I. Rževskij's letter convinces Balmain that there is nobody at present in Russia capable of leading such a conspiracy, as Pahlen did in the case of Paul I: could he become another Pahlen himself? But his realization that Alexander I has been more than generous with him makes him set aside these disturbing thoughts for the moment.

In the next chapter the Balmain "digression", it would seem, comes to an abrupt end: the Count has married Suzy, and just before leaving Saint Helena, the couple makes a tour of the island. The young wife is not simply in love with her husband, she thinks him the greatest man in the world; and he, although the first ardor has already passed, feels

generally content with life: his doubts about the after-life are fading. However, the counterpoint of his wife's idle and aimless chatter, which he already finds irritating, is barely able to distract him from fantasies connected with his political ambitions, in which he becomes Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Then, just before the end of their walk, they come upon a recumbent man throwing pebbles into the water to frighten the fish. Suddenly, Balmain recognizes the man as Napoleon — and the long “digressive” chapters fall into proper perspective. These chapters have been a variant of the “prehistory” Lukács considered necessary to prepare for the appearance of the “world-historic individual”, but with an ironical difference. Napoleon is no longer capable of “concentrating and generalizing” the unconscious aspirations of the people,¹³ but it has been necessary to study Balmain's complex character in detail to fully understand the shattering impact produced by his unexpected glimpse of the exiled emperor. To simple Suzy he is still the “bad Boney” of her childhood and nothing more, but to the Count he appears as something like a phantom of the death awaiting him after all: in panic he thinks

What nonsense! ... What miserable nonsense all these thoughts were: career, conspiracy, Pestel, Nesselrode. ... That man who is throwing pebbles into the water was the master of the world. ... All is emptiness. ... All is falsehood. ... All is deceit. ... There is no life. ... There is nothing. ... Nothing remains. ... Suzy? *He* possessed the most beautiful of women. ... Life is over. ... Old age. ... And bound, bound forever, to this silly little girl (*glupen'kaja devočka*) who for some reason or other is now hanging on my arm. ...

Saint Helena is nearly half over and the central character has so far presented himself only with his back to the reader: yet the beginning chapters have introduced a subplot, filled in the European background to the circumscribed island tragedy, given vague intimations of things to come, and dramatized the pathos of Napoleon's exile more vividly than any face-to-face confrontation could have done. Later in the book the former emperor, giving an interview to an Italian marquis, summons the force of will to assume his legendary cold and majestic mask, but in this seaside scene he is caught off guard, unaware he is being watched, and completely immersed in the stagnation of his exile's existence. The development of the novel has been unorthodox to this point, but its apparent diffuseness of form has thrown its essentially pictorial, static subject into powerful dramatic focus.

The rest of the novel is dominated by the personality of the slowly

¹³ *Supra*, Introduction, p. 15.

dying Napoleon. Although Suzy Johnson and Count Balmain, denied access to his house, can come into no direct contact with him, he is presented in as many other different juxtapositions as his restricted social circle allows. His relations with his French followers Gourgaud, Bertrand, Montholon and Las Cases, so well recorded in their memoirs, are kept to a minimum. More detail is given to his charming friendship with Betsy Balcome, the fourteen-year-old daughter of the merchant at whose house he stayed before moving to his permanent Saint Helena residence. The lighthearted scenes between Napoleon and Betsy offer a welcome relief to the otherwise unrelievedly gloomy mood of the concluding chapters in the book: evidently the dethroned emperor's universal misanthropy made one exception in this young girl. While out walking once with Betsy and Las Cases, Napoleon meets the old Malayan gardener, Toby, whose ignorance of his existence comes as another unpleasant reminder to Bonaparte that he was never quite able to conquer the whole world. He is shown from still another angle in his interview with the fat and worshipful visiting Italian marquis, where more from boredom than from bitterness he vents his spleen on the victors who prevailed in his unsuccessful battle to dominate the world. Still later he is glimpsed after dinner, set against the circle of his voluntary companions in exile. In these chapters Aldanov sums up Napoleon's philosophical attitudes by using the emperor's own words. As his life draws closer to its end, he is shown in yet another setting, unsuccessfully trying to mount his horse, Vizier, for his daily ride. Forced to walk that day, he looks out in the dying light of day at the first stars, searching for his ... "There was nothing more to be looked for on earth." On the sea a ship slowly sails past, bearing the Balmain's to France, and there is one last glimpse of this mismatched couple, the wife weeping miserably and the utterly disillusioned husband determined to resume his former dissipated way of life. After this brief interlude, the final act of Napoleon's tragedy is played out in the last three chapters, with emphasis placed on its dramatic sides. From the beginning of the portrayal of Bonaparte in depth, time in the novel has taken on a new aspect, intimately linked with the whole mood of the story. It slipped by very quickly in Suzy's empty childhood, seen in telescoped retrospect it prepared an important crisis in Balmain's life, but in the perspective of Napoleon's idle exile it stretches out formless, flat and seemingly interminable. At the close of the action it is dramatically intensified once more, moving inevitably towards death. One chapter employs the favorite Tolstoj — and Aldanov — device of the "inner monologue", as

