The Iron Bridge

and

Digging deep: the enchanted underground in Pavel Bazhov’s 1939 collection of magic tales, *The Malachite Casket*.

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities

2018

Rebecca Hurst

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
# Contents

Abbreviations 4  
Abstract 5  
Declaration & Copyright Statement 6  
Acknowledgements 7  

## I: The Iron Bridge

Preface 9  
Notes on the Poems 11  

### 1. Walking Dwelling Thinking

- Hide and Seek 14  
- Night Journey 15  
- The Frog Prince 16  
- Brothers 17  
- The Art of Needlecraft 18  
- Mapping the Woods
  - i. Winter solstice, 21 December 2009 19  
  - ii. Spring equinox, 20 March 2010 21  
  - iii. Summer solstice, 21 June 2010 24  
  - iv. Autumn equinox, 23 September 2010 26  

An Explorer’s Handbook 28  
For Thereby Some Have Entertained Angels 29  
Desire Lines 30  

### 2. On Sledge and Horseback to the Outcast Siberian Lepers

- Table of Contents 31  
- Kate Marsden Leaves Moscow 33  
- Much to my Regret 34  
- Appendix to Official Papers and Letters 35  
- A Great Work 38  
- Teeth 39  

### 3. Holy Fool

- Sibir’/Сибирь 44  
- The Early Medieval Balkans 45  
- Letter From Spring Green, WI 46  
- The Emotional Lives of Soviet Objects 47  

### 4. Her Unbreakable House

- The Memetics of Fairy Tales 49  
- A House of Sorts 51  
- Familiar 52  
- Cuckoo 54  
- Singing Together 55
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How the Fox Lost his Brush</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Corresponding Lover</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Satisfying Lover</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Careless Lover</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Song</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lismore</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The House Opposite</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Women Around the Table</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabbage</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Giantess</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niht-sang</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homecoming</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrivals/Departures</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Animal Bridegroom</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodbye to a River</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Stone Flower</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wone</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Unreliable Narrator</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### II: Digging Deep: the enchanted underground in Pavel Bazhov’s 1939 collection of magic tales, The Malachite Casket.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: In a Certain Town, In a Certain Time</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 – Pick: the Soviet Magic Tale as Descent Narrative</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivers of gold, forests of stone: introducing Bazhov’s tales</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bazhov in the Anglophone world</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The magic tale underground</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic tales in the Soviet context</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enchanting reality: words about words</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The Fairy Way of writing’</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 – Shovel: Excavating the Role of the Storyteller</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Traces of the storyteller clinging to the story’</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A tale twice told: translating Bazhov’s tales</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Malachite Casket as magical object</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descent 1: ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descent 2: ‘The Malachite Casket’</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 – Lamp: Ambivalence &amp; Utopianism in Bazhov’s Tales</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading malachite green and gold in The Malachite Casket</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descent 3: ‘The Stone Flower’</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descent 4: ‘The Mountain Master’</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: When Content and Form Speak with One Voice</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterword: How the Storyteller Found his Stories</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>241-48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Word count: 59,693
Abbreviations

IPF  ‘In Place of Foreword: The Watch-house on Dumna Mountain’ by Pavel Bazhov, in *The Malachite Casket: Tales from the Urals*, trans. by Alan Moray Williams

IFT  *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, by Jack Zipes,

OED  Oxford English Dictionary

RF   *The Russian Folktale*, by Vladimir Propp

RMT  *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*, ed. by Robert Chandler

TMC  *The Malachite Casket* (The abbreviation refers to the book, not the title story within the book, which will appear written out in full within single quotation marks.)

Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two parts, each of which is intended to stand alone. Although conceived and created separately there is, inevitably, some resonance between the two projects, which over the course of four years of research and writing have entered into dialogue with each other. Both poetry and critical essay are concerned with the fairy tale as a literary form and share motifs of the underground, doubling, and the creation of enchanted or mythical landscapes.

I. The Iron Bridge

*The Iron Bridge* is a collection of poetry that interrogates and subverts the traditional tropes, characters and themes of the fairy-tale form. It is grounded in place, and in the exile’s experience of far-from-home. And it is deeply interested in the human compulsion to gossip and chat, sing songs and tell stories. My poems are rooted within the genre of fairy tale and folklore. However, these roots have branched out in many different directions, complicating my initial thoughts on the collection, and encompassing themes of: the landscape, history, and folk music of the Sussex Weald; the travels and tribulations of the Victorian nurse and explorer, Kate Marsden; and the art of the Surrealist painter and writer, Leonora Carrington.

II. Digging deep: the enchanted underground in Pavel Bazhov’s 1939 collection of magic tales, *The Malachite Casket.*

Grounding his folkloric fairy tales in the local legends he heard in childhood, Pavel Bazhov used mining and mountain lore to create an original and paradoxical literature of descent. This thesis excavates *The Malachite Casket*, his 1939 collection of Soviet magic tales. Writing at the height of the Stalinist Terror in the mid-1930s, whilst in hiding and ‘underground’, Bazhov created characters and narratives that traverse above and below ground. In his stories the subterranean realm is an ambiguous space of hard labour and punishment, enchantment and transformation. I argue that concealed within the text of these utopian and socialist realist magic tales is not only the story of Bazhov’s own time ‘underground’, but also his oblique critique of Stalinism’s impact on Russia’s rural peasant underclass. In exploring these hidden themes I employ a synthetic approach, using sociohistoric and subtextual analysis. The intention of my ‘underground’ reading is to mimic Bazhov’s katabatic themes, exposing the negotiation in tales and text between what is above and below, and revealing more fully their cultural and literary significance, and enduring legacy.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification from this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Copyright Statement

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trademarks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=24420), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/about/regulations/) and in The University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Vona Groarke and Carol Mavor, for guiding and inspiring this project from beginning to end; for reading and discussing its numerous iterations; and for their unflagging enthusiasm and generosity. I am grateful to my third supervisor, Ian McGuire, for his discerning suggestions on both my research and poetry. Thanks are also due to the Centre for New Writing, and its co-directors John McAuliffe and Kaye Mitchell, for providing a collegiate and stimulating atmosphere in which to work; and to the Graduate School staff (especially Julie Fiwka and Joanne Marsh) for their support, and for answering the ten thousand questions I’ve asked over the past few years.

Also to be thanked are my fellow students who have given such generous feedback on my work. Fatema Abdoolcarim, Lucy Burns, Kathryn Dixon, Imogen Durant, Charlotte Haines, Tessa Harris, David Hartley, Usma Malik, Shirley Nicholson, Valerie O’Riordan, Janet Rogerson, Alicia Rouverol, Eleanor Ward, and Mariah Whelan: I appreciate your friendship and encouragement.

Beyond the University of Manchester’s redbrick walls, I am grateful to friends and colleagues who have supported my creative work in various ways including: Zhanna Alimova, Amy Bere, Abi Curtis, Suzanne Holland, Astrid Holm, Helgi Rafn Ingvarson, Oliver Christophe Leith, Johnny Marsh, Oge Nwosu, Julian Philips, Stephen Plaice, Pat Robson, Catherine Smith, Tabitha Tarran, Katie Tearle, Jenny Walters, Rachel Windus and Freya Wynn-Jones.

The support of my family has been a source of strength and joy, and I am grateful to my parents, Ranna and Tony Hurst, for my folk-roots; and to my sister Rachel Hemingway-Hurst and my brother-in-law Colin Heminway, for being there through good times and bad. My partner, Steve Wells, is the rock on which this thesis was built: I am ever thankful for his love, good humour and patience, and for the dancing.

This thesis has benefited immensely from the close reading and critical feedback of my friends in-writing and in-life, Siân Thomas and Terri Mulholland. Thanks are also due to Michael Betteridge for the wine and music; Ed Moss for the boating; and Hester Lonergan for the fairy tales and porridge.

The School of Arts, Languages and Cultures’ Home Fees Bursary was what made writing this thesis practically possible, and I am grateful to the Centre for New Writing for additional funding during my third year.

Ideas developed during my research on The Malachite Casket were presented at the conference ‘Damsels in Redress: Women in Contemporary Fairy-Tale Reimaginings’, April 2017, Queen’s University Belfast.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my wonderful daughter, Luka Madden, and to my dear friend, teacher, and mentor, Cuyler Etheredge; the two Texans whose belief in me has always meant more than words can say—with love and gratitude.
The Iron Bridge
In writing this collection I sought to bind myself on paper to the intuitive logic of fairy tales. Imaginatively these poems travel far and wide: from the woods, fields and hollow lanes of my rural Sussex childhood, to a surrealist’s vision of Mexico City, and the mythical Eastern Europe I inherited from my grandmother. *The Iron Bridge* documents the tension between personally embodied and imaginatively inherited landscapes. I am interested in what happens in the space between experiencing something and remembering it; and in what compels us to make art, instead of simply getting on with our lives. I interrogate and excavate the edge-lands that border the known and tangible world, and the messy dreamscapes beloved of surrealists, mapping wild places I have visited, both geographical and psychological.

Experimenting with form is one of the joyful challenges of writing poetry. Many of the forms in this collection were dictated by the requirements of the poem itself, as it emerged on the page—for example the two column ‘bridge’ that is used in ‘Wone’, or the ballad-like short-line stanzas of ‘Teeth’. The long lines of ‘Fire Song’ pushed through to meet the narrative demands of the poem. Conversely, the short lines of ‘The unreliable narrator’ mirror the poem’s fragmented and fibbing imagery. And the couplets in ‘Letter from Spring Green, WI’ and ‘Сибирь/Сиби́рь’, visually represent one aspect of these poems that was important to me during their writing—my sense of the lines coming through with urgency, like dots and dashes racing down a telegraph wire. Other poems were written over many months and through multiple redrafts; the long, winding shape of ‘Goodbye to a River’, which flows across several pages, no doubt reflects this provenance. Finally there are formal choices can best be described as echoes of things seen, heard, or read over the course of a looking, listening, and reading life. ‘The Memetics of Fairy Tales’ falls into this last category and uses a form I describe as ‘there-and-back-again’, which was taken from Stan and Jan Berenstain’s picture book *Bears in the Night* (London: Harper Collins, 1981).
Over the three years *The Iron Bridge* was written, poetic form was what I came to rely upon as the thread drawing the collection together, using the rhythms and compressions, omissions and narrative drive of ballads, and the surreal nonsense of nursery rhymes, to inform and amplify the lyric voice. The poems also share imagistic and linguistic motifs, including those of magical transformation, Sussex folk traditions, and exploration. Across the collection I have also played with line-length, repetition and rhyme, the musicality of language, and the use of stanzas or (in a small group of prose poems) not. Finally the rhythms and impulses of walking a landscape, repeatedly and over a number of years—sometimes alone, or with a dog, sometimes in the company of friends and family—has been a critical element in the making and shaping of these poems.

In putting together this collection I decided, after some experimentation, not to strive for strict grouping by theme, instead allowing the poems to converse across the work as a whole. This subjective approach—placing the poems in dialogue with each other—reflects the experimental and chancy striving of the dissemination of fairy tales, and the vagaries of both exploration and art. My desire writing *The Iron Bridge* was not to make a seamless body of work. Rather, I tried to create a collection of poetry that reads like one of my grandmother’s quilts: a patchwork of irregularly-shaped pieces cut from outgrown clothes, old curtains, and frayed tea towels, and stitched together by a single, unifying hand.

~ж~
There are two found poems within this collection. The first is ‘An Explorer’s Handbook’, and a full bibliographic reference to the book from which this poem was made resides in the title. The second found poem—‘On Sledge and Horseback to Outcast Siberian Lepers’—is based on a book by the Victorian nurse and explorer, Kate Marsden. Her epic account of travelling in Siberia in search of a cure for leprosy was first published in London by the Record Press in 1892. The ‘Appendix to Official Papers and Letters’, meanwhile, draws upon Kate Marsden’s letters held within the Bexhill Museum archive. I am grateful to the Museum for allowing me to use this material. The song quoted in ‘Appendix to Official Papers and Letters’ is taken from ‘Across the Sea’ by William Allingham (1824-89).

Five of the poems take their titles from, and refer to, paintings by the surrealist painter Leonora Carrington. The poems are: ‘The House Opposite’, ‘And then we saw the daughter of the minotaur’, ‘Three Women Around the Table’, ‘Cabbage’, and ‘The Giantess’.


‘Goodbye to a River’ is another borrowed title, taken from a book by John Graves (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961). The poem’s epigraph is from his account of a canoe trip down the Brazos River in central Texas.

Finally, ‘Mapping the Woods’ was written as part of a collaborative art project undertaken with the visual artist, Johnny Marsh, and the writer, Siân Thomas. I want to acknowledge the vital role they played in the development of this site-specific poem, which is based on walks we took together over the course of two years.

I am grateful for the support of the following publications and anthologies in which my work has appeared over the past three years: Agenda (‘Night-sang’, ‘Letter from Spring Green, WI’, ‘Walking Dwelling Thinking’, ‘The Early Medieval Balkans’, ‘Holy Fool’); Aesthetica Creative Writing Anthology (‘Cabbage’, ‘And Then we Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur’); Antiphon (‘A Great Work’); The Clearing (‘Familiar’, ‘Hide and Seek’, ‘Sibir’); Magma Poetry (‘Kate Marsden Leaves Moscow’, ‘On Sledge and Horseback to the Outcast Siberian Lepers’) and The Next Review (‘Memento’, ‘Night Journey’). And also for the support of the Manchester Museum, where I was writer-in-residence in 2014-15.

~Ж~
What we habitually see confirms us.

(John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*)
Walking Dwelling Thinking

This wood has a thousand exits and entrances: stiles, gates and tripets, gaps and breaches.

This wood is hammer-pond, chestnut and chalybeate, charcoal and slag heap, leats and races.

This wood hides the boar-sow in a thickety hemmel; is home to the scutty, the flindermouse, the kine.

This wood is cut and coppiced and burned. Each decade caught-hurt—it takes a tumble.

This wood is two green and clay flanks pinched by the link of iron bridge over water.

This wood keeps its secrets: the peaty-black knuckerhole where the dragon lies sleeping.

This wood scolds with a tawny owl’s brogue shrucking and shraping, kewick hoohoo.

This wood is ashen, eldern, and oaken a mile from the village, ring-fenced, well-trodden.

This wood summons you from out of your house to walk through leaf-fall and bluebells and moss.
Hide and Seek

I chased them all—St Stephen’s freckled wren, the Whitsun Man, John Barleycorn and his bride—from first frost to leaf-fall, from old moon to cold.

Now it is Michaelmas: the land sun-warm, fields shorn, blackberries ripe to bursting. And on I quest, hide and seeker, bow-tuned and wearing this rank waxed jacket, blunt nose lifted to the swallocky air. Barefoot past Rushers, Hawksden and Sharnden, then down the twittens checking my traps of wire and ribbon. At dusk I found him mired in the coppice and clay—the King of Wands.

He was at bay and panting hard. I branded him. Burnt my mark in the fist of flesh above his heart then slashed the snare that held him fast.

He shuddered at my touch, leapt through a gap in the hedge and fled. The stream clamoured. The greenwoods shrugged into nightfall.

A mile away and the white stag stopped to graze on the flank of a hill, bowed his head and a blackbird called for rain.
Night Journey

At the station’s entrance
a narrow man sleeps. Nested
in rags he has put away
his sign and cup of coins.

His rough-coated dog
opens one copper-bright eye
but does not lift its head
as I walk by.

Along the track the lamps
rear back against the sky
lift the sheer black tent
mute the moon’s light.

All roads are open
on this frosted night.
The rails crosshatched by shadows
as I walk the way I am led

as far as the tunnel
then continue until all light
and sense bleeds away beyond
a shallow bend in the brick wall.

And now in the dank and dark
I can feel my way, stone by stone
like a child locked out at night
imagining the way back home.
The Frog Prince

On rainy nights she dances on the puddled road squashing worms and slugs and snails beneath the crêpe soles of her black school shoes.

You’ll find her deaf and mute as a toadstool. Give her a hammer. Let her loose in the hen house. Tap, tap, she will crack and smash those little worlds.

She’s trouble. Tickling the purple rain clouds ’til they let down their long winding sheets of water, exceeding the rivers and flooding the town.

Gnarly and bored, she sets off a string of Black Cat firecrackers in the tin tabernacle at the end of the lane. Sits on the bridge smoking Silk Cuts, eating toffee crumble.

The prince, when he finally shows, is a damp squib of a boy from the wrong side of Tunbridge Wells. His sodden grey cardigan droops to his knees.

But he sings sharp and apple-green as a piccolo, folds himself like origami to squeeze through her window, trails honeysuckle and patchouli. She takes his hand.
Brothers

One gingerbread boy.
I rolled him out
I shaped him
brother-of-mine
tall as my thumb
not too big not too bold
two linseed eyes
a raisin mouth—oh
baked and browned
now run brother run.

Three brothers-of-mine
or their rain-shadows
on the puddle’s skin.
All called Thomas.
All tadpole boys.
All three water-babies
fused ankle to gill and
my knife slit the clinch knot
that held them tight.
Now run brothers run.

Seven cubs, seven boys,
seven men all bearded bears
swilling mugs of strong tea
black as their eyes, sweet
as their song. Brothers
who hid you? Who fed you?
Who wove and stitched
seven nettle shirts sitting
seven years dumb in a tree?
Run brothers run.

Twelve green bottles
twelve iron keys
twelve wooden buttons
twelve silver pins
twelve gold coins
twelve white swans
twelve black ravens
twelve spent matches
twelve drops of blood.
Now run brothers run!
The Art of Needlecraft

Once there was a girl (or boy) who woke alone in the forest.
Dark as it was s/he set off home letting feet find path until at last
the path split and there were two.