Bonaparte reviews his life, not for his companions and thereby for posterity, but for himself. Its sequel is a terrifying scene in which the delirious emperor, previously determined to *mourir en Napoléon*, loses his self-control and after a nightmare wakens Montholon in the dead of night to dictate, "holding his hand pressed to his side, with flashing, insane eyes, ... a plan for the defense of France from an imaginary invasion". Napoleon's death is briefly described against the background of a raging tropical storm, and the quiet last respects are followed by the rolling nihilistic phrases of *Ecclesiastes*, read by the Abbé Vigniale, alone with the dead man: the Bible left surreptitiously by the Abbé a few days before is opened to these pages. This Biblical epilogue not only serves as a commentary on Napoleon's life, it also expands the time frame: all is vanity, wise men have known it always was so, and always will be so. In the final chapter, where toothless, senile Toby laughs indulgently at the English cook calling Bonaparte the conqueror of the world, since he knows that the universe was really subdued by a legendary Malayan rajah, the story ends with a splendid rolling sentence reminiscent of Bunin's exotic style. The syntactic amplitude and apparent compositional irrelevance of this concluding sentence adds the final touch of irony to the story, demonstrating wise Solomon's pessimism in the example of stupid Toby. Its very obliqueness underlines with special poignance the question basic not just to Bonaparte's stormy career but to all human endeavor: what for? At the same time it releases the time dimension in a new direction toward infinity, into the past and future. There is something ageless, transcendent to what Aldanov has called "the stirring bond of time",¹⁴ in the imperturbable assurance of the ignorant heathen gardener.

In elaborating his theory of the chronicle, Edwin Muir states that the particular actions in it, set against the general concept of arithmetical time, lose their dramatic inevitability:

(The) figures will stay the same, but their appearance, the color of their hair, their thoughts, their affections will continue to alter until the final alteration comes. ... These changes ... will go on silently and unregarded, and only when they have taken place will the characters realize it, but not know how it happened. In such moments as these, when the tramp of time marching behind the action is most clearly heard, all that the characters have done will seem accidental even to themselves, and by no scanning of it will they discover how they came to the point where they stand. It is the apparent waywardness

¹⁴ Aldanov, *Desjataja simfonija* (Paris, Izdatel'stvo Sovremennye zapiski, 1931), "Ot avtora", p. 10.

of the action which produces this effect, probably the most profound the chronicle can evoke.¹⁵

Balmain's panicky realization that the best part of his life has slipped vainly by is a clear instance of the effect Muir has in mind. In a certain sense Toby's reaction to Bonaparte achieves the same result. He has no conscious awareness of the inexorable passage of time, but the very fact that he has passed the age where he is able to reckon it obliquely indicates the change it has wrought in him. At the same time, however insignificant he is, his existence triumphantly negates Napoleon's whole life, making it accidental and meaningless. Isolated in a forgotten corner of the world, he very effectively represents that side of humanity which Napoleon failed to touch and which continued its semi-animal existence before and after his life, as if he had never existed. His brief appearance extends space and time in this tiny novel far beyond the limits of Bonaparte's drama, which is resolved by his death. Thus *Saint Helena* corresponds in one more respect to Muir's definition of a chronicle: "Finished, the chronicle releases an echo which wanders in larger spaces than those in which it has just been confined; spaces, moreover, which repeat on an unimaginably vaster scale the proportions of their original, and respond to the same tones."¹⁶

Confronted with a difficult and familiar theme, seemingly amenable only to static spatial treatment, Aldanov has heightened the drama of Napoleon's exile by portraying him as far as possible scenically, set off against a wide variety of different people, who by coming into contact with him reveal various aspects of his many-faceted personality. Into this dramatization of a primarily pictorial subject he has also skillfully interpolated the dimension of time seen beyond the limits of the immediate action, thus transforming his novel into a chronicle, according to the definition of Edwin Muir. However unorthodox his methods, he has succeeded in extracting impressive dramatic effects from a subject which at first glance seems thankless and restricting.

To fill out the picture of life in Europe, as has been seen, Aldanov uses the flash-back devices of Balmain's meditations, the letters he receives, Napoleon's conversations, and the causerie at the dinner party Sir Hudson Lowe gives for the Saint Helena commissioners. The many allusions in these conversations and thoughts cover not only the whole range of important issues and persons of the period, but stand in close thematic connection with many of Aldanov's own later works. Most

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

of Balmain's reflections related to the murder of Paul I complement material later incorporated into the novel *Conspiracy* (in Russian *Zagovor*). In chronology of action, *Saint Helena* is the fourth and last in the French Revolutionary tetralogy entitled *The Thinker* (in Russian *Myslitel'*).¹⁷ However, it was the first to be written, and there is evidence that Aldanov did not originally intend it as part of a larger literary conception. In the Russian book version Balmain reads in Rževskij's letter that among their mutual friends involved in secret societies is a certain Julij Štaal', "of whom various things are said".¹⁸ This phrase, the only allusion to the central fictional character in the other three *Thinker* novels, is absent in the English translation¹⁹ and in the *Sovremennye zapiski* serialization.²⁰

Many other allusions refer to historical characters treated more fully in later Aldanov works. Byron, one of Balmain's most vivid recollections from his London visit, is the central figure of the philosophical tale *For Three the Best* (in Russian *Mogila voina*), along with Alexander I, Castlereagh, mentioned in Napoleon's interview to the visiting Italian marquis, and Wellington, who looms large in the conversation at Sir Hudson Lowe's party for the Saint Helena commissioners. Wellington also figures importantly in *The Devil's Bridge* (in Russian *Čortov most*). The visiting Italian marquis, being shown through Napoleon's quarters, notices a portrait of Marie Louise by Isabey, who plays a leading role in the philosophical tale *The Tenth Symphony*. Marie Louise herself figures in *For Three the Best*. Bonaparte's *mot* that the only victory in love is flight is used by a self-styled Napoleon type to console himself for romantic disappointments in *Live As You Please* (in Russian *Živi kak xočeš'*); in the same book appears Lafayette, whom Napoleon caustically criticizes in his conversation with his companions in exile. Talleyrand and Fouché, excoriated by Bonaparte in his interview with the marquis, figure importantly in other novels of the *Thinker* cycle. Even Balmain's family tree, probably including a Jewish strain through his grandmother Countess DeVier, links him to a leading character in *A Story About Death*, the young 1848 Polish revolutionist Vier. Curiously enough, nearly all Aldanov novels contain either some allusion to anti-Semitism or some figure of obscure origin that is probably or certainly

¹⁷ The chronological order of the *Thinker* novels is as follows: *The Ninth Thermidor* (1792-1794), *The Devil's Bridge* (1796-1799), *Conspiracy* (1800-1801) and *Saint Helena, Little Island* (1821).

¹⁸ P. 41.

¹⁹ Cf. p. 80.

²⁰ Cf. p. 79.

Jewish. This Semitic fillip generally adds nothing compositionally or psychologically beyond a certain exoticism and perhaps a reminder that the author himself is a Jew, with no intention of disguising the fact. Elsewhere in *Saint Helena* there occurs a passing allusion to "the Jew Bernadotte".

The preceding examples, though far from exhaustive, give an inkling of the enormous number of factors which link all Aldanov's *belles lettres* into an astonishingly close artistic unity. Not only the basic view of life which they express, but common characters, reappear in new combinations and shadings from one book to another, making the whole of Aldanov's fictional work into an integrated literary edifice.