The first was the path of needles.
A path so sharp in the telling it slid beneath the skin.
To travel this path is to journey outside-in; to slip through
the needle’s eye small as a flea.
S/he took the path of needles to ask needle-sharp questions.
To feel with his/her own fingers along the border’s selvedge
the fat, neat seam, the herringbone stitching.
To wonder when did s/he come to be in this body?
This place? How did the forest embroider and annotate them?
What is this electric nerve?
And how does it and why does it sting?

The second is the path of pins.
On this path s/he collected and catalogued dreams, spelling
them out in silver pin-heads.
S/he is pricked to ask: what do I know about this place?
Is this body my own or another’s?
Who holds in their hand such a plump, green pin-cushion?
Who has travelled here before?
Who follows? Whose scissors?
S/he pins a sheet of tissue paper against the form; pricks an outline;
his/her body (or some other’s); cuts out a pattern and trims it
to the shape of girl/boy
a forest/two paths diverging
the rough, weedy selvedge
sharp needles/ silver pins
Mapping the Woods

Parson’s Wood, Mayfield, East Sussex
Longitude: 51.061001
Latitude: 0.308827

[...] woods are evidently places propitious for wandering, or getting lost in, all woods are a sort of labyrinth.
(Francis Ponge, The Notebook of the Pine Woods.)

i. Winter solstice

(21 December 2009
sunrise: 08.00 am
sunset: 03.54 pm)

Between dark and dusk
we walk to the brink of the year,
a line laid iron-red on cinereous clay.

Hands cramp with cold on the old road
as we sketch and note this moment
a half hour past sunrise but not brightening
though the rooks are awake and jigging
on the frosted shoulders of a broad oak.

Pass a nip of brandy, roll another smoke.
Make a mark
and a mark on the damp page.

This winter’s day the wood is a room,
screened by snow, shuttered and barred,
nothing doing.
Yes, we feel the parson’s coppiced woodland,
feel the challeybeate and charcoal in our bones.

We circle it, three walkers beating the bounds,
speaking of other pilgrimages:
the vixen’s path
the vole’s path
the roebuck’s.

From the knap of this hill everything
is explicit, holding a pose.
The line of burnt-orange larches, the net of branches the beech casts against the sky.

Count the ways in:
the paths and driftways,
sheere-ways and tracks,
the gates, tripets, stiles,
and holes in the hedge.
Loop around and back again.
These Wealden hills burn us up—
the effort of taking them in the snow.

Fumbling in pockets for a pencil stub
I trace the shape of a chestnut bole,
a rosette of reindeer moss.
The doctor’s lanky son peers down,
says, “*Clara-donia rangiferina,*”
and harrups to clear his throat.
Rolls another smoke.
Siân hands out gold chocolate coins,
blows her cold-pinked nose.

By the hammer pond we peer
through the burne-washed brick tunnel.
The water races, black as slate.
Three centuries back there was a foundry
here: a pond bay, trough and furnace.
We light a cardboard waterwheel.
It doubles, spins and crackles.
The old year creaks, then turns
as with a flash the flames ignite
fast as the robin flits
across the ice-fringed pool.

Night comes early.
We set a candle in the window.
There is stew in the oven,
wine and bread and salt on the table.
Johnny draws back the curtains
and St George ambles
through the unlocked door.
We cheer as he slays the Turk
with his righteous sword,
cheer again when the dead
man is magicked back to life.

Walking home through the wood
an hour past midnight
I find a chestnut leaf
   lying on the path,
fallen
picked up then palmed

between the pages of this notebook.
ii. Spring equinox

(20 March 2010
sunrise: 06.03 am
sunset: 06.10 pm)

Sugar moon, stiff hands flexing.
Station Street to High Street
down Fletching Street to Coggin’s Mill.
The air is tepid and thick,
mist draws down along
the sandstone ridge.
Traffic reporting from the A26.
Birdsong quadraphonic;
simulcasting spring.
I feel it too.
Yawn, warming
as I walk, and
my body yields.

At Johnny’s house a bedroom window
is propped open. We shout in the dark,
“Wake up lapsy!” and a lean shadow
calls, “Good morning! Be right down…”
We take a thermos of tea, fill our pockets
with Simnel cake and tie our bootlaces tight.

6.04 am. A minute past the day’s dawning
but no sun. Just grey cloud and the clatter
of the burne, rain-choked and precipitate.

Beating the bounds of the rough-sketched
woodland, walking in silence.

Downstream from the hammer pond
we paddle along a reach of gravel.
Above us the bank rises ten feet sheer.
We dig in the clay for nuggets
of charcoal, slag, and ore,
grubbing out a lump of iron
big as my head. It is cast
with foliage, a dainty kissing ball
made of lion’s mouth, celandine,
hemlock and stitchwort.

Later we sit in a row on a gate
and Johnny tells a story he heard
from Alf Clout—an old woodsman
who has his corner in the pub,
and his terrier, and his pint
of Harvey’s Best.

There was a young bullock
white and round as the moon
who broke a fence
and lost himself deep
in this tangled stretch
of coppiced wood.

“He dwells here still,” Johnny says.
“And each year in March
as we cross the season’s threshold
there is one out walking who will see him.
And they’re in for a hard year,
poor fated soul, for a glimpse
of the white stot bodes no good.
It’s easy to get lost
in the Sussex Weald,
a land all folded in on itself,
as many nooks and creases
as a lady’s glove.”

We nod, make note and eat our sandwiches.

Twelve hours pass in doing not much

but walking and watching the shift
in shade and tone on this sunless day.

We wash our hands and drink from the spring,
tie three-dozen ribbons to the ash tree
that sprouts nearby, a wish for every
bright strip of cloth
binding us close
to this crooked place.

The flat light drains colour from the fields,
submerges the intricacies of the wood
and exhausts the gaze. Nightfall
revives the faded landscape
just as it begins to rain
and we see the gleaming bones
of a long-dead oak and the bronze
and mauve of budding trees.
Still walking, homeward now, heads down against the rain, ready to see this bout through, we cover the conifer plantation make our last lap along the Little Rother.

Mud licks our boots. We walk blind night-fallen, surefooted. Until the path dips and there is a flurry like a leaf turning in the breeze. Siân stops. Peers down. "A toad," she calls out in warning and summoning for then there is a frog and a frog and another toad and five, six, seven more leaping up from beneath our feet green and gold on grey.

We walk single file heads bowed and counting our steps with care on this most lively road through the woods knowing they've woken to warmth and dark and wriggled from their muddy holes to mate in the puddles and ponds where they were spawned.

We hear them crooning now for this damp gloaming is their unimaginable high noon and the wet and the warmth and the woods have called and they have come.
iii. Summer solstice

(21 June 2010
sunrise: 04.44 am
sunset: 09.17 pm)

Milk thistle is the solitary maid
setting up her spindle in the coppice
amongst the sprouting chestnut boles
and bee-fingered foxgloves.

The stream is silent, stretching
itself from blue sunrise to last light,
seventeen hours long. No rush then.

And the leaf canopy is a bold new green,
while fireweed and knapweed,
ragnwort and buttercup scald
the fields and verges and tracts
of common ground.

We follow a fox-track flush
with orchids and milk-maids,
make tea from pods of Solomon’s seal,
inhal the rare steam and lie about
in the long grass waiting
and reading aloud.

Johnny unpacks the picnic:
bread, cheese, tomatoes
red as my sun-flushed face,
Milton’s Comus,
a dish of watercress,
another of strawberries.

Tilting his hat and taking off his shirt,
the doctor’s son begins to read:

*The first Scene discovers a wild wood.*
*The ATTENDANT SPIRIT descends or enters.*

Afternoon dozing—

I dream of a woman
sitting with her lap full
of some puzzle of yarn.
She wears green and gold
and is all pins and needles,
bobbins, hooks and barbs.
She reaches out and snips a slit in the day with a pair of tiny brass scissors. The sun slides through the tear…

And wake to see the runic heron tow its long legs across the sky. Rooks follow, black ribbons unspooling.

It is time then and we take tea-lights to the hammer pond while night seeps in like a promise half-kept

and we light the dish of black water.

Now this small place is an amphitheatre, the stories we tell in whispers, epic.

Siân spins a yarn:

The way she tells it, the scraggly milk thistle moves at night on tattered feet. I believe she has that in her, to tear herself from the soil, to creep close, closer.

And at daybreak replants her feet in charcoal and clay, far from home and back again.
iv. Autumn equinox

(23 September 2010
sunrise: 06.47 am
sunset: 06. 57 pm)

The rosebay willowherb
has gone to froth and spume.
Siân, leading the way,
finds a great web
blocks our path.
The spider—a stripy-legged man—
hovers in the corner of his larder-loom.

We have been out for an hour.
The birds are rousing.
My stomach growls.
I pick blackberries.
A hazel leaf shivers
and drops.

This wood was full of children
when I was young.
We built dens using cut branches
the men who came to coppice
left behind. And in the old charcoal
pits we lit fires, cooked our tea—
cans of beans and sausages.
We came here with matches
and small dogs
homemade bows and arrows
and paper boats
and penny chews.
We skinny-dipped
in the hammer pond,
stayed out too late,
let the glow worms
light us home.

I knew all the old stories:
dragons and devils,
saints and sweeps,
tusked wild boar,
the white bull lost
and still looking
for a way through.
At night sometimes
 tucked up in bed
I heard him roar.
And yet for all that
the wood let us enter
and saw us leave
to live our lives,
grow up,
move away.

Now I think on it
there were only three of us
playing in the wood.
Sister, friend, and me.
Now three again
constructing a _sukkah_
of willow and bracken.
Lying inside we look up,
see the tawny autumn
leaves and the blue sky.

Later I sit on an oak limb
shaggy with lichen.
The air is warm
on my bare arms.

I feel just right,
at home
here in my skin
and in the woods,
up to my ankles
in leaf-mould
and sphagnum moss.
The clamour of insects
rises in waves and rolls down
the sun-struck meadow.
The shrilling fills the wood
like a hive brewing to swarm.

And yes, I hear you calling.
I take off my shoes.
Remember we said
we’d walk home barefoot?
The ground is warm
and turning.
An Explorer’s Handbook.

Obtain a horse. At local markets look for a hardy independent type, still fat after winter.

Fleet the hours at police roadblocks by pressing wild flowers, writing letters, mending clothes.

Red ants can be used to pinch-closed a deep cut. Comfrey is also known as ‘knitbone’.

Hunting: you can summon a crocodile by calling through cupped hands so sweetly, “Nyark! Nyark!”

Or flicker your torch across the moon-scaled river and watch their eyes snap to red.

Birds will lead you to the nearest spring. A sturdy camel carries 600lbs with ease.

In the Sahara wells may be one-hundred feet deep. Looking down you see a circle of metal sky.

Bring rope long enough or you will smell the water but die of thirst anyway.

The magnetic needle of a broken compass will point north if placed on a leaf floating in a bowl of water.

Tested exits from tight corners: smile politely, offer mugs of tea, surprise is the essence of self-defence.

For pre-expedition advice about breakdowns, what spares to take and how to cope, see Appendix 2.

Breaking camp, leave no trace. To kill a fire beat it, stamp it out, cover it with earth and sand.

It occurred to me that every day we awoke lost, were lost as we travelled, and stayed lost all night.
For Thereby Some Have Entertained Angels

The Russian girl working
a double-shift in the gelateria
knows all about being a stranger
in a strange land.

She has grey eyes and
lemon-yellow hair. Wears black.
Leafs through her dictionary
on the counter as if shuffling
a fat pack of cards. Tells
how to find the thing
my heart most desires:

blood oranges
from the Sessa superstore
on the edge of town.

The Russian girl hands me
a creased plastic bag and says
ask everyone, and then
ask and ask again,
show them the address
on this bag until at last
you find your way.
Desire Lines

I face the glass and afternoon light divulges the lines silvering skin between throat and breast. These days what I want is straightforward: my daughter’s good health and cheer; a decent night’s sleep; to walk land that lights my senses like a switchboard at midnight on the 31st of December.

Sleepless I set to the task of recreating in mind a walk to Parson’s Wood and back home, coming down the High Street at dusk as shops are closing. The wood brinks on a southern ridge—a creased line of oak and beech. Paths through the trees converge, pushing through a gap in the hedge until one day appeared a fence, wire between hazel stakes, bisecting the path which stepped back on either side, affronted. I set out with wire cutters. Split the line and left it neatly folded, this path being an expression of what I want in the world: a way through the dirt and grass, ribwort and cinquefoil to last a season, more if my wanting chimes with others’ hardwired restlessness: feet pressing down blades of grass, trampling and scoring our movements, compacting the earth across lawns, verges, public places, circumnavigating or following another’s path, feet pressing grass, pacing out our wanting.

~Ж~
On Sledge and Horseback to the Outcast Siberian Lepers

But, in spite of my plainness of speech [...] my motives were misconstrued, and all kinds of rumours were set afloat.
(Kate Marsden, On Sledge and Horseback)

i. Table of Contents

To her most Gracious and Imperial Majesty

THE QUEEN
This story
Of a woman’s work
On behalf of helpless, hopeless, and homeless outcasts,
is,
Dedicated.

Chapter 1
The writer’s object — The herb, reputed to arrest the progress of leprosy —
Arrival in Moscow — The Golden-Headed City — Taken for a spy —
Mounting the sledge — Off!

Chapter 2
The pleasures of sledging along a broken road — Wolves — A cheap “hotel” —
Roses in Siberia — Pirate drivers — A petition to the Empress —
A feather bed at last.

Chapter 3
Mostly mishaps — Russian harness — Minor inconveniences —
We are shot onto a river — A smash — Those horses! —
Convicts travelling in winter — A pitiable sight.

Chapter 4
Clanking chains — Omsk hospital and prison — Free dinners for the poor —
Scene in an étape — Deserted! — Haunted dreams —
Dangers of crossing thawing rivers.

Chapter 7
Area and population of Yakutsk — Native traits and habits —
Rules of etiquette — Laying up stores for twelve months — My outfit —
A wise dog — The start of the 2000 miles’ ride on horseback.
Chapter 8
What the map says — Sinking into bogs — Visions of home — Bear alarms —
Graves with a tragic history — A very simple breakfast — Keeping my journal —
Depression — Arrival at Viluisk.

Chapter 11
Stumbling onwards — Forest solitude and the screech of owls —
A witch fable — The earth in flames — Picking our way through fire —
A mad horse and a narrow escape — In God’s hands — Exhausted.
ii. Kate Marsden Leaves Moscow

Two steamer trunks; a satchel of books; a thousand rouble note; five boxes of tinned sardines, black and white bread, Chinese tea, sugar, forty pounds of plum pudding; two dozen boxes of oil-lamp wicks; Jæger flannel undergarments; a pair of long-haired stockings; a letter of introduction from the Empress Maria Feodorovna; an eider-down ulster; a full-length sheepskin coat; a reindeer-skin coat; a pair of gentlemen’s hunting stockings; mittens; felt boots; a fur-lined cap; shawls, rugs, and blankets; a map; my father’s compass; a travelling companion (Miss Ada Field); a whip and a revolver; a sledge; a Cossack driver; a bottle of vodka; a troika; a pack of dogs; nightfall; a frozen lake; a forest; a road.
iii. Much to my Regret

Under the birch-wood table we hold hands tapping fingers against palms in make-believe semaphore trying this tune or that, toying with secrets.

The samovar sings.
Our host—a creased old woman—believes it has a soul.

Steam rises like the stories we tell snug by the stove whilst outside snow falls rivers freeze and winter shackles itself to the land.

Our driver says at last the roads and rivers are hard as iron and the way east is clear. He bows to the red corner and prays.

Dressed for a long journey my dear friend lumbers about the room cocooned in layers of silk flannel wool felt and fur.

I look to the candle on the table.

The guttering flame leans into the horn shield as I would lean into her hidden places wanting what she will not allow me to have.

“Father requires my return to Chiswick,” she says folding the pages of a letter the means of her summoning though our mail has not followed us so very far from home.

She has carried this ruse all along the Trakt of bones from St Petersburg to Omsk.

The old woman sees my tears. Calls out, “What now my dove?”

Ada does not cry. Snaps shut her carpetbag. Shivers. Says, “Yes, love, I must go.”
iv. Appendix to Official Papers and Letters

17 March 1913
Reading the letter I remember playing a childhood game: rock, paper, scissors. And how I learned from my sisters that paper cuts and words bruise.

_Private & confidential—in an unfamiliar hand._
I burn the envelope and the letter. Breath comes short, heart banging. Walk to Cooden Beach walking close to the sea as I dare, so the rumble of surf dragging shingle echoes my pulse. But even the bellicose roar of waves cannot drown out the words. Instead, like the long lines of rollers on and on they come and I am afraid they will drag me under.

I hear the words chime with the knock of my heels as I walk home later. The house is dark. If I tidy, yes, I’ll tidy this cabinet of coral, shells, and molluscs. I line them up, pinked and cream and hold the conch’s freckled, glassy lips against my ear for the shush of my dead sisters’ voices:

_I stretch out my hands; who will clasp them?_
_I call,—thou repliest no word [...]_
_For the tide’s at rest from east to west, And I look across the sea._

19 March 1913
The doorbell shrills. My dear friend Miss Norris startles, drops her conté crayon and smudges the picture she is working on. One of the pastel paintings for which, in Bexhill, she is quite famous. From an exhibition catalogue:
_Sunrise Over Sea—Light at Evening Tide—A Grey Morning—Storm Clouds._
They did not sell as we hoped. I lay down my book. On the hall table another letter.