B. CHARACTERS

Aldanov defines one aspect of Tolstoj's "making it strange" technique in the following terms: "Tolstoj at times presents enormous historical events through the intellectual world of people who obviously are incapable of understanding them. Nikolaj Rostov, of course, was not equipped to comprehend the battle of Austerlitz."²¹ Three such characters figure in *Saint Helena* for various compositional reasons: Suzy Johnson, the old Malayan gardener, Toby, and Balmain's Russian groom, Tiška. Tolstoj is inclined to accept the judgments of his simple characters at face value when this suits his purpose of stripping the tinsel away from what he considers as false values. Aldanov's approach, in the case of Suzy and all the English characters in the novel, proceeds from a different vantage point. His problem in portraying her, and his solution, is discussed in *The Art of Fiction*, with regard to Flaubert's treatment of Emma Bovary:

(The problem) appears in any story, wherever the matter to be represented is the experience of a simple soul or a dull intelligence. If it is the experience and the actual taste of it that is to be imparted, the story must be viewed as the poor creature saw it; and yet the poor creature cannot tell the story in full. A shift to the author is needed. ... Flaubert achieves a smooth transition from Emma to his own focus in writing by always keeping her at a certain distance, even when he appears to be entering her mind most freely. He makes her subjective, places us so that we see through her eyes, but with an air of aloofness forbidding us ever to become entirely identified with her. ... The true valuation of character is implied in a tone of irony, which gives the author perfect freedom to supersede his character's limited vision whenever he pleases.²²

Aldanov achieves a fine irony in describing Suzy's childhood by his

²¹ Aldanov, Review of *Egerija*, p. 404.

²² P. 87.

choice of the details that delimit the world of her experience. Suzy's first visions of "bad Boney" as a sort of bogeyman who eats all English children's pudding with raisins, cinnamon and candied peel, and the Continental System as a kind of long, horrid snake, are of course explainable as an effect of her childish outlook towards everything. But prim and proper Mistress Johnson, who cannot explain herself what the Continental System is, the nurse Miss Mary, who threatens to give give Suzy to "bad Boney" when she is naughty, and even Daddy, who agrees with Miss Mary that Boney is not merely Satan himself, but a d-damned d-devil, obviously determine her narrowness of outlook just as much as her tender age. Aldanov clearly implies that nearly everyone in England interprets the Napoleonic wars in much the same way as this silly little girl. And by a dreadful irony of fate her stepfather is the man appointed to guard Napoleon in exile! In the course of the story Suzy grows, but her ideas hardly change at all. Her father's death in the war is connected in her mind with the fact that soon thereafter dessert reappears at the table! All that she remembers much later of the long sea voyage to Saint Helena is that she was the only one in the family not to get even one little bit seasick. Suzy is the classic "flat" character, according to Forster's definition, a character that does not develop in the course of the story.²³ Since she appears as a young child at the start of the action and a grown woman at the end, this does not speak very highly for her intelligence. Her outlook mirrors the self-satisfied, narrow dullness of the whole victorious British nation after the Napoleonic wars, and in typifying this attitude she sharpens the irony and deepens the tragedy of Bonaparte's last years. Later in the book, talking with his intimates, he sums up his own situation: "Twenty years of contest with the whole world — and to finish the contest with Sir Hudson Lowe. ... Oui, quel rêve, quel rêve que ma vie!" There is something touching in her devotion to her husband, but in the chapter where they come upon Napoleon unawares, she is described only in irritating details. Suzy's unimaginative placidity is echoed in the attitude of all the English on the island, from Lord and Lady Lowe through the soldiers, who at Napoleon's bedside take out their pocket-handkerchiefs and raise them to their eyes as if by word of command — "though he was an enemy of the Dear Old Country, he was still the greatest man in the world". Even the cook, informing old Toby who Napoleon was, adds, "He conquered all the nations of the world, except us Britishers."

Toby's compositional role has already been discussed. Since he ap-

²³ V. Muir, pp. 134ff.

appears only twice, very briefly, he is characterized simply by his reaction to his surroundings: his inability to comprehend anything concerning Napoleon and his stubborn conviction that the greatest man in the world was the Malayan rajah with the long and musical title. The other servant, Balmain's sly and ebullient groom Tiška, has something like Toby's function in the story. Toby represents human ignorance, Tiška the earthy, practical side of the Russian people: he laughs gleefully at the language his master uses driving back from his round of the island with Suzy, who despite all her assiduity at learning Russian, can only understand, among all the other words, *mat*, "Mother"! Tiška's joy at returning to Russia is mostly anticipation of vodka and women in plenty. Balmain in his skepticism about the misty conspiratorial idealism of the Masons and other secret societies remembers his groom: "They think that my Tiška requires a Turkish or a British constitution! He requires vodka — that is true; he requires a woman also — like myself — and who knows what besides?"

As a general rule Aldanov is very sparing in characterization by exterior attributes, preferring rather Tolstoj's "illumination from within" and "inner monologue" technique. In a book as short as *Saint Helena* insistence on a physical peculiarity as so often practiced in *War and Peace* is virtually impossible. Eyes are mentioned a few times in the course of the book. Suzy at her first meeting with Balmain is pleasantly aware of his beautiful eyes fixed on her back; later, after he gives her a very expensive present, she recalls that his eyes seemed moist and somewhat oily, like ripe greengages. Balmain remembers more vividly than anything else Byron's beautiful insane eyes. Several times Napoleon's eyes are referred to as insane, also as flashing and terrible. Balmain's carefully hidden bald spot is of course the outward sign of approaching middle age. Aside from these physical traits, however, Aldanov presents his characters through their thoughts.

As has been implied in the preceding section, Balmain's thoughts center on himself. To reinforce his basic "vanity of vanities" theme in the other novels of the *Thinker* cycle on a private level, Aldanov has chosen a fictional character, Julij Štaal'. Balmain assumes the function of representing petty, principally personal egoism in *Saint Helena*: his political aspirations are as dilettantish as everything else in his life. He realizes that he would never take part in a plot on the life of Alexander I, "not only from fear, but also from fastidiousness; he remembered with disgust the scenes he had witnessed in his distant youth in the Mixajlovskij Palace. However, he was not unwilling to profit by the fruits

of a conspiracy carried out by others.” He is typical, historically in his dandyism, universally in his self-centeredness. Moreover, as a brilliant dilettante who prefers a variety of sensations and impressions to deep involvement in anything, he proves the perfect medium for reflecting a wide variety of impressions. His neurasthenia (on Saint Helena “he began to feel that he changed rapidly from one frame of mind to another. The word ‘neurasthenia’ had not been invented then”) increases his psychological richness, and makes it possible to outline his character by following the play of his varied moods. In passing rapidly through his mind, his thoughts not only serve an expositional purpose but also enrich the picture of his personality. Balmain thinks now of himself, now of his impressions of England, now of his fear of death, now of the political situation in Russia, now of whether he should marry Suzy, now of pleasant past memories connected with women, now of Russian literature — should he take to writing verses? — now of the Russian Masons — what connection does all this after-life business have with him? — now of secret societies — he would make an excellent Foreign Minister, and so on. This play of thought associations, proceeding from the ego of the character and again returning to them, is basic for Aldanov’s approach to “inner illumination” in his novels.

Aldanov has allowed himself much less fictionalizing freedom in the portrait of Napoleon. This caution in approaching Bonaparte contrasts strikingly with Tolstoj’s attitude to the emperor. The difference in treatment of the same historical character underlines a very basic variance in the whole outlook of the two authors. Aldanov considers that Tolstoj exceeded the rights of a historical novelist to tamper with the truth in certain parts of *War and Peace*²⁴ in an effort to reconcile history with a preconceived historical philosophy: “The author of *War and Peace* hated Napoleon, so to speak, doubly: the French emperor was hateful to him as a man and an artist as the incarnation of all that was horrid and detestable to Tolstoj; but besides that, Napoleon did not tie in with his philosophy of history at all.”²⁵ Aldanov’s historical impartiality is one of his outstanding qualities as an author,²⁶ so it is not surprising that the picture of Napoleon in *Saint Helena* differs sharply from the one in *War and Peace*. Partiality in representation is avoided by setting the exiled emperor off against a wide variety of people: as his last years are so well documented, this obliges the author to stay close to existing

²⁴ *Ul'mskaja noč'*, p. 96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶ V. Struve, p. 271.

sources. Napoleon is presented from the outside, talking to Betsy Balcome, the visiting marquis, his companions, so that the picture of his personality is in large part a compendium of his dicta chosen to give the particular image Aldanov desired. This material is supplemented only by brief and peripheral fictionalized details. Napoleon is seen looking back on his past, but this gives historical perspective more than psychological detail. The tragedy of his end is mainly pictured from outside as well: the picture of him at the seaside, in front of his house trying vainly to mount his horse, conversing from boredom with people who bore him still further. Perhaps because the Saint Helena period is so well documented, perhaps from a feeling of timidity, Aldanov is for the most part reticent about "creeping into the soul" of the exiled emperor. Napoleon's own words, organized as a summary of his attitude to life, are Aldanov's chief means of characterizing him. Bonaparte's remarks on love, politics and religion deserve some detailed attention, since they are very close to some of the ideas expressed in hundreds of variations throughout all Aldanov's literary production.