4 April
It takes me fifteen long days to reply to my accusers.
These things are written: I am a person of commanding influence. I am not a suitable person. I am a terrible fraud who makes a comfortable living out of the leper business. I am unwomanly. But here—my book—a published account of my travels on sledge and horseback. Also serialized in the *Girl’s Own Paper*. Anyone can find and read these things. Or see this attaché full of official papers: introductions to and commendations from the governors of great provinces and other persons of authority: Her High Countess Tolstoi; Gregory Eremeieff; letters from grateful lepers; and from my guide, Serge Michailovich Petroff, attesting to the résumé of my journey to Yakutsk. And still they say I am a great mystery and they say I threw myself upon a simple gentlewomen—Miss Elizabeth Norris—the daughter of a clergyman. They say she seems mesmerized by me.

6 April
The doorbells rings. Neither I nor Miss Norris move to answer it or to collect the mail. We sit, silent and feign work, absorbed in the task of ignoring the creamy white envelope on the mahogany table, addressed to me. In the top-left corner the words—*Private & confidential*—written in a hand now quite familiar. The letter lies until after dinner. The maid heads home and Lisbet—red-eyed all evening—goes to the hall, locks the door and brings me the letter. She places it on the table beside my chair. I ignore it and continue reading. Lisbet sharpens pencils between fits of weeping. After a half hour or so I say goodnight, very sweetly and go to my room. And then when I’m sure she is sleeping I go back downstairs.
As I write my reply the pen-nib sticks and stammers a flurry of black ink across the paper. I write like it is sword play. I parry and lunge and each letter makes a fierce mark or bold counter-stroke. I write as if this furious riposte will appease the wagging tongues. As if I believed there was a speck of hope, though I know there’s none. The viper of scandal is still my own dear friend, his green scales lustrous after all these years. I hear the clamour of all those accusatory voices: I am not a suitable person. I am unwomanly. I am a great mystery and I threw myself upon a simple gentlewomen—Miss Elizabeth Norris—She is mesmerized by me.

Pushing open the window I lean into the fading dark; listen for birdsong and the boom of the spring tide, incoming; listen for the shrill of my dead sisters’ voices singing as we used to, in close-harmony.

And the water’s bright in a still moonlight, As I look across the sea.

And what else would you have me do with my big, rough-made heart? This heart that trots ahead, teeth bared. This heart for which anything was possible but nothing likely. This heart I fear will one night explode like a meteor over the Siberian taiga making matchsticks of forest trees and burning bright enough to be seen from the Bexhill shore. Where can this heart go and respectably and quietly live out its days?

Awaiting your reply I remain, Kate Marsden
v. A Great Work

What stirs the blood?
Not tea and muffins.
Not tatting and quilling.
I like to wrestle. I like the heavy lifting
the hard work of shaping and making
as the sea at Cooden Beach relishes
the work of lifting the shingle
over and again across its own threshold.

I love you because loving you
is not light work, not woman’s work.
Yet it is the patch I have been given.
Clay and sandstone hefted by the shovelful
clearing a space on rough ground
for something to take shape.
It is not dainty work but a shift
to suit this grafter’s love.

One day I woke to find my heart
had upped sticks and gone east
like the village of Russian serfs
you spoke of: fugitives, unwavering
in their belief in some distant place—
the underground kingdom of Belovodye
ruled by the White Tsar and the Maiden Truth
where each person gains at last the thing she longs for.
vi. Teeth

Forget her fast. Eyes shut and split, five, six. Little bitch little squit. Lost in the woods. Slam and bolt the door on her.

Pour her away. A saucer of sour milk. Little stinker onto the shovel with her. Spilt. Blink. Lose her quick.

And let the seasons pleat folding one year to the next linen stacked in the press. Stamp the sparks down and still stories smoulder. The neighbours, a childless hunter and his wife thought they saw her scamper through the trees.

It was mid-winter. No one in the village had fuel or food to spare so they tried to forget her.

But like the keening of the dogs at night her memory nipped and snagged their sleep.

It was a burr caught in the soft edges of their hard days: a child alone and trapped in the snow-shuttered woods.

On the eve of the Epiphany they found her sleeping in a bowl of ice and leaves. The trees bristled with hoar-frost.

A pack of dogs circled her, snarling and barking, lured away by the gift of raw red meat.
And the hunter carried her home. Filthy, naked, mute. They took her in, little cuckoo. Fed her, dressed her, taught her.

Months passed and the girl learned the bones of polite behaviour. Soon she could thread a needle, sweep the floor and milk the cow.

She spoke stammering named things like a spikey Lilith pointing to – this? – this? – this?

Again and the mask slipped. She bared her teeth snapped at strangers. Bit striking hard and deep.

Three times she ran to the woods. Three times the hunter tracked her, fought off the dogs, caught her, brought her home.

'Til one fine summer’s day a newspaper man, just passing through, saw the story in her.

He photographed her capering on all fours, lapping from a dish laid on the floor. And

the hunter and his wife let her go. Done with the trouble and the strangeness of her. Nearly forgot her until

one frost-furred night they woke to howling and stood at the window saw her calling, calling and heard the wild dogs in the woods answer her call.

Yes, she barked and howled with an ease she had never coaxed from her human voice.
And like burrs in her matted hair
they had snagged
the woods, the pack of dogs
and she had worked her way back.
But no longer tame and trained,
now all sharp teeth and claws.
The hunter and his wife heard
their doomed hens
cry out in warning
and ran—too late—to save them.

Found a flurry of blood
torn feathers
and the girl gone
just the brass latch
on the henhouse door
spun around past the point of holding.

~ж~
Holy Fool

_In my beggar’s mind, for the first time, ditches open, full of brassy water, and I follow them away from myself, both the blind man and his guide._

(Osip Mandelstam, from _Selected Poems_, trans. by Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin)

Children follow me along the village’s single street.

They call me Fool but do not throw stones as at the Tartar beggar-woman whose very look can curdle milk, cause a healthy child to wither and die.

Sometime ago I vowed to touch no iron. The cross around my neck is carved from wood. I will not hold an axe or knife or hoe. Cut nothing, kill nothing. I bind my feet in birch bark and felt, wear linen, a stinking sheepskin coat, wind a braided belt of scarlet and gold around my waist.

I do not sleep among people but alone in the forest. Speak soft as leaf-fall. Shy away from the touch of another human being.

At the crossroads I kneel and bow my head to the earth three times. Then walk across fields through acres of blue flax, golden rye.

I share my black bread with finches, crumbs from my upturned palms. Beyond the village lies untrammelled forest and boundless steppe.
Fierce winters, frosty nights
have nibbled away at me,
reddened my cheeks and fingertips
but also charged me
through with some fierce blue light.

I laugh and sing as I walk.
Reach down and pluck
from the snow
a dead branch.

In my hand it bursts
into newly-minted leaf.

I lose myself in the forest.
I find myself there —
blindman and his guide —
feeling out the narrow paths
made by deer and wolves.

I sing as I walk,
Lord, lord, have mercy upon me.
North has deep pockets
felt boots, a flash silk scarf.

North is a pest and
stings like a gadfly.

North has a tongue of flame
and knobby, crafty fingers.

North is round
as a malachite egg.

North is a blue note leaning
on the glottalic creak of river-ice.

North is mouthing bone
sound from a Jew’s harp.

North tattles like a samovar
her tall-tales steaming.

North is a hut, eaves
shaggy with lichen.

North is a sentry—
Baba Yaga’s black goose.

North bangs hard
on a horse-skin drum.

North is a frost-bronzed
wood pile.

North sh-shouts
your name.
The Early Medieval Balkans

The old map confounds.  
A finger tracing boundaries  
mistakes borders for rivers and roads  
a tea-stain for a pearly lake or estuary  
and an ink-fleck for a walled town.  
Always someone going somewhere  
in a tremendous hurry: call them  
Bulgars or Avars or Ostrogoths.  
Listen for steppe-sure hoofs  
treading the silk road to dust.

Lost in the woods northwest of Cluj  
the envoi, asleep in his saddle, dreams  
of wrestling a bear. He sways in its arms  
a rough-ready polka. And wakes to the tune  
of east-wind scraping against conifers.  
The letter, null cipher, ticks inside his satchel.  
He’s in love with a woman whose tongue  
he does not speak. There are three sides to this love—  
her, him, war—pacing out the miles between them.  
Blood flows like water and

the river has not yet reached the sea.  
A week later and the eastern sky  
is black with smoke and crows.  
In the musty, cluttered gatehouse  
a middle-aged man struggles  
to fasten the fibula  
of a tarnished breast-plate.  
The buckle won’t bite down  
on the leather strap. He thinks,  
This fit perfectly the last time I tried it on.
Letter From Spring Green, WI

My father had fists of steel; my mother had fingers of glass. I grew up between them, their cub, a paper tiger
crouched on the red Uzbek rug outside my father’s study playing rock, paper, scissors—ice-hearted little princess.
I only had to say it once and they hopped to like sunflower seeds on a hot stove.
The white Kremlin walls were metres thick and every time they dug to lay a cable or fix a leak
found bones, charred by fire or frost-furred red. The black earth was thick with them. At night
I heard them rattle and the gold domes buzzed with forgotten voices.
Now tell me, do I slip and break things—vases, lamps, clocks and windows—
because I am old, careless and impatient? Or because I am Stalin’s daughter?
They still read my mail and spy on me though I’ve long scratched Koba’s name from mine. Wisconsin
winter nights are dark and cold. I sit up writing diktats. Let me go to the movies! Take me to the ballet!
Buy me an ice cream! He wrote back to me in his wretched, clumsy hand signing himself
Your humble and unworthy peasant. Kukushka—little cuckoo—I hear, I obey. It will be done.
The Emotional Lives of Soviet Objects

Here is a potato peeler—the silver bow that fits the palms, its blade worn thin by paring. When everything else has been sliced away, this it will know: Leningrad, November 1946, and in the Bay of Finland sea-ice is forming. At midnight he returns and their conversation takes the shape of the night; two phone calls, two interruptions, a hard frost but no snowfall. Alone at last they sit across from each other in the unheated room, and can imagine no other place, no other. The shutters are closed. On the back of the door hangs her winter coat, worn at the collar and elbows. She recites a poem, something new, but will not let him put her words to paper. His pen remains capped in his pocket. At 3am they drink a glass of tea and share a dish of boiled potatoes. For all the cold and dark, through their talk she has a sense of daylight breaching.

Here is a doily made by one woman as a gift for another—loved like a sister—who vanished soon after. Barely, she had time to place the round of lace beneath a potted plant, before the tornado lifted her away. Where it dropped her, who knows. Her friend, for all the years of looking, never found her. Now the doily sits under a plant (a plush-leaved violet) on another’s table. It has aged to a hue we might call nicotine-yellow, the colour of absence, of Not Known at this Address, of places that can only be returned to in dreams, transformed yet uncannily familiar. And each tiny knot holds tight, as hands clasp before parting, a fastness against forgetting.

Here is a slipper—one surviving half of a pair—the felt sole sheened slick as mackerel-skin. The crocheted foot is a colour that evokes the linoleum floor of a communal kitchen: of cabbage dumplings and dirty canal water. Is the colour of the old palace’s shrapnel-scarred walls, converted by such flimsy partitions into cubicles for merely living, and through which a neighbour’s dry cough, efficient love-making, samovar-boiling could distinctly be heard. It is the colour of speaking in whispers. Having lain for years in the stairwell at the bottom of a pile of rubbish, following the hasty clearing of that tiny apartment, it was separated from its other. Having been slept on by a spaniel, carried to a three-sided bed after the loss of her puppies, it smells of that dog’s secular and unassailable loyalty. And still the slipper holds the shape of the foot that wore it in the early days of a second marriage, in the solitary decade when son was imprisoned and husband a stranger, and every attempt at friendship or conversation foundered upon those old buffers of self-reproach and loneliness.

~Ж~
Her Unbreakable House

Describe the box.
   It is square, carved from elm with a brass hinge and lock.
I see you hold it in your hands.
   I hold it against my body, so.
It is a burden.
   It is the size of tea-caddy.
It is an object of beauty.
   You could call it beautiful. The spiral of the grain, the glow.
The box is very old.
   The box would prefer we not discuss its age.
You found the box.
   Rather, it was where I had been told it would be.
And it was locked when you found it.
   Tight as a nut.
Why did you unlock the box.
   Because the key was in my hand.
You had the key.
   It was the length of my little finger.
You had the key.
   I wore it on a black ribbon around my neck.
Why did you open the box.
   Because the key sprung the lock and the lid lifted.
Does the box belong to you.
   Certainly. In my dreams.
It was yours to open.
   I did the thing that had to be done.
Did the box contain what you expected.
   It held what I needed at that time, in that place.
No more or less.
   Yes. I would say that is true.
And now what is in the box.
   The box is empty.
Nothing then.
   (Silence.)
Nothing then.
   I would not say so.
   I would not say nothing.
The Memetics of Fairy Tales

The locked door

The locked door.
The golden key

The locked door.
The golden key.
Midnight

The locked door.
The golden key.
Midnight.
The goose-girl awakes

The locked door.
The golden key.
Midnight.
The goose-girl awakes.
The path of needles
and the path of pins

The locked door.
The golden key.
Midnight.
The goose-girl awakes.
The path of needles
and the path of pins.
A red cloak

The locked door.
The golden key.
Midnight.
The goose-girl awakes.
The path of needles
and the path of pins.
A red cloak.
Paw prints in the snow

The locked door.
The golden key.
Midnight. Starlight.
The goose-girl awakes.
The path of needles
and the path of pins.
A red cloak.
Paw prints in the snow.
An axe
An axe.
Paw prints in the snow.
A red cloak.
The path of needles
and the path of pins.
The goose-girl awakes.
Midnight.
The golden key.
The locked door

Paw prints in the snow.
A red cloak.
The path of needles
and the path of pins.
A forest glade.
The dreaming goose-girl awakes.
The golden key.
The locked door

A pair of scuffed red shoes.
The cottage in the forest.
The goose-girl awakes.
Midnight. Starlight.
The crone at her spindle.
The golden key.
The locked door

The cottage in the forest.
The goose-girl awakes.
Midnight. A fence of skulls.
Iron shoes and iron teeth.
The golden key.
The locked door

The goose-girl awakes.
The palace of moonlight.
A silver staircase.
The golden key.
The locked door

Midnight.
The golden key.
The locked door

The golden key.
The locked door

The locked door
A House of Sorts

Once I made a paper house
Paper bed & paper moon
Paper door & paper windows
Sharpen each fold with bone

Paper bed & paper moon
Paper key & paper lock
Sharpen each fold with bone
Tick-tock of the paper clock

Paper key & paper lock
Paper owl in a paper cage
Tick-tock of the paper clock
Ink the stone & print the page

Paper owl in a paper cage
Paper bed & paper moon
Ink the stone & print the page
Out of sorts & all alone

Once I made a paper house
Paper bed & paper moon
Paper flute to play this tune
Familiar

She has some small skill with these things
making balm, potions, cooking almost—
a dream of cooking. As when we were children
making mud pies and jelly from yew berries;
food we left for the birds, used to poison
the gamekeeper’s needle-jawed dog.

But she could make anything grow or fail:
cow, crops, child. Dousing with a whale bone
on Bible Bottom she lifted a spring;
clear water from the dry chalk slope.

They said when the frozen fields caught fire
it was her weird song lit the spark.
They said she could turn the wind like a knife.

That they saw her barefoot in the Hollow Lane
running a gauntlet of nettle and thorn
to meet the tinker, her lover.

They said her name, spoken aloud, was a shaft
of cold air that sliced open a man’s throat
so he must swallow her down like a draught.

Hedge-witch, slut, shrew:
the girl the priest called brazen; the girl
the school-master kept back to parse
her dark nipples, rub his smooth face
in the musk of her armpits, climb
up through the froth of mud-laced petticoats
to mouth and mumble at the source
of her: cupio, comedo, futuo, ustulo.

What they dreamt and what is—
these things are fraught as the strip
of common ground that bleeds
the village into the downs.
Where the shepherd says he saw her
flying amidst a flock of fieldfare, the flash
of white from their wings bedazzling
him even now as fireside he tells the tale:
how he found her again at Saxon’s Cross
riding the chalk road like a wild mare,
skirt hitched up her skinny legs, eyes pinched
shut, clamouring in some devil’s tongue.

Tells how he put his arms around her,
shouted her name into the bitter wind
and held fast as she was changed.

First a fiery branch, then a block of ice,
a double-edged blade, a roebuck
a viper, a falcon, a burning coal.

Tells how his heart failed.
How he dropped her, watched her race
up the scree, a flint-grey hare
long ears laid across her back
eyes moon-bright.

Not mine, he said.
Not any man’s.
A typical example of the ritual ways in which rural communities expressed contempt and disapproval, usually for offenders against the decencies of family life...consisted of visiting the offenders home after dark...and serenading him or her by clashing tongs and pots and pans, booing and yelling, rattling bones, blowing cow-horns and so forth.

(Jacqueline Simpson, *Folklore of Sussex*)

I dare them, I dare them, to summon me from bed with rude cries and rough music.

Come dusk and I hear them, over feld and water, clashing tongs, pots ’n pans, baying for my daughter.

The grass shivers and parts before them. I hear the stamp of iron boots, the threat in their voices.

Chance-born—but I’ll not hand her over. And to damp down their nuisance I set to spelling.

It’s hard work—sweat and muscle—to quell a crowd blowing on horns, booing and yelling.

They holler, ‘Witch!’—but I stand against them. As they clamour at my gate I fix them in place.

Struck fast and tugging at their boots, I net them in clouds of midges, thick as Queen Anne’s lace.

Breathing-in they choke, spitting and gasping. My midges hush their rough music and they beg me to free them. But this bad girl’s not yielding. I hold them ’til dawn, red-bitten and fickle.