Napoleon's misogyny is just as corrosive as his misanthropy: thinking of a woman who had betrayed him, "the familiar feeling of aversion for everybody, especially for women, arose with new force in the Emperor's soul. 'Love is the occupation of idle society', he said gloomily, 'I never attached much importance to it. Only the Mohammedans have accepted the right view of women, while we Europeans take them seriously for some reason or other!'" This view brings to mind the amply detailed similar views on marriage of the Georgian Džambul in Aldanov's last novel *Suicide* (in Russian *Samoubijstvo*). The view of love between man and woman, especially in marriage, is much more complex than this in Aldanov's novels, but for all his personal "chastity"²⁷ the author's frequent pictures of women with light morals belong to his most arresting creations: Nasten'ka in *The Devil's Bridge* and *Conspiracy*, the canteen keeper in *For Thee the Best*, the sorceress in *The Belvedere Torso* and Roxolana in *A Story About Death*, are the most outstanding examples.

In his political judgments Napoleon shares with Aldanov two ideas which appear over and over again in all his writings: a fatalistic belief in the omnipotence of chance²⁸ and an abhorrence for revolution:

Fools talk of the past; clever men converse of the present; madmen try to interpret the future. ... I ... learned from experience how much the greatest events in the world depend upon His Majesty — Chance. ... I conquered the

²⁷ A. Sedyx, "M. A. Aldanov", *Novyj žurnal*, LXIV, 1961, 224.

²⁸ Cf. subtitle of *Ul'mskaja noč'*: "the philosophy of chance".

Revolution because I understood it. I took from it all that was of value, and strangled the rest. And mark, I did this without having recourse to terror. ... Revolution is a terrible thing. ... After Waterloo I could have saved my throne if I had incited the poor to rise against the rich. But I did not want to become the king of a jacquerie. ... I had studied revolution at close quarters, and therefore I hated it, and yet I was born of it. Order is the greatest blessing of society. ... All my victories are as nothing compared with the pacification of the Revolution.

More bitter even than his attacks on women are his judgments of religion, most particularly of Christianity. There is no after-life: “quand nous sommes morts, nous sommes bien morts.” On earth “il faudrait que les hommes fussent bien scélérats pour l’être autant que je le suppose.” As for personal morality, “il y a aussi des fripons assez fripons pour se conduire en honnêtes gens”.²⁹ “If I had believed in God, could I have done what I did? What is God? What is higher righteousness? Almost all scoundrels live happily.”³⁰ “If God Almighty has specially occupied Himself with my life, then what did He want to say by it? Incomprehensible.” The passage from *Ecclesiastes*, to which he leaves the Abbé Vigniale’s Bible opened, eloquently sums up his philosophy, and an important part of Aldanov’s as well:³¹

All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked. ... This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all; yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ... the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to the men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

An instance of the emperor’s endless scorn for all men, despite his passionate attachment to life, is a passing affair he has with the wife of the most faithful of his companions in exile. The general is not named, but the only general’s wife who occurs in the story, Mme. Bertrand, when remarking on Bonaparte’s phenomenal memory for the details of his past battles, is told that it is “le souvenir d’un amant pour ses anciennes maîtresses”. The remark takes on a special irony when addressed to the

²⁹ Cf. Sabaneev, “Pamjati M. A. Aldanova”, *Novoe russkoe slovo*, March 7, 1957: “This powerful man with his thirst for knowledge had no inclination for mystical teachings or religious aspirations. He disliked them and was not very fond of their practitioners. My impression was that he was not completely convinced of their sincerity.”

³⁰ The problem of the relationship to virtue of happiness is discussed more fully in *Ul’mskaja noč*, pp. 195-197.

³¹ Cf. Sedyx, p. 222, who mentions that Aldanov quoted from *Ecclesiastes* in connection with his own pessimism.

lady the reader suspects of being on very intimate terms with Napoleon. Elsewhere he “suddenly felt amused: the devoted general always accompanied the Emperor wherever he went — even when the latter visited his wife”. In another spot, reflecting on his affair with the general’s wife, “From the thought that perhaps the only man in the world who had remained faithful to him to the grave, had fallen a victim to his last cold whim — from this thought the terrible and devilish impulse that had smouldered within Napoleon during his whole life was slightly aroused”. The vaguely stirring infernal element noted here may have provided the basis for the unifying conception of the *Thinker* cycle. The Thinker in question is the celebrated gargoyle with tongue sticking out, on the tower of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, *le diable-penseur*. A paragraph linking *Saint Helena* to the other *Thinker* novels which appears in the book edition,³² where Napoleon recalls seeing the figure and wondering about the meaning of its devilish smile, is absent in the English translation³³ and the *Sovremennye zapiski* serialization,³⁴ yet another indication that *Saint Helena* was not originally planned as part of a larger artistic conception.

C. STYLE

In his analysis of Aldanov’s style and artistic devices Sabaneev places him in the direct line leading from Puškin, Tolstoj, Turgenev and Gončarov to Bunin, the one contemporary writer Aldanov greatly admired.³⁵ Like Tolstoj and Gončarov, writes Sabaneev, Aldanov in his prose has “ideal purity and care of writing, rejection of all ‘flourishes’ and ‘new-fangled’ devices: the same forcefulness (krepost’ frazy), constant clarity, prose without the slightest hint of ‘poeticity’”.³⁶ His prose corresponds admirably to Mirsky’s definition of the Russian realistic novel of the mid-nineteenth century, with “its artistic simplicity, a consistent effort to make its style as unobtrusive and as unstriking as possible. The realists avoided all fine writing. What they regarded as good prose was prose adequate to the thing described, prose that answered to the reality it spoke of, transparent prose that should not be noticed by the reader”.³⁷

³² P. 106.

³³ P. 80.

³⁴ *Sovremennye zapiski*, IV, p. 78.

³⁵ “Ob Aldanove: k dvuxletiju so dnja končiny”, *Novoe russkoe slovo*, March 1, 1959, p. 4.

³⁶ “M. A. Aldanov: k 75-letiju so dnja roždenija”, *Novoe russkoe slovo*, October 1, 1961, p. 4.

³⁷ D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*, ed. Francis J. Whitfield (New York, Vintage, 1958), p. 180.

Sabaneev considers as a contributing factor to Aldanov's literary conservatism his absolute honesty; he was repelled in symbolist prose by what he saw as insincerity, pose, and artificiality.³⁸ The literally prosaic side of his style Sabaneev sees as a corollary of his scientific outlook on life,³⁹ which not only made him reject any metaphysics but also choose as his artistic medium the historical novel, that literary form closest to a scientific discipline.⁴⁰ Aldanov himself states his ideas on literature in his philosophical dialogues: "Russian literature is at its highest where it does not pursue artificial 'originality', which is a very easy and cheap trick."⁴¹ In describing the esthetic approach of his philosophical model, Descartes, Aldanov stresses the fact that clarity and simplicity were his criteria of excellence; if two hypotheses had equal validity, he preferred the more elegant one, not in regard to the true essence of the phenomenon observed but to its hypothetical expression. Further he goes on to connect art and science: "Scientific creation *basically* has a great deal in common with artistic creation ... in both fields ... imagination and keenness of observation are equally essential."⁴² These statements, by a close friend of Aldanov's and by the writer himself, make it clear that the hallmark of his style is prosaic purity with no poetic overtones,⁴³ distinguished by almost scientific clarity and simplicity, as well as a touch of elegance.

No important difference in narrative style or the structure of Aldanov's sentence distinguishes *Saint Helena* from the rest of his work. In his later writings he evolved much more in the direction of structure than in style. He seems to have begun his literary career with perfect technical mastery of his chosen genre, somewhat like Puškin. As in the poet's case, a certain coldness and virtuoso glitter mark his early work. Though he obviously agreed in his early writings with André Gide that "les bons sentiments font de la mauvaise littérature", his later books show the trend towards a less cynical and more positive attitude, the concept of

³⁸ "Ob Aldanove: k dvuxletiju so dnja končiny".