Now they’re gone. The grove rings with bird song. And I sit with my face sun-addled, babe at my nipple.
Singing Together

A morning of daffodil bright and she sits, packed with all the rest on narrow benches, singing. Outside the window, beyond the shrill of voices, Harry pushes a mower in circles, laying siege to the ilex tree. *I’ll sing you one, O/And green grow the rushes, O.* She presses her knees together against the sharp buzz of love; like growing pains to have her spacious brain suddenly crowded with this someone—his sweet smile and eyes faded blue as his handyman’s overalls. At lunchtime she seeks him out against the rules; finds him in the boy’s cloakroom. Harry is sloshing a mop around the empty stalls. The rows of duffle coats smack of playground games. Pairs of black plimsolls nest like swallows in their wire cages. She lingers by the door and chats. She likes the way Harry lays down his mop to listen; how his hands hang from knobby wrists; how he chuckles at her tall tales. Later, he is called to the classroom to remove a bumble bee. Standing in the thicket of knee-high desks he is a giant; she knows him from fairy tales. He carries the bee away as if it were a fallen star.

Later, home and watching *Jackanory,* she writes a note using her father’s fountain pen. The ink leaves a black spot on her index finger. She signs the note with an flowery H, and sleeps with it under her pillow. Now, folded small, the note sits for days in her coat pocket. It is a razor blade. It slits open the seams. It falls to the ground and her mother finds it, unfolds it, reads the careful cursive: *I love you.* Holds the note between thumb and forefinger and says, ‘Tell the truth.’ Says, ‘No one will be angry.’ School, the next day, and Mother Superior’s voice is a hammer, ‘Admit you wrote it yourself. It is your handwriting.’/’It is not!’/ ‘These are your words!’/’They are not!’ She watches a column of dust rise and fall in the sunlight. The window is cracked. From the room below her class singing. *What is your one, O/?One is one and all alone/And evermore shall be so.* And in the distance, the sound of a mower. She says, ‘He wrote it. He wrote it!’ Her fingers curl fierce-tight around the fib, that pinches like a bee sting, a sharp buzz of love. *And green grow the rushes O.*
How the Fox Lost his Brush

Why do poets invoke the Muse?

(Robert Graves, The White Goddess, 1961.)

I. Help Wanted

A job with lots of advantages: cosy working conditions, minimal obligations. Required: typing speed of 80 wpm; a sparkling glance; steadfast demeanour. Preferred: able to brew a reviving cup of tea and cook a soft omelette. Occasional evening shift bivouacked under the stars. Therefore good circulation and night vision helpful. Pay commensurate with experience. Room and board provided. Include full-length photograph, dress, and shoe size with application.

II. Appraisal

You were not what I expected (leaf-green girl, first glance, playful pursuit). Instead—a woman that sharp I cut my tongue on her. I was wrong-footed from the moment you accosted me in Woolworths. I: shopping for decongestants (springtime, sinus trouble). You: holding a box of knee-high pop socks and my ‘help wanted’ ad. I tried, with courtesy, to brush you off, assuming it would not be difficult given your advanced years and limited mobility. But that night, as I dined alone in The Original Third Eye, you returned at the very moment I crushed a cardamom pod between my back molars, splitting open the roof of my senses. I gulped Cobra to wash you away but the channels were open and you poured through, clamouring like a lusty sixteen-year-old charging up Crowborough Hill on Saturday night. There was no tuning you out, no turning you off. I heard you and you doubled down on me. Then split my lip like some street-brawling slut. I kicked your shins as you clung to me, and woke the next morning bruised from foot to knee, head throbbing, aware that something vital was missing. One week later and you remain camped on my front lawn with your eight shambolic sisters, who blight Rannoch Road with bonfires and bawdy sing-alongs. I sit stuck inside with the curtains drawn. While you squat on my doorstep, your ruined mouth pressed to the letterbox, calling out my name.
The Corresponding Lover

...writes to you on notepaper filched from the munitions factory store. He addresses you My dearest Angle—words being a thorny-thicket he tangles with; also misspelling your three-syllable name, the country of your birth, other common or garden words that in his hand snag and turn back upon themselves. But you won’t correct him, being truly more Angle than Angel, with your scimitar smile, spill of ink-black hair, and foreigner’s accent catching like a burr on the briskness of received pronunciation. His daily letter names your parts, which he adores: your bumpy nose, tender buttons, how you sing-out his name. He anticipates your next visit; the two of you hands clasped, creeping in stocking-feet past the landlady’s front room. Upstairs, door closed, his hasty hands are on your thighs and underneath your skirt before you’ve taken off your coat. Tossing shoes under the bed, jumper wrenched over head, he slides you between sheets grey with coal dust. His fingers span your throat, inscribe your breasts, the round of your stomach and between your thighs, cupping your buttocks. Your body is smoothed by his touch; malleable as memory beneath the press of his thumb. Afterwards you sleep in his narrow bed, the creased sheet an envelope that holds you pressed hip to hip, a near perfect fit.
The Satisfying Lover

...loses himself in you, spends the whole night looking and finding himself again in stairwells, wardrobes, under the bed. Morning comes and he runs up the stairs, cheeks pinked by frosted air, blue shadows under his eyes. Clambering into your warm bed he makes a tent of linen and eiderdown; presses his mouth to your mouth. You are a millpond. Drawing one sharp breath he dives in; curls and turns against the dark water like a carp. You are a labyrinth. He burns the ball of twine and enters blind. You are a knotted shoelace. He kneels to unpuzzle you. You are the score he sight-reads and he sings you sweetly. And when the door is locked, the window beyond reach? Then he lifts you up, steadies you as you scale him, foot on his knee, then cupped in his hands. He does not flinch when you grip his shoulders with your toes. Sways and braces himself as you unclasp the latch, push the window wide and step over the sill.
The Careless Lover

…stumbles against you crying in the stairwell. Below, your sixteenth birthday party comes to a slow boil. He comforts you with a hug that slides down until his hand is on your arse. And in a careless moment you are on your sister’s bed, the Hello Kitty duvet ruched under your bare thighs. The clematis rattles dry fingers against the window but he is heavy, determined. And lying under him you remember the steel-toothed rat-trap. Your mother said, “Don’t touch!” but of course you did. You see him again; you like the bite. He fucks you in a nest of bracken on the forest, against the brick wall behind the Stoker’s Arms, in the back of his Ford Cortina. He calls her Rusty, another redhead. One night you flinch and he bloodies your nose. The next gives you a moonstone ring and you do not ask how he came by it. He sends you to sweet-talk his dealer; ask for one more week. The careless lover is out when they force the lock and tear the flat apart. You hide in the airing cupboard and remember the shocking fierce leap of the trap as the steel jaws snap. Hear the big man shout, “Where is she?” Good question, you think, and sit tight.
Fire Song

In the Rumble Club the band is setting up: three boys, a drum kit, two guitars and a cat’s cradle of electric cords. My sister sits alone at a table under the disco ball. Her pillar-box hair smart in the wefty black of this music box. People drift in off the street, cluster round the bar and talk. The tower of amps is fizzing. My sister sits and smokes. The ball begins to spin and silver sparks across her milk-pale face. We wait to hear her sing.

On the back of the 252 bus through Mark Cross my sister holds her lit cigarette against the seat. There is a sizzle, a thread of smoke, and the little black hole winks back at us. When she sings she shuts her eyes and touches her red mouth to the mic.

And then there was the time she read my diary. And the time I threw a bowl of cornflakes against the wall. And the time I photographed her lying in a bathtub full of autumn leaves. And the time I climbed a tree up to the crow’s nest, to escape the needle-sharp of her voice. And the time we mustered the fireguard and clotheshorse and made a den in the inglenook. Gathered close by the grate playing at gypsies and Robber Princesses. Until I found one loose brick in the fire-back, hot to the hand and singed black, wobbling like my front tooth. I niggled it free and we pressed our faces to the gap.

Beyond there was a strange room—not of our home—with a red rug on the floor, vine-shuttered windows, arsenic green leaves patterning the wallpaper, and a gust of air seasoned with damp and vinegar and some old churchy fragrance that made our eyes tear. A woman sat at an upright piano, her back to us, head bowed and striking one key / Eb / hard, over and again with her index finger. She did not turn around but when she spoke we almost remembered her needle-sharp voice: the flare of language; the hot, bad song. “I know you,” she said. “I know you. And I know everything about you.”
Lismore

A week still to go. Days of drizzle and midges.
The croft, cramped and low, good to walk from.
The grown-ups’ wan interest in all but ferry times,
tides, and the opening hours of the pub in Oban.

And I, aged five or six, unwatched for the first time
ever, follow a sheep track down past the black broch,
its dome cracked open, to where land lifts from sea,
where beyond the trough of waves there are mountains.

I stand, an astonished body in this place, my own north,
eyes bedazzled by light on water, sea and sky supple
as sealskin, and the rocks sunk to their chins in moss
yielding to bare shelves of granite sparkling with mica.

I stand on the shore amid rafts of wrack and dulse,
gravel lax beneath my feet and water soft as driftwood.
And beyond the surf’s complicating lacework, stranded
on a sheet of grey sand, a jelly-fish: Aurelia aurita.

A moon deflated, a collapsed umbrella, an eye peeled
open reflecting the sky’s astonishment and its own
domed-self. I squat down on my haunches to look
at the gelatinous saucer, count 1-2-3-4 pale lilac rings.

And that night, bathing in peat-gold water, I trawl
with my flannel. The nubby cloth blooms and pulses,
summoning the jelly-fish—wave locked within wave—
lobbed into an element unimagined, struck by the weight

of gravity’s suck on its tulle skirts and tentacle ribbons.
On yielding it lay and waited, aware or not of the surf
retreating, opaquely eyeing the mackerel sky and
the child who has come alone to find it.
The House Opposite

And later, wherever it is you settle
that first house shines through like the lustre
of wood beneath layers of tempera.

The cavernous cellar is long since flooded.
A flight of brick steps ends in a sink of black water.
Shut the door on the dark. Draw a chalk circle.

Here is the attic window framing the moon.
Here is the wardrobe, the bookcase, the chair.
Here a staircase that twists to ladder spanning

root and bloom. It is a bridge blown from glass.
So trot across. At the table three women sit and eat,
look up as you enter, move to make room for one more.
And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur

She has a big heart, black glass eyes and seven stomachs spooled to a labyrinth beneath the cage of bone and cartilage. You wouldn’t think it to see her—hands delicate as luna moths—how tirelessly she chased the thread of herself birthing this or that along the way until the floor was tacky with blood.

Every door is the bitter end. But turn the key and the last door opens back upon the place you set out from. Here again and still so very far from what you’re looking for. Why you left home. Why you can’t return. She knows. The Minotaur’s Daughter is a double-bitted axe cutting both ways.

On the terrace jasmine has taken root through the marble, the vine thick as her wrist and the night-scent bruising. She rises from her seat at the table never mind the children are watching. A dog barks and she nods her horns and scythes your legs from under and you tumble like a shock of corn.

Yes, the universe is a musty old backcloth, moth-nibbled so the flecks of light shine through and you wait in the wings wearing a dress they call diaphanous. Embarrassingly so. But then the band strikes up and in a rush like a spill of milk you see the wheel of suns turning and she folds you under and down you go.
Three Women Around the Table

Bus stop, basket, sunhat and home from the market with ñames, cebollas, ajo, huevos. A pot of peppers on the doorstep, fat red flames nestled amongst the green leaves. The room at the back of the house described as a kitchen/studio/kennel/nursery.

Wednesday lunchtime and they each draw a card—the Sun, the Wheel of Fortune, Death reversed—and lay it on the table amongst the yellow corn, tomatillos and pinto beans.

Remedios shreds cilantro; Kati smashes garlic cloves; Leonora reads aloud, her words spiced by the anguish of six rowdy crows stripping the fig tree in the courtyard.

A white crane descends to sip water from the fountain and the Chihuahua cocks his leg against a canvas frame. In the margin of her book Leonora draws a hen wife in black charcoal. And before it is time for the children to come home from school a decade might pass and these three women, gathered together in the alchemical kitchen, pressing out tortillas with corn-dusted hands will see their husbands die; will grow old; will drink tequila with lime juice from clumsy, salt-rimmed glasses; will quarrel and sulkily observe that the coffee is too bitter and black; will watch moonrise over turquoise mountains; will listen for owl song; will speak in tongues; will make each other’s portraits; smoke cigars and gossip; will go outside barefoot to remember the heat of the day in the cracked pavement; will make crowns of broken eggshell and eat figs dipped in honey; will hold hands around the table; cry as they recall the war, their mothers; doze in their chairs while the table becomes a rose bush or a circle of black earth planted with blue cabbages.
Cabbage

Slung from a trug it rumbles across
the kitchen table, this flabby magenta fist
of stalk and leaf, this bundle of pages
flopping loose from their binding
this globe cleaved with a grunt leaning hard
on the blade and I look down on this
confounded universe halved in my hand
shout ‘I can believe in the cabbage!’

And yes, lean in to sniff iron and damp earth
prod the pleats packed with butterfly eggs
constellations neat as a convent girl’s stitches
this leathery, creased leaf a dish of galaxies
this bloody alchemical rose, this labyrinth
quick, keen I unscrew a jar of condiments
cinnamon sticks, star anise and clove
shout louder ‘I believe in the cabbage!’
The Giantess

And on this very day our Giantess was not hatched (or born) but emanated god-like in broad brushstrokes feathering the near then far horizon as murky rainclouds gathered and the sky knelt to the sea

Until [gasp!] she stood among us, her pale bare feet planted dainty on the sand hills—guardian of all a day can offer: the reaching trees, the pack of dogs, the timid islands and astonished sea-creatures

What a hoot we thought, this Giantess of the scratchy shoreline, and her great wisdom and our startled smallness, rushing with all the tasks still to do: spinning, milling, drumming fruit from dumb olive trees

Sure we knew she was trouble, never mind her bright owl-face, sad eyes and little mouth pursed to say naught but mumble the oh! Oh! Our Giantess mortified each hour from dawn to dusk and only the birds tumbling from the creamy folds of her cloak refused to be surprised. Not by her glassy silence. Not by the whales coasting sea-green alongside our fishing fleet

Nor by the chimera—hazy as a roll of smoke—which we chased for a day and a night with our dogs and our pitch-forks and our holy terror until the corn was flattened and our children wept

But she held an egg—speckled as mercy [An egg!] in the cup of her hand! So we knelt and built fires beneath the tent of her dress and doing our best to rouse her we lifted our voices in song.

~ж~
Niht-sang

The danger of lying in the dark and dreaming before sleeping and the words half-forming like letters scratched on the frosted window-pane

    Are we there yet?  
    Yes, almost there.

and in the dark, half-dreaming, remembering

    What is the place we run to?  
    Just sit tight. Try to sleep now.

when footprints in the shimmering snow are the only trace left of you

    Are we there yet?  
    Just a stone’s throw.

see the line of trees hoisting the sky’s grey weft

    Did you stop and look back?  
    Once, as we watched and waited

and the wicked cold enters like a shadow aslant or askew, as a needle etches the skin

    What kept you?  
    I was calling and calling you

and the blush of ink and the sparrow’s beak nipping the seams, stitch by stitch, and the north is a rip you crawl through to hear the voice that prickles like frost on a window-pane as you lie in the dark dreaming before sleeping and the half-formed words leak through.
Homecoming

Mid-April. The dark moon.
I wake from a winter’s sleep
to the sound of a bumble bee

knocking on my windowpane,
see shutters limned in golden light.
My door is winter-bloated in its frame

the letterbox choked with leaves.
Milk has soured in the fridge.
No food in the pantry, but on the table

a withered apple, mouse-nibbled.
Drinking strong black tea I take stock:
the sharp blades of new grass, chestnut buds,
nettles and cow parsley unfurling. The lawn
is shaggy with dandelions and burdock.
I am middle-aged now and these past

six months are the first I’ve lived alone.
The threads that bind us hardly seem
sufficient for the job, the great distance:

fibre optic cable with its boom of static,
the lag as our voices blunder down the line;
a pixelated image; these letters on blue

airmail paper; the parcels I send, bits
and pieces from home to remember me by.
The short letter I receive in reply.

A place, a time. ‘Will you be there?’
There’s no danger I’ll muddle
the dates, but still go daily.

Put on my old camel coat,
a violet in the buttonhole.
As if worried you won’t know me.

Counting weeks then days.
Hours spent at stations, watching
other reunions. Not lonely

just needing to stand amongst
strangers, to see the jolt of joy
on their faces—a distraction
from the hours imagining her, dressed in black, winter-pale eyes kohl-rimmed, my daughter

sulky and bold, scraping clean the last jar of plum jam I sent her as a sweet taste of home.

She packed her suitcase weeks ago, when even in that drear place the first signs were felt of the earth turning.

Every year, the subtle movement of white roots flexing; the long days beaming. Time to begin the journey home.

She touches his hand; he turns his face away. It is a mask and she barely knows him, for all her claims to love him. Now alone

along a maze of corridors she trudges up the winding flights of stairs and as she nears the top her pace quickens.

At the station I wait on the platform wearing this tweed skirt, scuffed brown brogues, arms full of hellebore and hyacinth blooms.
Arrivals/Departures

Someone’s daughter, sister, mother
told to carry two silver coins
and three cakes soaked in honey.
Careful, stepping into the boat
not to touch the water because
she wants to remember everything:
where she came from, where she is going.

Someone’s daughter, sister, mother
sits for hours, her body succumbing
to turbulence, to the pitch of motion
a vibration that lifts her through the clouds.
Obedient not hungry, she unfolds her table,
takes a box, peels back the plastic film and
spoons in the rice, one mouthful, another.

Someone—daughter, sister, mother
hugs her old leather bag to her chest and
stares across the sleeve of grey water.
Midstream, the boat seems less a craft
than a few rough planks nailed together.
The ferryman gulps shallow puffs of air.
His oars flail and popple the river’s surface.

Someone yawns—gaping through
time zones. She lifts the window-shade
to watch the quick charge of nightfall;
blue-black sky and a ghosting new moon.
Sees the taillights blinking red, red, red.
She has two passports; one for going
and the other on which to enter.

Someone—her name stolen by water
stands as land and sky resolve in shadow.
When they reach the shore dim forms appear
calling Who? Who? Who? She brushes past,
jumps clear of the boat onto a strip of gravel,
breaks a sandal strap. Shouldering her bag
she—someone—walks away from the river.

And holding her sheaf of papers enters
a hall of long shadows, blue strip lighting,
no windows. Not yet the place she set out for
which she has yet to enter, standing in a crowd
of others, comforted because she must find
comfort somehow, by the heft of her bag
which leans like an old dog against her ankle.
Someone—reaches the place where she must feed the dog, throws a honey cake to each snarling head then nips through the gate. The cavern roof dips as she descends, walking on sharp-toothed gravel carrying her sandal by its broken strap, dragging her bag. Tunnel diverges. She hesitates, not sure which to take

—stands in the press of others. Two passports.
Hears voices shouting: *You have yet to cross the border.* *This is not an arrival. For your own security you must wait until called. You are still in transit. Do not use your phone. Do not do not speak to the person next to you.* She ignores ignores their soft weeping. She remembers how the heel of her foot touched water
The Animal Bridegroom

They say, the Bride wore green and processed down the narrow, muddy lane in the midst of a little band—bride and groom, guests with flags and bunting, drums and horns and bells. One amongst them summoned a gust of wind. And a shower blew through, sunshine and rain a warning that set the mothers running to bring their children in from play lest they catch a glimpse of the Fox’s wedding.

They say, there was one boy whose parents were careless—arguing or in passionate embrace a stolen moment—they left him to wander and he saw it all: the Fox with his coal black eyes and red grin; the Bride in her green dress, the chill of dread so manifest her footsteps frosted the new grass. Wonderstruck the boy followed the sight and noise, the bold flags, the baying horns, the drums, the drums.

They say, how in the apple orchard the boy hid behind brambles to watch. He was nabbed, dragged out, tried and spared after a manner thanks to the Bride’s pleading. ‘As she begs,’ said the Fox, ‘I’ll not rip out your throat.’ And he gave the weeping boy a sideways smile. ‘But everyday you’ll wish I had not been so kind.’ And he looked at his Bride as she stood on a patch of ice-fringed grass, and stared him down.

They say, an iron knife was placed in the boy’s hand, they spun him thrice, and put him on the path home though it never felt like home again. The boy lost first the word for it, then a word a day all that year: the word for primrose, for comfrey, for stone, oak, the name of the stream that crossed the muddy lane, the words for minnow, magpie, mother. At last he was dumb as any beast, and lonely. And his iron knife, it was the only thing that spoke.
Goodbye to a River

*People made me tireder than the river ever could.*

(John Graves)

Sometimes I wake uneasy
dreaming he has returned
to prowl the scrublands of my sleep.
I turn my face into the pillow but
catch the edge of his reek

And then he bleeds through
the great raft of detritus
I have hauled out like a barricade;
rubbish wanted by no party
not even our daughter,
these boxes of photos,
his stamp and coin collection,
a quilted Christmas stocking.
I tell myself to throw them out.
Don’t do it. What I want is a fire
to burn our past to the foundations
having long run from the house
with what I could carry—
myself, our child—while behind
the stairs catch hold, whirling flames
up into tinder-dry and verminous rafters.
Acrid paint on the front door blisters
as I make for the road. All along the drive
hot pink rhododendrons bloom.
I hear the bang of windows exploding;
a clamour as the red-brick chimney
tumbles down into the hearth.

Our house is gone. Burnt to the ground.
And you are dust and cinders.
I plug my ears. *Don’t speak!*
I press my face to the pillow.

And I want to write *once upon a time.*
I want to write *the end.*
I want to frame this story,
keep it short, contained.
But here I am again, sitting
at this oak desk, lamp-lit
night-writing feeling the press
of each letter on the page
breath-stop at the line break
and remembering.
Seven years old and I was a cautionary tale. Scrubbing my nettle-stung shins with dock as I sheltered in a hawthorn hedge. All day I climbed trees and trespassed in gardens and played in a tributary of the Rother—a brambly bog deep in the greenwood. A brick tunnel took the stream under our lane shallow enough to paddle through and swagged in ivy at both ends; so the tunnel was a curtained place filled with the play of light-on-water cool in summer, shelter in rainstorms. I liked to stand on the tunnel’s floor ankle deep in the stream, staring down at the moss and fronds of hart’s tongue knotting its roots deep into the mortar. The tunnel was neither outside nor in not classroom or church or our cluttered and overheated sitting room.

A decade later. Nightfall. Standing in a layby on the road out of a trashy seaside town peeling an apple with the blade I also used to bring an edge to sticks of charcoal. My hair stank of turpentine. My boots paint-spackled. I stuck out my thumb and the first car that stopped, I got right in. The driver tells me I have a pretty face and when I don’t respond he changes tack says, ‘I have a daughter. Aren’t you scared out here alone? I’m a nice bloke but I could do anything I wanted if you catch my drift.’

In fact the river had washed me back to this shore before in other cars, on other moonless nights. ‘I’m not scared,’ I lied and turned the knife in my hand so the blade caught a flash of light. Brakes slam, swerve hard against the hedge he reached across me to fling open the door. ‘Get out,’ he said. Seconds later the red taillights were gone around the bend. Where am I? Nowhere. Not town, not home no streetlights or houses, just the sense and smell of fields, dense woodland and close black sky. From the shadows a dog fox appears. His bright musk floods the night air as he raps out a line of wire-sharp yelps then slides away. Hot knife in butter, I think and turn to face the traffic.
Really. All those years I imagined I was brave
and closed tight as a nut, years asleep
on a dome of granite, encircled by fire
(or being depressed is another way to put it)
dreaming my way back. I was nearly home
when he woke me. The man zealous or stupid
enough to walk right through flames
in hot pursuit. Blue eyes, I remember.
Dark curls. The ocean he’d travelled.
That smile. Done for.

There were tears and laughter both.
Arguments. Epic and ungodly amounts
of sex, kissing, talking: late-night
early-morning shagged-out storytelling.
Letters written, long-distance phone calls,
all the glorious palaver and drama.

Only, that time asleep in a narrow bed
and waking to find him wide-eyed
staring. He held me tight, pinned down
said, ‘Fucking, talking to you is not enough.
I want to feel everything you feel, share
your thoughts. Dream your dreams,’
My mouth was dry. I licked my lips to speak
and he placed a hand around my throat.
‘No,’ he said. ‘I can read your mind
through your eyes. Don’t say a word.
Not a word.’ And did I speak?

We married in April.
Sunshine and showers and me
just six weeks gone, clutching
a red bucket because I would surely
puke on the way to the registry office.

A snapshot taken that day:
up against a brick wall
I stand between two men.
My father holds me, his fingers
curled tight round my upper arm
as if otherwise I might step out
of the frame. My mouth is open.
There is something I want to say.
The other man (husband)
stands apart, arms folded
feet planted in fighting stance
staring the camera down.
Beyond, the woods were in newly-minted leaf—
on the green lawn dandelions and daisies—
and a great clamour of birdsong. It cracked
me open and I felt all at once my belonging
and longing on the very day I was leaving
for a life not of my making. And yes, I wanted
to shriek and bite and roll in muck.
I wanted to scramble over the fence
and go to earth. I was still that wild
and green-hearted girl. But he (husband)
called my name once, twice and then again.

Two suitcases. A twelve hour flight. Texas.
Sunshine and concrete. A land that had forgotten
time or green. Where I wore the modest clothes
my mother-in-law bought me. Gave birth
and breastfed my daughter. And unlike
my parents knew to call her in from play
when sun glamoured through sheets of rain.

The second spring I grew nasturtiums
on our front porch finding they thrived
even in the fierce sun. Sprinkled a few
on the salad one evening and he
picked them off frowning, asked why.
‘They remind me of home,’ I said.
‘Home is here, isn’t it? With me.’
‘And there. My grandmother grew
grows them.’ ‘Here? There? Which?
What is it you are trying to say?
That you want to leave me? Or stay?’
I fell silent, tongue-bitten. The AC
came on with a bang and the plates
were chill to touch when I cleared them.
‘Here? or there?’ he said over and over
chasing me from one room to the next
though the apartment was small and
I could hear him no matter where I went.

We fought half the night. Him slicing
strips off me, silencing me every time
I tried to speak but I spoke anyway
then screamed and cursed.
We woke the baby, sure, wept
and fell asleep at dawn exhausted.
Woke with him clinging to me
asking forgiveness. My tongue
was peppery with nasturtiums
but—no passport no ticket home
where else would I go?

I spoke the words he wanted
but through the years that followed
kept my face turned towards him
smiling even as I walked away.

Tornado season. The sky julep, air bristling
and the magnesium flash of heat lighting.
Driving my daughter to school on highway 114
the charcoal clouds thickened dead ahead
and one fat cumuliform dropped a needle
that found the groove, thickened and funnelled.
I stopped the car to watch as a squall of rain
lifted right up from the prairie scrub, silver
in the sunlight. The fat finger shadow-danced
the near horizon and my daughter lifted herself
up from her car seat to look, whispered
‘Mommy, can we go home?’

I dropped her off; went on to college. Later
making dinner and hearing from him all the
stale questions about my day, the accusations
when what I said did not fit with what he knew
to be true, the secrets I kept, my notebooks
which he read. The groove we settled into
of arguments and shouting; the paring knife
I once held to his throat; the windows
and plates that I broke; his eyes coal black;
the needle jammed and the stammer
of his words like hammer blows.

Later I climbed into bed beside him.
Pretended he had nothing on me. I lay still.
Ignored his breath, his heat, hand closing
around my wrist even in his sleep.

I won’t say it was a gift—
(he gave me one thing only, my daughter)
but at least I was done by the time I left.
If our marriage was a falling out of love
it was such a long and boring decline.
I fell for years and learnt that however
we come down—quick or slow—
the descent is easy and it is the landing
that is hard, amid thorns and cinders
and general dereliction.
Remember there were rats in our kitchen?
It seemed like a sign of the end of all things.
Remember they ate through the window frame
and plundered our provisions, kept carelessly
in cardboard boxes on the floor.

We had so little by then.
We had been casting out ballast
for more than a decade
but no matter what we discarded
there was nothing but sinking until
at the end it was the three of us clinging
together, then just him I, kicking
myself free. The landing was pitiless.
Blinded by thorns I blundered
ran into her at last by chance
my daughter, felt her tears on my face
and then, such relief, I could see.
The Stone Flower

Uncut, the block
stays dumb
She sets to work
carving a shape
with fingers and thumbs
Work that can never
be quite finished
Polish it smooth
and rub, rub, rub
until the form
comes through
A cup? Bell? Flower?
A flower then
hewn from
green stone
petals revealed
by the chisel’s tip
Pistil, stigma, stamen
unfurling from the
point. Malachite
stem uncoiling
Making this
stone flower
and it’s one
damn thing
after another
the door bell
the child
tired or hungry
begging for stories
Her hands always
busy with soothing
baking, and folding
On the day’s threshold she wakes to take up

hammer and chisel
At her bench the memory

of touch
Stone sings to the lathe’s tune

And the flower lifts its head sparked to life

in a flurry of knocks and chips, blows and bruises

Cordate leaves lie snug to the bud

Little frills nicked on the petal prick fingers and thumbs

Words are good she says, but touch is better

There—and she brushes off the dust Almost done
The iron bridge stands its ground gathering land to water across thin air. The drop, nine foot on either side, holds gusts of midges and looping light from the sandstone bank. Early evening. The western sky is charcoal foxed with gold. The bridge does not dwell. No more do I and each time it is harder to return. But the bridge—I think it knows me even after five years gone. My heel strikes a spark, iron on flint and the bridge recalls the press of my hand on the cold rail and the point I stop, always, and turn to look downstream, to see the way water shivers across a shallow reach of gravel. Yes, the bridge is a thing of this sort, spanning water with iron and concrete to lift me through air and make a place to hesitate and turn to look downstream, to feel again the rub of the stranger’s child, that familiar itch or nudge as the mind unmoors and pours out of my mouth and eyes and ears.

And this moment on the iron bridge quiets my eye, and place and time converge and are nested like a yolk inside its shell. The bridge straddles more than half my life, stepping wide across the murmuring stream. It is a charm against fretful darkness. It is the thing I set my mind towards when I step over the threshold, cross the churchyard and down the gully into Parson’s Wood. When I set my feet in the direction of the bridge I am already there hand resting on cold iron rail turning to look downstream, as I could not carry myself across the bridge if I had not first imagined reaching it in my mind. For I am here, stuck in this everyday body at my desk, and again climbing over the stile as I write the coppiced wood, then one foot on clay and one foot on concrete stepping forward, already there in mind, hesitating at the halfway point, standing as I will always do to look downstream and only in this way can I cross the iron bridge.
The Unreliable Narrator

Not a field, a forest.

Not a key, a hammer.

Not a sword, a spindle.

Not a chair, a ladder.

She barks like a vixen sparring with shadows in the midnight garden.

No guide she leaves you on the mountain pass to wake in the precinct at dawn in a nest of newsprint while around you schoolchildren rowdy as rooks gossip, smoke and spar.

If there is truth in her she has yet to find its edge.

Still when she gives you a sprig of larkspur or a glass of tea take it.

The amber leaves blossom as they steep. The glass sings. Take a scalding sip.

~Ж~
Digging deep: the enchanted underground in Pavel Bazhov’s 1939 collection of magic tales, *The Malachite Casket*.
A writer who mines the treasure of folklore
must not only accept the tradition, but overcome it.

(Vladimir Propp, The Russian Folktale)
Foreword

Once, in a certain town, in a certain time, in a land ruled by a greedy and wrathful Tsar, there lived a Storyteller. As a young man, the Tsar walked amongst his people wearing his gold heart upon his sleeve. But trouble had cast darkness over the land, and as years passed the Tsar became known not for good deeds but for the great numbers of people who died at his command, or who starved because his rapacious troops had stolen their harvest, or who were forced to work as slaves in his mines and factories. It was whispered that the Tsar’s gold heart had turned to stone. News of the troubles travelled slowly through the realm, but at last their long shadow touched the Storyteller’s village. Hoping the bloodshed would pass, the Storyteller shut his eyes and covered his ears and closed his mouth. But the stories he had heard bubbled up inside him, like steam from a samovar. Fearing for his life since he could not keep silent, the Storyteller hid deep underground in an old mineshaft. ‘During the black of night,’ he told his wife before he left, ‘we can only wait for the gold of dawn.’

~Ж~
Introduction: In a Certain Town, in a Certain Time

In 1939, in the wake of Stalin’s ‘Great Terror’ (as that era of heightened violence and political oppression would come to be known), Pavel Bazhov published a collection of Soviet literary fairy tales called The Malachite Casket: Tales from the Old Urals.¹ The stories, set in pre-Revolutionary Russia, provided their author and his readers with a magic tunnel back into the world of his childhood.

Born in the Ural mountains in 1879 into a family of former serfs, Bazhov had a lifelong connection to the forested, swampy, and mineral-rich oblast in west-central Russia, surrounding the regional capital of Yekaterinburg.² Like all Russians born before 1917, the events of the October Revolution meant Bazhov was exiled from the country and place of his birth. The ‘tiny little house’ beyond which ‘stretched an endless belt of dark blue pine-forest’ belonged to a realm he could return to only in his imagination.³ Fantastic changes took place over the next 70 years as everything was transformed or replaced, from the ruling elite to place names. Yekaterinburg itself between 1924 and 1991 was known as Sverdlovsk, and in 1918 the last Romanov Tsar, Nicholas II, was executed there, along with his wife and children. Their deaths indicated that the old world was gone, and that all bridges connecting the vanquished past to the radiant future were to be demolished.

¹ The Great Terror, took place roughly between the years 1936-1938, see Robert Conquest, The Great Terror: A Reassessment (London: Pimlico, 2008), p. 3.
² Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov ed. by Robert Chandler (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 223. Subsequent references to this book with be cited using the abbreviation RMT.

¹ П. Бажов, Малахитовая Шкатулка: сказы старово Урала (Свердловск: Свердловскок областное издательство, 1939). Subsequent references to The Malachite Casket generally, rather than to a specific edition or translation, will be cited using the abbreviation TMC.
² Bazhov, The Malachite Casket: Tales from the Urals, trans. by Alan Moray Williams (New York: Hutchinson & Co, 1944), p. 5. Subsequent references to this edition will be referred to as Bazhov/Williams followed by the story name.
Writers and artists remaining in the Soviet Union often found their initial ‘revolutionary exhilaration’ crumble as they became aware of its enormous cost, both human and cultural.⁴ Refusing, as the poet Anna Akhmatova wrote, to join those ‘who left their country/For wolves to tear it limb from limb’, they nonetheless knew Russia for what it was: ‘an old peasant/Killing his meat’.⁵ In the first decades of the Soviet Union’s existence a largely rural society became urbanized—following rapid industrialization and the nationalization of agriculture—and ethnic groups were forcibly relocated across the former empire. The price paid for such radical transformation has proved incalculable, and the response of those who lived through it hard to comprehend.

In part this is due to the immense danger of setting oppositional thoughts down on paper; and in part to the ‘withering away of private life’, which resulted in the near impossibility of speaking these thoughts aloud, even to family members or close friends.⁶ As a result, opposition and dissent were forced underground.