³⁹ Aldanov, "Iz zapisnoj tetradi", *Sovremennye zapiski*, XLIV (1930), 362, credits Tolstoj for introducing "real truth" into literature, and criticising Krylov for his contrived language and situations: after all, foxes don't like cheese!

⁴⁰ "M. A. Aldanov: k 75-letiju so dnja roždenija".

⁴¹ *U' mskaja noč*, p. 287.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

⁴³ Cf. G. Adamovič, "Moi vstreči s Aldanovym", *Novyj žurnal*, LX (1960), p. 111, who remarks that Aldanov evidently did not like poetry much or have a deep understanding of it. Cf. Balmain's views on writing poetry: "There is something frivolous about it. It's not exactly frivolous, but rather ridiculous: 'What is your occupation?' 'I write verses.' 'En voilà un métier.' All men's occupations are not over-clever ... but this one, I fancy, is the silliest of them all."

Kaloskagathos, Beauty-Good, elaborated in his philosophical treatise. The *Thinker* cycle certainly constitutes the most "unkind" part of all his literary output. *Saint Helena* is mostly ironical in tone, from Suzy's biography and other details furnished directly by the author, to the musings of the superficial dandy Balmain and the nihilistic universal misanthropy of Napoleon's utterances, with their echo coming from past ages in the verses from *Ecclesiastes*. In the case of Napoleon and Balmain, their words and thoughts speak for them. Throughout the rest of the story the author keeps himself carefully out of sight, writing in sentences as short, unobtrusive and simple as possible, thereby bringing out in higher relief details designed to produce an ironic effect.

One device used with different effects is the interpolation of foreign languages into the Russian text. Napoleon's *mots* come out with extra force and elegance in French. This is also the case with Balmain, who finds it hard to express certain ideas adequately in his native Russian. This French orientation even in thought adds to the characterization of the count. Suzy's atrocious French heightens the most dramatic moment of the story: alarmed at her husband's violent reaction on coming upon Napoleon unawares, Suzy cries "Darling, what is the matter? Quelle est la matière?" And suddenly, with dreadful clarity, the reader feels that this marriage is a dreadful, irremediable mistake.

The ironical effect of mixed languages comes out much more vividly in the Russian text than in translation. Among other things, it points up basic differences in Russian and English psychology: English phrases inserted, sometimes in Russian transcription, as a strange dissonance in the body of the Russian text admirably imply the author's attitude toward the Britons in the book. Diminutives serve to reduce the range of the English intellectual horizon in the reader's mind, especially as the appellation Boney has the same morphological structure as Betsy, Eddy, and Daddy, who with Mistress Johnson and Miss Mary limit Suzy's world. Not only Suzy, but also her mother tend to see all kings and emperors in terms of King George, all the English love The Dear Old Country, and so on.

A striking device, repeated in Aldanov's later writings, is the sentence-paragraph to mark transitions for a variety of effects. A sentence-paragraph begins chapters 6, 7 and 11. They are so short as to occupy less than a line of type, and their typographical isolation, at a spot where the reader is inclined to hurry on, arrests the attention and increases the dramatic effect of the narration.

Some stylistic variation is achieved by the introduction of the two

letters to Balmain from Krivcov and Rževskij, poles apart in style and even in language, but treating the same subject, the abject condition of Russian under Alexander I. The contents of Krivcov's French letter are given in a rapid, epigrammatical Russian summary, liberally sprinkled with anecdotes, but includes two phrases in brittle French salon style. The inclusion, at the end, of the Saint Petersburg pamphlet remarks on the woeful state of all the virtues in Russia provides a curious contrast stylistically to the gossip in the rest of the letter, but at the same time an apt commentary to it. The elaborate style of Rževskij's letter, heavy with Old Church Slavonicisms, offers some comic relief in the irritated reaction it produces from the Europeanized dandy Balmain. He feels still greater bewilderment at the cabalistic books in even more archaic style sent by Rževskij, which he reads on board ship bound for home. Further stylistic variety is afforded by the quotations from *Ecclesiastes*, in their broad resonance presenting a striking contrast to the bare, unadorned sentences of the narration. The only other sentences that call attention to themselves in the book are those characterizing Toby's mythical rajah, with their syntactic complexity and mysterious Oriental coloring.