Written during the turbulent years of 1936-1939, during which Bazhov and his wife, Valentina Ivanitsky, were under threat of arrest, and for a time went into hiding, The Malachite Casket forms a personal response to a society traumatized by revolution, civil war, and totalitarianism, under which millions lived and perished in a ‘state of fear’.⁷ But the collection’s earliest stories, composed in 1936, were to be first published anonymously in a 1938 almanac, The Contemporary Urals.⁸ Bazhov was acknowledged only as having ‘recorded’ the magic tales; a framing strategy that distanced the author

---


from his own work.\textsuperscript{9} According to Claudia Rozhdestvenskaya, his editor at the Urals Publishing House, these tales were written in response to the mid-1930’s Soviet folklore revival, when enthusiastic collectors roamed the countryside ‘recording’ stories told by workers and peasants.\textsuperscript{10} It was as a type of folkloric worker’s tale that Bazhov’s first stories, including ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ and ‘That Dear Name’, were expediently masquerading. Only with the publication of \textit{The Malachite Casket} in 1939 did it emerge that these Soviet magic tales were ‘original literary creations’— and that their author’s name was Pavel Bazhov.\textsuperscript{11}

Framing his stories as if told to his childhood-self by a village storyteller was an artistic device that signalled the collection’s folkloric roots. It was also politically expedient. Russia’s eponymous Time of Troubles followed the accession to the Muscovite throne of Boris Godunov, and saw ‘social disorganization, strife, and virtual collapse […] that opened the Muscovite state to foreign intrigue and invasions’.\textsuperscript{12} Three hundred years later, parallels can be drawn to the events that followed Lenin’s death in 1924. The internal struggle for power within the Bolshevik Party culminated in the political purges, which preceded the invasion of a traumatized and weakened Soviet Union by the German army, in May 1941.\textsuperscript{13} In this new ‘time of troubles’, the use of an archetypal storyteller, like his decision to publish the first tales disguised as anonymous folklore, allowed Bazhov to set himself at a remove from his own work. As a former revolutionary and, by 1936, a disgraced Communist Party member, the author knew that his radical-past and present-day loyalty would not save him from the Gulag. And as a journalist, propagandist, and amateur folklorist, he discovered that in calamitous times,

\textsuperscript{9} Chandler, RMT, p. 221. Italics in the original text.
\textsuperscript{10} Рождественская [accessed 9 January 2018] Chandler, RMT, p. 221.
\textsuperscript{11} Chandler, RMT, p. 221.
\textsuperscript{12} The Time of Troubles’ refers to the period 1598-1613, ‘a particularly turbulent, confusing and painful segment of Russian history’. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, \textit{A History of Russia} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 157
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
and when confronting events so cruel they defy reason, it is fantastic and implausible stories that best reflect a confounded reality.

Magical realism flourished in the politically-fractured Latin America of the twentieth century, using ‘the carnivalesque, folklore, and myths’ to address ‘cultural hybridity and post-colonial themes’. Similarly, in the Soviet Union fantastic works of literature—from Mikhail Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita, to Andrey Platonov’s The Foundation Pit—also reached to the heart of life in a fractured and dystopian world. As the fairy tale scholar and translator, Jack Zipes, contends: ‘Fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict.’ To write sincerely and unguardedly during the Stalinist Terror or, as Russians would say, to write with your heart’s blood, was to risk your blood being spilled. Fairy tales offered a way of telling stories from behind a mask, and the role of storyteller proved, for Bazhov, to be a transformative one.

Russian twentieth-century literature contains numerous responses to the transforming experience of loss and displacement. Amongst them is Speak, Memory, in which Vladimir Nabokov described the temporal experience of exile as a ‘spiral unwinding of things’ resulting in the creation of ‘a special Space’. This space, like the world of fairy tales, is both within and beyond the everyday world; it is ‘a foreign country’, but one whose borders are not easily discernible. Russian citizens born after 1917 could be called Homo sovieticus, having lived their whole lives ‘in the Marxist

---

16 In Russian, Писать кровью сердца: ‘to write with sincerity and deep feeling about something through which one has suffered’. Sophia Lubensky, Russian-English Dictionary of Idioms (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 275.
Leninist laboratory’, and speaking its lexicon as their mother tongue.\textsuperscript{19} But those born before the revolution, whether they fled abroad or remained in the Soviet Union, lived as if straddling two worlds, the inheritors of ‘intangible property, unreal estate’.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{The Malachite Casket} opens with the words: ‘When I was a small boy I lived […] at the foot of Dumna Mountain—[in] a tiny little house built on a bed of slag.’\textsuperscript{21} In this apparently autobiographical opening, Bazhov both grounded the collection in a specific time and place and, by sleight of hand, stepped away from his imaginative tales, placing them in the realm of his own, long-vanished ‘unreal estate’.\textsuperscript{22} He also used the introduction to describe his proxy, ‘Grandpa Slishko’ (or Grandpa Listen-here) a pseudo-historical storyteller whose tales Bazhov claimed to have listened to in childhood, and ‘Reproduced from memory […] almost half a century later’.\textsuperscript{23} Bazhov provides these details in a voice that reads as autobiographical and authoritative. Yet in the same breath, he give his storyteller a doubly-implausible name, which serves to undermine the façade of fact and memoir. Grandpa Slishko’s ‘official name’ is Khmelinin, a word that has its roots in the Russian for hop-flower: \textit{khmelina}.\textsuperscript{24} It is a word whose tendril-like off-shoots lead to the related words of ‘intoxication’ (\textit{khmel’}), ‘hop-garden’ (\textit{kmel’nik}), and ‘to get tipsy’ (\textit{khmelit’}).\textsuperscript{25} And it recalls one of the traditional endings to a Russian magic tale—‘and they began to live happily together and are still living. I was at their wedding and drank beer. The beer ran along my

\textsuperscript{20} Nabokov, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{21} Bazhov/Williams, ‘In Place of Foreword: The Watch-house on Dumna Mountain’, p. 5. Subsequent references to this story will be cited using the abbreviation IPF.
\textsuperscript{22} Nabokov, \textit{Speak, Memory}, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, pp. 11, 6.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p. 6.
moustache but did not go into mouth’—a storyteller’s dissembling and two-faced claim to sobriety and truthfulness.26

The theme of the double is an important one in The Malachite Casket, extending beyond the device of author-storyteller. There are three pairs of linked or doubled tales within Bazhov’s collection. Characters are also frequently doubled, including the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, in the figure of Tanyushka, a miner’s daughter. Similarly, the miner’s wife-aboveground, Nastasya, is doubled by the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, the goddess-below; and the master stone carver, Prokopich, is doubled and finally replaced by his apprentice, Danilko. The linked stories ‘The Great Serpent’ and ‘The Serpent’s Trail’ are about two brothers—one kindly and hardworking, one a cunning trickster—who met two very different fates. As Zipes writes on the doubling properties of the genre: ‘The fairy tale ignites a double quest for home: one occurs in the reader’s mind and is psychological and difficult to interpret [and] […] The second occurs within the tale itself’.27 Within The Malachite Casket the prevailing and ambivalent themes of disappearance and concealment underground serve to double Bazhov’s own life-story, as well as the experiences of millions of ordinary Soviet citizens in the late 1930s.

In the field of Russian literary studies, both Robert Chandler and Mark Lipovetsky identify motifs in The Malachite Casket that would have resonated with Bazhov’s contemporary readers, yet did not arouse the misgivings of Soviet censors: motifs of repression, brutal and arbitrary punishment, disappearance, and misinformation. It is their critical considerations of Bazhov’s work—Chandler’s in the anthology Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov, and Lipovetsky’s essay,

'Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy, Discovering the Soviet Uncanny’—that have reintroduced this neglected Soviet-era writer to the Anglophone world, and created the space from which my own readings of his tales have emerged.28

Helena Goscilo, in her introduction to the anthology of Russian and Soviet fairy tales, Politicizing Magic, cites Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s analysis of the fairy tale ‘Snow White’ as ‘rewardingly provocative’, and an ‘exemplar of a synthetic, multilayered reading’.29 My approach to The Malachite Casket is similarly multi-layered, framed within the context of Stalinist politics of the 1930s, and the fairy-tale traditions of Russia and northern Europe, and focusing on the motifs of the storyteller, the enchanted underground, and Bazhov’s unique merging of literary forms.

In an effort to read ‘what has never been written’ and ‘listen to what has never been said’, my analysis of The Malachite Casket is both literary and historicizing, engaging with the issues of censorship and samizdat (or ‘underground literature’) in Russia and the Soviet Union, and with encoded and ‘Aesopian’ readings. The idea of ‘Aesopian’ reading is specifically Russian; a method of peering ‘between the lines’ that spans both ‘the Russian and the Soviet traditions’, and refers to the ‘common efforts of writers, critics, and publishers, who, deprived of freedom of expression […] [tried] to circumvent the concentrated efforts of censorship’.30 The subtext or hidden allegory within a literary work was intrinsic to the emergence of the secular intelligentsia in early modern Russia—a class for whom ‘dissident culture became symbiotic with the

dominant tradition’.\textsuperscript{31} And once ‘developed as a special subtext of “literature between the lines”’, Aesopian language became not just a means of political expression, but also ‘an important manifestation of realistic verbal art’.\textsuperscript{32} This tradition of subtextual readings is essential to my methodology in excavating \textit{The Malachite Casket} as I consider the provenance of the collection; the story of Bazhov’s descent into hiding doubled within the tales; and their undercurrent of disquiet I detect towards the Stalinist regime, which counters his lifelong loyalty to the Communist Party.

A descent narrative is a story in which the tale’s hero/ine travels down into an underworld, often the land of the dead, before ascending again to the aboveground world we know as our own flawed home.\textsuperscript{33} Most readers of fairy tales are familiar with the motif of the enchanted underground having found themselves following a line of text down into a tunnel, mineshaft, cellar or cavern. Odysseus’ and Gilgamesh’s mythic travels to the underworld allow us to excavate the golden seam of fairy tale, revealing other descent narratives: from the Grimm Brothers’ tale of a young man taken to a cave by his godfather Death; to the twelve princesses, secretly visiting an underground castle in ‘The Shoes that Were Danced to Pieces’; and from Alexander Afanas’ev’s description of three subterranean kingdoms made of copper, silver and gold; to ‘The Crystal Mountain’, in which the prince turns into an ant, and rescues a princess imprisoned underground.\textsuperscript{34} These tales feel timeless, but in their various and infinite forms reflect the temporality of a particular retelling as their meaning transmogrifies.

\textsuperscript{32} Terras, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{33} In her book \textit{Hell in Contemporary Literature}, Rachel Falconer describes the ‘katabic imagination’ as a still prevalent ‘world view which conceives of selfhood as the narrative construct of an infernal journey and return.’ (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) p. 2.
depending on when, where, and to whom they are told. My reading of *The Malachite Casket* similarly excavates and recuperates both text and subtext, with method—like content—closely shadowing form.

In this thesis I juxtapose Bazhov’s depiction of mining and manual labour with the fabulous subterranean realms he created: an underground reading that excavates golden nuggets of allusion hidden within the tales. This imagery—of enchanted palaces, rivers of gold and stone forests, peasant workers, ruthless overseers, and magical helpers—illuminates the play in *The Malachite Casket* between what is aboveground and what is concealed below. My reading of the tales as an oblique critique of Stalinism (as the critics Robert Chandler and Mark Lipovetsky have also observed), and of the rapid and brutal transformations the Soviet Union endured in the years following the October 1917 Revolution, elucidates the collection’s literary significance, cultural impact, and enduring legacy. Concealed within the text of these simultaneously socialist realist and utopian fairy tales is, I argue, not only the story of Bazhov’s own time underground, but of his disquiet over Stalinism’s devastating impact on Russia’s rural peasants. A third, and significant strand to my reading considers Bazhov’s self-mythologizing, as following the publication of *The Malachite Casket* he assumed the role of storyteller. The form Bazhov chose—that of the magical descent narratives—is intrinsic to the content of his stories. Just as their provenance, as the ‘secret tales’ of Ural mountain miners is inseparable from their final emergence as an enduring act of literary imagination—still little known outside of Russia—hatched at a time of personal

---

danger and distress.\footnote{Chandler, RMT, p. 225.}

Chapter I (‘Pick’) descends to the fantastic myth-country Bazhov created, with a synopsis of the stories contained in The Malachite Casket, and an overview of other critical considerations of these Soviet magic tales. Here I provide historical and literary context in support of my reading of these stories as descent narratives. I close this introductory chapter with a consideration of language peculiar to the Russian tradition of magic tales, and of Bazhov’s hybrid form within the context of fairy-tale studies and folklore.

Chapter 2 (‘Shovel’) excavates the role of the storyteller—particularly as seen through the prism of Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay ‘The Storyteller’—and the provenance, publication, and translation history of Bazhov’s work. Central to my consideration of the stories contained in The Malachite Casket is Bazhov’s expedient use of a fictional double: Grandpa Slishko. I argue that the character of Slishko is a device that both frames the collection, and allows Bazhov to distance himself from, or collectivize, his own work, assuming the role of storyteller, not author. This chapter includes a textual descent into the first pair of Bazhov’s linked tales: ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ and ‘The Malachite Casket’. My reading is one that explores the theme of the underground in Bazhov’s stories beyond the literary realm, as a cultural, political, and psychoanalytical motif.

Chapter 3 (‘Lamp’) illuminates the utopianism of The Malachite Casket through the symbolism of malachite-green and gold in the collection’s title and in ‘The Stone Flower’. It explores the motifs of precious stone and metal, and interrogates the ambivalence of the tale’s ending, and its prevailing concern with individual artistic struggle. These themes, considered alongside the motifs of hiding and disappearance, are central to my reading of ‘The Mountain Master’ (the sequel to ‘The Stone Flower’).
Taken together, these two tales are the best known and most widely adapted stories in the collection; written during Bazhov’s ‘period of self-confinement’, they exemplify his blending of forms.37

My conclusion proposes that the content and form of Bazhov’s stories speak with one voice, elucidating the ways in which the deployment of the descent narrative in *The Malachite Casket* literally functions as the content of the tales’ downward journeys. Ernst Bloch’s essay, ‘The Fairy Tale Moves on its Own in Time’ (1930), has expanded my consideration of everyday utopianism in *The Malachite Casket*. The essay’s prescient opening sentence—‘Certainly good dreams can go too far’—provides a sharp commentary on the utopian project that was the Soviet Union, from 1917 to 1953, and informs the strange collusion between socialist realism, folklore and descent narratives that occurs within Bazhov’s tales.38

~Ж~

Descending and dissenting, fairy tales reach down into the ancient world of myth and ritual, whilst confronting injustice and taboo, or underground subjects such as: incest, infanticide, and cannibalism. A sub-genre of folklore, fairy tales turn on magic and elicit a sense of wonder. They have been disseminated across the centuries, ‘imitated and replicated […] to form the fiber of culture and tradition’.39 The ancient forests of Northern Europe ‘were dangerous and generous, domestic and wild’, and it was from this landscape that Russian magic tales emerged.40 A great forest called the *taiga* stretches from the Ural mountains to the Pacific Ocean. It is a myth-country

37 Chandler, RMT, p. 221
39 Zipes, IFT, p. xii.
sprawling across 3,600 miles and, like the Germany’s Black Forest and England’s Sherwood, is deeply rooted in the collective imagination. Russian folk traditions are animated with nature spirits, from leshii to rusalka. However, fairies are ‘not met in the Russian tradition’, and so the English phrase ‘fairy tale’ is a problematic translation for the Russian equivalent. Skazka, the Russian word for fairy tale, has more in common with the layers of meaning invoked by the German Märchen or the Icelandic saga (translated as ‘tale’ or ‘story’, but implying a folkloric and oral tradition) than with the sophisticated concoctions—le conte de fées—that emerged from the Paris salons of seventeenth-century France. In the Russian context, ‘magic tale’, rather than ‘fairy tale’, best describes this type of folktale; therefore, in this thesis I have chosen to translate the Russian term, skazky, as ‘magic tales’. When referring generally to such tales within the Northern European tradition I have used the term more widely recognized within the Anglophone world: ‘fairy tale’.

Traditional Russian magic tales, like other northern European fairy tales, have ancient origins. And the genre has been enriched by a culture of storytelling: from the Muscovite-era wandering skomorokhi, who were reputed to have ‘magical powers’; to storytellers in the court of Ivan the Terrible; and peasant tales told to match ‘the slow tempo of life and the handicraft nature of work in the old village’. Magic tales contain

41 Doris Lessing once said that: ‘Every writer has a myth country […] my myth [was] the bush I was brought up in, the old house built of earth and grass, the lands around the hill, the animals, the birds. Myth does not mean something untrue, but a concentration of truth’. Quoted in Pushpa Naidu Parek and Siga Fatima Jagne, eds., Postcolonial African Writers: A bio-biographical critical sourcebook (London: Routledge, 1998), p.285
45 Icelandic Dictionary Online <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/IcelOnline/IcelOnline. TEId-idx?type=entry&eid=SAGA-1&q1=saga> [accessed 12 January 2016]
46 The term also favoured by the British translator and editor, Robert Chandler.
remnants of pre-Christian rites and rituals, and ‘materials from prehistoric times’, and are ‘rooted in oral traditions’ and the vernacular of the everyday. A literary fairy tale, in contrast, is the product of an individual writer’s imagination, rather than a story emerging from the collective and oral folk tradition. These tales are published as original literary works, and both use and disrupt the conventions and tropes of the fairy-tale form to create fabulous new fictions. Writers of literary tales include: Hans Christian Andersen, Oscar Wilde, Leonora Carrington, and Angela Carter.

The stories in The Malachite Casket are works of high fantasy; literary magic tales that remain ‘rooted in reality’, showing great originality in their exploration of ‘themes such as the quest for creative inspiration, nature’s revolt against man’s exploitation and the rewards of persistence and bravery’. By 1930 the Soviet aesthetic had aligned with the ideas of Georgy Plekhanov, a Marxist theorist for whom the historical development of art ‘was intimately linked with that of social labor and class struggle’. Under Stalinism art was required to be broadly appealing and intelligible, party-minded, and a tool for class struggle. This conservative Soviet aesthetic was in rigorous opposition to the avant-garde’s emphasis, a decade earlier, on a break ‘with the feudal and bourgeois past’ and the creation of a new, proletarian culture.

Yet while arguably created to appropriate and redraft local folk tales, ensuring they adhered to Marxist ideology, Bazhov’s tales escaped the fate of the majority of other, similar, works of literature, no longer read except within academic texts. Coined in the Soviet context by the historian Frank J. Miller, ‘fakelore’ describes the many

---

Footnotes:

48 TBG, p. xxi.
49 Anna Gunin, from an email to Robert Chandler, posted in RUSSIAN-STUDIES@JISCMAIL.AC.UK, 20 January 2013 [accessed 17 June 2017] Gunin translated the four stories from TMC collected in Chandler’s 2012 anthology, RMT.
50 Terras, p. 275.
51 Ibid.
pseudo works of folklore written in response to the Bolshevik government’s call for workers’ tales that matched their dogmatic version of Marxism. As Lipovetsky and Miller make clear, most authentic Russian folklore ‘belonged to peasant culture’ and so ‘sadly contradicted the official statements on the cultural hegemony of the proletariat’.53

In both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, Bazhov’s stories of mountains and mining have endured, adapted, and assumed—like all fairy tales—an ‘almost […] life of their own’, as they are disseminated through the decades in a variety of guises.54 Despite their fame in Russia, however, these magic tales have been largely neglected in the Anglophone world where there is a paucity of scholarly work on The Malachite Casket. From the depths of this lacuna my thesis transpires and—with pick, shovel and lamp in hand—seeks to amend.

~Ж~

53 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 264.
54 Zipes, IFT, p. 15.
Chapter 1: Pick

The Soviet Magic Tale as Descent Narrative

Once, in a certain town, in a certain time, there lived a Storyteller who was hiding from a wrathful Tsar. One night he dreamt that soldiers were coming to take him across the mountains to a prison made of ice. When he woke he barred his front door, closed the shutters, and turned off all the lamps inside his home so there was not a glimmer of light to be seen from outside. Then the Storyteller and his wife went down into their cellar and hid in the dark amongst the cords of firewood, the press full of potatoes and turnips, and the bottles of pickled cucumber and beetroot. They sat at a splintered old table holding hands, quiet as mice when the cat’s abroad. A week later the Tsar’s soldiers came looking for the Storyteller. They banged on his door and shuttered windows. They scrambled up the high wall and peered into his vegetable garden—a patch of black earth invisible from the street and already thinly covered in weeds. They questioned a child playing nearby who said, ‘He ran in the night.’ The soldiers left, and did not return. The house stayed shuttered and dark as, for days, for weeks, for months, the Storyteller and his wife sat in the cellar holding hands across the table.

~Ж~
Rivers of gold, forests of stone: introducing Bazhov’s tales

The tales in *The Malachite Casket*, based on stories told by miners in the Ural mountains, are a potent blend of realism and fantasy, remembered and ‘reworked’ by Bazhov. Their publication as a collection, in 1939, marked a radical shift for the former journalist and editor, from the well-trodden path of writing government propaganda, to the creation of magic tales. In the months and years that followed, *The Malachite Casket* was recognized as a classic work of Soviet children’s literature, and the stories, and their numerous adaptations, have been beloved by generations of Russians. Although Bazhov died over half a century ago, his tales still resonate and endure. New editions of *The Malachite Casket* continue to be published in Russia, while the stories it contains have been adapted into film, animation, ballet, theatre, and opera. In December 2016 the 1957 production of Prokofiev’s ballet, *The Stone Flower*, was revived at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the composer’s birth.

Written in what the translator, Eve Manning, described as ‘Urals dialect, dynamic and rhythmical […] rich in associations’, Bazhov’s magic tales are filled with ‘vivid local colour’ and characters. The Russian of Ural natives is fast and flowing: they swallow vowels and rarely pause between words, ‘but somehow manage to emphasize [the] letter O’. Their distinctive dialect means they soften the ends of some verbs, and use others that are unique to the region. Bazhov’s decision to write in the Ural vernacular, rather than standard Russian, gives some indication of his strong

---

55 Propp, RF, p. 33.
56 Chandler, RMT, p 221.
58 Eve Manning, ‘Translator’s Note’ in *The Malachite Casket: Tales from the Urals* by Pavel Bazhov (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1945).
59 Zhanna Alimova (a Siberian-born poet and occupational therapist), in a personal email to Rebecca Hurst, 8 February 2018).
regional loyalty, and commitment to a specific geographical setting. This regionalism runs counter to the centralizing policies of the 1930s, with regard to Russia’s minorities, when ‘Stalin and the Politburo began to stress the Russian language […] as the binding cement of their multinational state’.  

Taken together with ‘That Dear Name’—a story that describes violence committed against the indigenous people by gold-hungry Cossacks—the use of dialect, and local patriotism is an act of discreet opposition.

In 1946, ‘The Stone Flower’ was made into a film directed by Aleksandr Ptushko (the Soviet Union’s Walt Disney) for Mosfilm. Ptushko described the film as his ‘attempt to answer the question implied by Stalin’s words: "How can you tell a fairy tale in a present-day world that pretends to be one?”’. After watching Ptushko’s reworking of his magic tale Bazhov ‘very cautiously’ expressed the opinion that, although he liked the film, it did not contain enough of ‘the Urals’. In particular, he noted that during one scene the villagers sang ‘Kalinka’, a pseudo-folk song composed in the 1860s, rather than one of many ‘good Urals’ songs’ that might have been chosen.

Setting his magic tales in the Ural mountain mining communities around Yekaterinburg, Bazhov drew upon compelling childhood memories, as the son and grandson of peasant ironworkers. This family history was enhanced by his fascination with, and years of research into, the folklore of the region. In writing The Malachite Casket, Bazhov’s lifelong connection to a particular place—the village of Polyevsky

---

60 Riasanovsky, p. 577.
64 Ibid.
65 Chandler, RMT, p. 223.
and the forested Dumna mountain—was ‘wish-projected’, at a moment of great personal danger, into a fairy-tale world.\(^{67}\)

Bazhov was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1943. Following this indication of official approval he wrote a further thirty stories, and published an expanded edition of *The Malachite Casket* in 1948. This thesis engages with the acclaimed early tales, written during the years 1936–39: fourteen stories in total, published in the 1939 first edition.\(^ {68}\) Two pairs of linked narratives lie at the heart of the collection: ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ and ‘The Malachite Casket’; and ‘The Stone Flower’ and ‘The Mountain Master’. These tales were written during the Great Terror and share themes of an encounter with a magical helper, a journey to the enchanted underground, manual labour and artisanal craft, a quest in search of gold and malachite, and class conflict. Taken together, they vividly introduce and develop the themes of the hero/heroine’s descent into the subterranean realm of mountain spirits.

‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ is the story in which Bazhov introduces and animates his muse-like nature spirit—the protector of the mountain’s precious stones and minerals. The young miner, Stepan, is a reluctant fairy-tale hero. Following his encounter with the Mistress he is set a series of impossible and dangerous tasks and is rewarded for his tribulations with wealth, a wife, and freedom from serfdom. But the miner’s first encounter with the Mistress (which he calls ‘bad luck’) foreshadows the story’s tragic conclusion, as descent to the Mistress’ realm leads to his untimely death.\(^ {69}\)

‘The Malachite Casket’ is narratively linked to the tale of ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, though stylistically and thematically it is quite different. The heroine

---


\(^ {68}\) The tale of these tales—their provenance and publication, and their author’s change of fortune—is almost as fantastic as the stories themselves. It will be told more fully in Chapter 2.

of the collection’s title story is Stepan’s daughter. Tanyushka is beautiful, clever, and an outsider within her own family, maintaining an uncanny connection to her dead father. The malachite casket full of jewels, given to Stepan by the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, becomes Tanyushka’s plaything. The casket is a magical object which, hidden in the cellar, reveals itself by glowing so brightly she thinks the cellar is on fire. When Tanyushka is approaching adulthood the Mistress of the Copper Mountain appears disguised as a itinerant seamstress; a role similar to that taken by the goddess Demeter, during her long search for her daughter, Persephone. The Mistress befriends Tanyushka, teaches her to make fine embroidery, and gives her a magical glass button through which the two women communicate.

‘The Stone Flower’ follows the fortunes of orphaned Danilko-the-Starveling, who suffers early misfortune, but grows up to be both handsome and accomplished. Like the rest of his village, Danilko is bound by serfdom to his master and the land he was born on, and suffers violent abuse at the hands of his master’s overseer. After several false starts, he is apprenticed to a master stone-carver, Prokopich. Danilko soon proves he is an accomplished malachite carver with a poet’s soul, and as he reaches adulthood becomes obsessed with the task of making an honest vase that expresses the true beauty of the stone. Following an encounter with the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, Danilko disappears on the night of his wedding in pursuit of this artistic vision.

‘The Mountain Master’ picks up the thread of the tale, but this time told from the perspective of Danilko’s betrothed. Katya is a direct descendent of the peasant girl, Vasilisa the Fair, the Russian fairy-tale heroine who is sent by her stepmother into the dark forest to ask for fire from the witch, Baba Yaga. Like Vasilisa, Katya is resourceful, stoic, and creative; the heroine of her own story. Leaving her family she
moves in with Prokopich, and after the old man’s death lives alone, teaching herself to carve malachite while stubbornly waiting for her vanished lover to return. At the end of tale Katya travels underground to confront the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, and rescue Danilko. He returns with her to the village, they marry, and live (almost) happily ever after.

Other tales written in the collection include the story of two orphaned brothers who are given the gift of a seam of gold. Their magical helper in ‘The Great Serpent’ is Poloz, another nature spirit, and the protector, donor/withholder of the mountain’s gold. In the story’s sequel, ‘The Serpent’s Tail’, this gift proves to be a source of conflict between the brothers. Through the intervention of Poloz’s red-haired daughter the bad, greedy brother is driven to madness and death, while the good, honest brother is rewarded. ‘That Dear Name’ alludes to the Mistress’s mythical and tragic provenance as guardian of the Ural mountains; while the scatological ‘Sochen’s Gems’, and ‘The Bailiffs’ Bootsoles’, humorously revel in the trickster aspect of her character. ‘The Cat’s Ears’ and ‘The Two Lizards’, engage more directly than any of the other tales with themes of class struggle and rebellion against brutal landowners. Finally, ‘Silver Hoof’ tells the story of an orphan and her magical goat; while ‘Sinyushka’s Well’ is another tale in which the golden promise of a magical gift becomes tarnished by a malachite-green ending, as the hero and his wife die of consumption.

~Ж~

**Bazhov in the Anglophone world**

If in the Soviet Union and Russia Bazhov’s tales have endured—in part, as Lipovetsky suggests, because they offered escape from, and fantastic resolution to the crises of Soviet life—the collection is far from well known to English-speaking
In the 2005 anthology *Politicizing Magic*, the story of ‘The Malachite Casket’ appears in the section of the book entitled ‘Fairy Tales of Socialist Realism’. Marina Balina’s introduction describes Bazhov’s work as combining a ‘revision of the folktale tradition with poetic representations of nature’, whilst voicing the ideological message of ‘the triumph of Soviet reality over any fantasy’. Her argument is that these magic tales are primarily focused on ideologically dogmatic depictions of class conflict.

In contrast, Mark Lipovetsky’s 2008 essay on the uncanny in Bazhov’s *skazy* offers a more nuanced and literary reading. A native of the Yekaterinburg region of Russia, Lipovetsky argues that the mythology Bazhov created ‘served as a mirror image of the present Soviet culture of the Great Terror rather than a reflection of ancient cultural memory.’ For Lipovetsky, the enduring popularity of Bazhov’s tales (particularly those written between 1936 and 1939) is in spite, not because, of their ‘consonance […] with the main trends of socialist realism’. More than just ‘the realisation of socialist realist dogma’, the art to Bazhov’s writing lies in the ‘double encoding’ he employs within the stories. As a result of this doubling, Lipovetsky argues, the stories ‘became one of the few manifestations of the repressed aspects of the Soviet collective unconscious allowed in official Soviet culture’. In his consideration of the *The Malachite Casket* Lipovetsky uses the word ‘manifestation’ as a means of circumnavigating the issue of intentionality; Bazhov channelled an aspect of the Soviet zeitgeist, but it remains arguable as to whether this was by chance or design.

Robert Chandler, the editor of Penguin’s anthology, *Russian Magic Tales*, also observes how closely the narrative of ‘The Stone Flower’ runs parallel to the common
experiences of Russians in the 1930s, when ‘hundreds of thousands of people [were] snatched up without warning, swept away to a distant realm of snow and ice and then returned to their homes after the passing of ten, twenty, even thirty years.’ There is certainly something of the fairy tale’s numerical obsessiveness in the precision of the long prison sentences meted out during the Great Terror, as well as in the arbitrary and fabulous nature of the crimes committed by Stalin’s ‘enemies of the people’, and the obfuscating communications received by their family members. It was ‘The Stone Flower’ that inspired Prokofiev’s ballet of the same name, a project initiated towards the end of the composer’s life, when in February 1948, the Soviet regime ‘simultaneously lauded and condemned him’. Chandler highlights the equivalences of life and art as ‘hidden in plain view’ within ‘The Stone Flower’, perhaps even from Bazhov himself. But his emphasis on the uncanny motif of disappearance echoes Lipovetsky, who calculates that out of the fourteen tales in the first edition of The Malachite Casket, seven end not with a return home and ‘happy ever after’, but with ‘the vanishing of the protagonist into thin air, or rather, into the depths of the mountain kingdom’.

Other Anglophone considerations of Bazhov and The Malachite Casket are more tangential. His stories are described by Cherry Gilchrist in her book, Russian Magic: Living Folk Traditions in an Enchanted Landscape, as ‘vivid and haunting’, and ‘as excellent vehicles for carrying knowledge’. A curious and tiny cult has grown up in the Ural mountains, dedicated to the ‘esoteric teaching’ they believe is hidden within

---

77 Chandler, RMT, p. 222.
78 As described in Chapter 4, ‘The Great Fear [1937-8]’, in Figes’ The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia.
80 Chandler, RMT, p. 222.
81 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, pp. 265, 277.
Bazhov’s tales. The Malachite Casket is also referred to in Sharae Deckard’s essay ‘Fox Spirits and Stone Maidens: Post-Soviet EcoGothic and Ecological Imperialism’ (2014), where Bazhov’s myth-country and latent environmentalism is described as lying at the heart of Olga Slavnikova’s novel 2017 (2010). Deckard explicates Slavnikova’s ‘triple-encoding’ of Bazhov’s ‘double-encoded’ tales:

[...] by incorporating their literal content and their generic principle, using the hybrid combination of fantastic and historical content as a way of commenting on the present-day situation in Russia without explicitly inviting censorship.

Limited as they are, these critical considerations of Bazhov’s work emphasize the collection’s power of endurance beyond the existence of the Soviet Union, in which they were conceived. And while the collection as a whole might embody the ‘tragic exhaustion’ of the post-industrial Ural mountains, the individual tales within The Malachite Casket are treasured for their compelling depiction of horror, heroism, and everyday magic.

Outside Russia, therefore, Chandler and Lipovetsky, provide the main body of work found on The Malachite Casket, with the uncanny and repressed elements of the tales drawing their particular attention. My own contribution is to extend this work with an ‘underground’ reading of Bazhov’s tales. My consideration of The Malachite Casket pushes beyond the Freudian prism of the uncanny to propose a reading of the tales as descent literature: fantasy fiction intrinsically grounded in time and place. My historicizing interpretation also places Bazhov’s work within the context of fairy-tale studies, exploring the social and cultural facets of the tales, and revealing the unique and compelling merging of literary forms.

83 Gilchrist, pp. 166-167.
85 Ibid, p. 16.
Although Anglophone scholarly interest in Bazhov’s work has been limited, the opposite is true of traditional Russian magic tales, and their North European kin. The field of fairy-tales studies began in the early nineteenth century, as Victorian scholars collected, and then attempted to catalogue and curate, a disorderly cacophony of folktales. In Germany, the Brothers Grimm—motivated by nationalism and a fascination with literary history—published their first collection of folk and fairy tales in 1812-15.\(^{86}\) Their Russian equivalent was Aleksandr Afanas’ev, without whose collection of traditional tales (published from 1855-64) ‘a Russian child’s bookshelf is incomplete’.\(^{87}\)

In *The Morphology of the Folktale* and *The Russian Folktale* the Soviet folklorist, Vladimir Propp, described the form and functions of the Russian magic tale, explicating their unique structure and provenance. *The Complete Russian Folktale*, translated and edited by Jack Haney, when read alongside Afanas’ev’s collection, provides a feast of stories. Some of these tales will be familiar to readers of the Brothers Grimm or Giambattista Basile, whilst others are unique to the Russian repertory; Nikolai Andreev’s 1927 statistical analysis of Russian folktales indicates that ‘about one-third are specifically Russian, and do not occur in Western Europe’.\(^{88}\) Finally, Felix J. Oinas’s work on the Soviet folktale illuminates both the tradition Bazhov drew upon, and the evolving role of folktales in the years after the 1917 Revolution.

Glancing away from Russia for a moment, the exuberant manifesto-essay ‘Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Tale’, by Kate Bernheimer, provides an introduction to the Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi, and his ideas on the structure of the traditional fairy tale.

---

\(^{86}\) Zipes, TBG, p. xxv.  
Bernheimer’s essay is distinctive for its passionate writing, as much as for its content: ‘Oh, how I love fairy tales!’ she declaims, before diving into a rigorous explication of this ‘lucid form’. 89 Fairy tales are known to us, as Lüthi argues in his books The European Folktale: Form and Nature and Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales, by the relationship of their distinct literary form to the content of the tales. Using his background in German language and literature to interpret and analyse European folk narratives, Lüthi described the folktale form as ‘abstract’ and ‘depthless’ defined by the stylistic qualities of ‘isolation and universal interconnection, the truncated motif, and sublimation and all-inclusiveness’, which permeate the tales like groundwater working through layers of sediment. 90

Other names from the wider world of fairy tale studies will appear in my consideration of Bazhov’s treasury of tales, numerous as the nuggets of gold that in the story ‘Beloved Name’ litter the ancient landscape of the Ural mountains, springing up from the ground plentiful as mushrooms. 91 Fellow-travellers in this enchanted realm include folklorists, social historians, structuralists, formalists, psychoanalysts (both Freudian and Jungian), poets, and storytelling practitioners.

An extended consideration of fairy tales inevitably begins, after the first few thousand words, to resemble the form it describes: rambling and profuse, influenced by ‘the lore of faraway place […] [and] the lore of the past’. 92 Like an ancient mine, the world of fairy tales studies is made up of deep shafts that lead to a tangle of winding galleries, where the gem-beguiled can wander for days or years, exploring caverns and abandoned workings, and excavating one promising seam after another. Emerging from

81 Bazhov/Williams, ‘Beloved Name’, p. 12.
the labyrinth of Faery with their hands callused and hair full of dust, the writer stumbles, blinking, into the sunlight, examining the jumble of stones s/he has brought back. I have done my best to acknowledge the numerous companions I met on my subterranean travels, and who will receive their dues in footnotes and asides.

~Ж~

The magic tale underground

Deep connections to oral folk traditions are at least one source of the clamorous fairy tale’s enduring vitality, and this ‘low class’ tradition is both reflected in and illuminated by the stories in The Malachite Casket. Author or reader, storyteller or fireside-listener, we set off from deep down in the dirt, amid the roots and shoots of the tale, and work our way up towards the golden promise of happy-ever-after. Great storytellers of the past have always been willing to cross boundaries and descend to the underworld, ‘rooted in the people’, evoking and sharing their everyday lives by moving ‘up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder’.93 In addition to his interest in the everyday roots of the genre, Benjamin’s metaphor of the ladder chimes with twentieth-century psychoanalytic readings of fairy tales, as texts by which the reader can descend and ascend into their subconscious.

The motif of the underground excites but also horrifies. Bazhov described it as a world of utter darkness, that the ‘ordinary little miner’s lamp […] so faint you wouldn’t even know it’s burning’ could not penetrate.94 It is a place that is also damp and

93 Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 100-01. (My italics.)
inhospitable to human life, and, forced to work below ground, Bazhov’s miners inhabit a liminal space as ‘lost souls […] [who] don’t care whether they live or die’.95

The underworld is, to sun-loving humans, an alien place. Descending into darkness we cross a threshold at which we relinquish the sun’s light and risk health, family, and reason. In the tunnels and mine-shafts below the Ural mountains Bazhov’s men and women forget what it is to be human, and what it is to crave life. Entering the subterranean realm of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain they lose themselves and become other. In Bazhov’s tales the descent underground, even when it is part of everyday working life, has the implications of a rite of passage from which the subterranean traveller will return transformed.

Yet, the underground is what lies intimately beneath our feet; as familiar as the sky above our heads. Physically it is part of the world we live in, and in this way the underground realm mimics the world of the fairy tale. Like the fairy tale it is a ‘Secondary World’; a place that shadows our own experiential reality but is also, uncannily, set apart.96 And again like the fairy-tale realm, the underground lies within us, as an allegory for the human subconscious; and as a metaphor for economies, art, political, and cultural movements, and even people who are somehow covert, subversive, and hidden from the mainstream.97 Finally, the underground can be restorative and womblike; a den or hideaway; a place of protection and shelter. Humans have lived in caves and burrows for thousands of years, and many homes still have

95 By liminal I mean ‘a boundary or threshold’; though my use in this context also infers the definition of the word in the anthropological context, as ‘a transitional or intermediate state between culturally defined stages of a person’s life, esp. as marked by a ritual or rite of passage’. OED Online, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 2 January 2018] Bazhov/Williams, ‘The Manager’s Boot-soles’, p. 29.
cellars and basements. Seeds germinate in the earth to provide us with food, while deep underground we have discovered and plundered precious stones, metals, and fossil fuels. The carbon trapped for millions of years in the form of gold, diamonds and coal, when brought to the surface, adds brilliance and warmth to our aboveground world.

The word ‘underground’ has similar ancient roots. Reaching back into Old English or Saxon, its etymology lies deep within our cultural history. Grubbing down into the English language through the pages of the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals that ‘under’ or *undar* is an Old English prefix that roughly corresponds with the Latin ‘sub’; 98 the word ‘ground’ is derived from *grund*, meaning ‘strong masculine’. 99 ‘Underground’ has the resonance of a foot stamping down hard on a flagstone floor. It is a guttural and solid compound, and a word that falls leadenly from the tongue. Unlike the more sibilant ‘subterranean’, to say the word ‘underground’ is to feel the descent in our body. Perhaps for this reason English-speakers in Britain did not adopt the French *souterrain* in the years following the Norman conquest. 100 Underground was a word that had been too deeply embodied. It is a word that takes us to the place it signifies. As we articulate ‘underground’ we discover that, like Alice, we tumble down the rabbit hole of language. 101 We pass through passages and tunnels, perhaps by way of an old mine shaft, or a cavern, or an underground railway.

The written record of fairy tales in the European tradition begins with the story of Cupid and Psyche, in Apuleius’s second-century ‘metaphysical romance’ *The Golden*

---

99 Ibid.
100 Although it has entered the English-language as a term used by archaeologists to describe underground chambers and passages. OED Online, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 21 June 2016]
101 See *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, first published in 1865. The handwritten manuscript, titled *Alice’s Adventures in Under Ground* is available as a facsimile through the British Library. <https://www.bl.uk/works/alices-adventures-in-wonderland> [accessed 13 January 2017] In Russia, Carroll’s tale of Alice’s underground journey has been enduringly popular. The first translation was published by the Moscow publishing house, Mamonov, in 1879. The anonymous translator Russified the tale, which was renamed *Sonja in a Kingdom of Wonder* (Соня въ царствѣ дива). In 1923, Nabokov published his own Russian translation, which he titled *Anya in Wonderland* (Аня в стране чудес). <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/exhibits/alice/translation/> [accessed 25 February 2018]
However, oral folktales enriched by the motifs of magic and wonder, and enlivened by talking animals, fearsome witches, and foolish kings, have been told for many thousands of years. The fairy tale is a magical form of folklore, ‘intended not for reading with the eyes but for aural reception’. European authors of literary fairy tales, from the seventeenth century to the present, have mined this rich seam for their own stories, adapting and reimagining them along the way. Folktales and fairy tales were told long before literacy was widespread, and across all social classes, though traditionally they have a particular connection to the seasons and rhythms of rural working life. But if the roots of the fairy tale are grounded in humble yet fertile soil, the heart of these ancient tales is more deeply buried, within an enchanted and subterranean landscape. The entrance to this magical realm is concealed by a great boulder that moves to reveal ‘an elegant staircase’, as the everyday leads to the fantastic. At the bottom of the stairs are ‘stone […] doors with beautiful decorations’, and the fairy-tale world of enchantment awaits.

103 How ancient are fairy tales? Around 5000 years old according to the findings of Jamshed J. Tehrani (an anthropologist) and his co-researcher Sara Graça da Silva (a folklorist). Their article, ‘Comparative phylogenetic analyses uncovers the ancient roots of Indo-European folktales’, published in January 2016 by the Royal Society explains their research methods and findings. <http://rsos.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/royopensci/3/1/1506455.full.pdf> [accessed 29 April 2016]
104 Propp, RF, p. 300.
105 Zipes, IFT, p. 2-3. In this book Zipes describes the symbiotic relationship between the oral tradition of ‘wonder folk tales’, and the literary traditions of fairy tales. The latter, he argues, emanated ‘from the oral traditions through the mediation of manuscripts and print, and continue to be created today in various mediated forms around the world’. Ibid.
106 The question of the provenance of fairy tales is beyond the scope of this thesis, although scholarship in this area is rich and full of controversy. In IFT Jack Zipes warns that we must ‘be aware of oral influences in printed tales that can be traced linguistically, philologically, stylistically, and historically to all kinds of oral tales’ (p. 167). Zipes counters Ruth Bottigheimer’s claims in Fairy Tales: A New History (2009), which dismiss ‘the oral tradition as providing the source of literary fairy tales and [proclaim] that the Italian writer Straparola was the inventor of the […] genre’, while ‘ubiquitous and mysterious folk and nursemaids’ were ‘consumers’ rather than ‘producers’ of fairy tales (pp. 157-158). In IFT Zipes refutes this argument, asserting that ‘folk tales, especially oral wonder tales, are much more diverse than Bottigheimer suggests and have many remarkable similarities with literary fairy tales and other genres, such as myths, legends, and anecdotes’ (p. 164).
reader walks through these doors and into a subterranean forest of trees made from living marble.108

Descending to the stone forest initiates a journey in pursuit of narratives whose characters, plots, and motifs are timeless, and whose origins are ‘concealed and fragmentary’.109 As she walks the traveller holds a thread between the thumb and index finger of her left hand. This thread is strong as spider-silk; it is a ‘chain of tradition which passes the account of an event on from generation to generation’ and keeps us all—storyteller and listener, writer and reader—connected to one another.110 Like Princess Irene, in The Princess and the Goblin (another descent narrative set within a mining community), the reader must ‘follow the thread wherever it leads’.111 Even if the route takes her ‘a very roundabout way indeed’, as long as she stays true to the tale and keeps hold of the thread she will surely make her way home.112

~Ж~

Magic tales in the Soviet context

By evoking the delights of a traditional magic tale within a Marxist and historical framework, Bazhov’s stories, like many folktales, skew their readers’ sense of here/there, this/that, then/now, and can perhaps be best defined as neither/nor.113 In this way, Bazhov was following the golden thread of Propp’s revolutionary adage that the writer who ‘mines the treasure of folklore’ must work with, but also against tradition.114 His tales adhere to the formal rules of neither socialist realist fiction, nor fairy tales, but

---

110 Ibid, p. 98.
112 Ibid.
114 Propp, RF, p. 7.
instead use elements of both to unsettling effect, trampling their own distinct and descending path.

Traditional Russian magic tales, like their Northern European counterparts, are darkly shadowed. The promise of a golden future does not necessarily hold, and the archetypal Slavic witch, Baba Yaga, is a cantankerous, iron-toothed guardian of boundaries, as well as a giver of magical gifts. In early modern Russia magic tales and folklore were an integral part of secular and oral culture, enjoyed by all classes, but from the mouths of storytellers, not the pages of books; they represented a ‘chain of tradition’, connecting listeners and tellers across the centuries. The first glimpse of Russian folktales that exists in written form comes from accounts by seventeenth-century travellers to Muscovy.116

In the early nineteenth century, Alexander Pushkin wrote six literary magic tales inspired by the skazky he heard from his nurse, ‘Ariana Rodionovna, a household serf’, and his main companion during two years of political exile in northern Russia.117 Pushkin’s poetic tales are cited as ‘the oldest surviving versions […] in Russian taken down from popular storytellers in something akin to the popular language’.118 And in the act of writing these tales were carried into the light and exposed as they had never been before.119 From the spoken-aloud-words of a peasant woman emerged a collection of texts by an aristocratic writer who, within his short life, transformed the Russian language; who had an official position in one of the most opulent courts in Europe; and yet who described folktales as not mere ‘charming tales’ to while away a dark evening, but compensation for his ‘cursed upbringing’.120 In his months of exile—when the state
itself hid Pushkin away from public view and discourse—the poet discovered the truth in Benjamin’s words, that ‘A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller’. And through the vernacular of his nurse’s magic tales he was able to escape the oppressive and unjust society into which he had been born, and take refuge in another world.

The role of storyteller—both bridging and caught between worlds—is often a confounded one, as Pushkin’s biography reveals. The history of folklore and fairy tales in Russia and the Soviet Union is populated by impoverished collectors and writers, buckling under the iron-hand of censorship and political oppression. From the late sixteenth century, the internal exile of political dissenters was used by Russia’s autocratic rulers as a means of dampening down the flames of radical opposition. Sending educated young people to far-flung places within the empire would have—particularly in the nineteenth century—‘unintended but fruitful side effects’, as the exiles, like Pushkin, ‘became interested in local lore and began to collect, translate, and publish it’.

Typical of this period are the lives and experiences of two of the great nineteenth-century collectors of Russian folklore, Alexandr Afanas’ev (1826-1871) and Ivan Khudyakov (1842-1876). The former died of tuberculosis in abject poverty, after the Russian Orthodox church denounced his Russian Folk Legends (1866) as ‘thoroughly blasphemous and immoral’; while the latter’s work in folklore led to his expulsion from Moscow University and exile to eastern Siberia, where he died in a psychiatric hospital at the age of thirty-four.

123 Forrester, ‘Preface’ to RF, p. xix.
124 Chandler, RMT, pp. 28, p. 81.
Following the 1917 revolution, the response to folklore and fairy tales by the newly empowered Bolsheviks was ideological and contradictory. The folklorist Felix Oinas has described the decade that followed the revolution as a ‘golden era’ when scholars and collectors of folklore were left to ‘do their work relatively undisturbed’. However, by the mid-1920s there was political controversy around the genre, and writers of original fantasy literature were treated with particular hostility by the regime, which insisted this ‘special art form’ was inherently ‘bourgeois’. The growing suspicion that folktales ‘reflected the ideology of the ruling classes’ led to the creation of a committee dedicated to eradicating a literary form that ‘glorified tsars […] corrupted and instigated sickly fantasies in children, developed the kulak attitude, and strengthened bourgeois ideals’. No less a figure than Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, declared in a speech that fairy tales were: ‘steeped in mysticism, belief in God and miracles, propagating monarchism, national enmity [and] chauvinism’. And in 1928 We Are Against the Fairy Tale was published, edited by a group of ‘leading Soviet pedologists’. As a result, books of fairy tales vanished from schools and libraries, despite Propp’s plea that the genre stood as ‘both a monument of the far past and a vigorous voice of our present’.

The Soviet opposition to the folktales, at least on the bookshelves of children, was purportedly based on the form’s failure to provide acceptable ‘class-oriented

---

127 Balina, p. 106.
128 Megan Swift, ‘The Poet, the Peasant and the Nation: Aleksandr Pushkin’s ‘Skazka o Pope i o Radotnike Ego Balde’ (1830) in Illustrated Editions 1917-1953’ in Russian Literature (87–89 [2017]), pp. 123–146 (p. 124). In this paper Swift argues that the politics surrounding folklore and fairy tales ‘can be read as a place of negotiation between the shifting cultural imperatives of the tsarist, Leninist and Stalinist eras’. Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
content’. However, the Party was also aware of, and alarmed by its slippery idealism, embodied in the motifs of ‘magic, fantasy, animism, and anthropomorphism’, and its potential for subversion. In 1922, Yevgeny Zamyatin published a collection of stories called *Fairy Tales for Grown-Up Children*. The book crackles with ‘explosive, anti-totalitarian’ anger as following a huge earthquake, during which ‘stars poured down from heaven like ripe pears’, a fearsome monster is born. Named Chomper, this monster has bear’s feet, a ‘dead boar’s head’, and a human face and mouth where his navel should be. He devours everyone he meets, from the old man ploughing to the little girl picking bluebells, and leaves a void in his wake, filled with ‘piles of droppings’. The tale’s nonsensical ending, which claims the earth will be enriched by Chomper’s droppings and so provide a good harvest, only increases the sense of prosaic horror. Using the magic tale’s satiric double-tongue, Zamyatin satirized the Leninist view that Communist Russia’s golden future had to be built upon the graves of those who stood it its way. An early member of the Bolshevik Party who was imprisoned and exiled in 1905 for his political activities, Zamyatin was nonetheless vilified and persecuted by Soviet ‘Party-line critics’, went into impoverished exile, and died in Paris in 1937.

The fairy tales’ Soviet period of prohibition came to an end in 1934 when Maxim Gorky gave a speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers initiating the process of rehabilitation: folklore was reclaimed ‘in the interests of glorifying a heroic

---

131 Balina, p. 106.
133 Ibid, pp. 235, 256.
135 Ibid.
136 The historian Richard Pipes argues that far from representing a shift from Leninism, with his policy of terror and mass murder, ‘Stalin was a true Leninist in that he faithfully followed his patron’s political philosophy and practices’. *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime 1919-1924* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), p. 508.
137 Terras, p. 529.
national past’. Gorky’s speech illustrated ‘the close connection of folklore with the concrete life and working conditions of the people’, stressing the genre’s ‘optimism’, and ‘artistic value’. Soviet leaders—‘As if by magic’—were successfully reminded of the utopian and ideological function of the genre, and began work to co-opt fairy tales and employ them as ‘builders of communism’. And so stories that had vanished underground, having been physically removed from schools and libraries, suddenly and unexpectedly resurfaced. It was in this still-contentious atmosphere that Bazhov, in 1936, began to cautiously set down the first of his own Soviet magic tales.

In his speech Gorky praised the fairy tale for its conception of the ‘artistically perfect hero types’, claiming that these characterisations were made ‘possible only through direct participation in the creative activities of labour, in the struggle for life’. When rehabilitating the form in the 1930s, the Soviet state seized upon one of the traditional roles of the literary fairy tale as a tool for reinforcing ‘inhibiting standards of civilisation’. However, Soviet writers created not only servile ‘fakelore’ to satisfy the state’s demand for folklore reflecting class struggle, and the utopian ambitions of the proletariat, but also wrote satirical works that used the fantastic as a tool for liberation, and to ‘subvert the controls of rationalization’. The state’s response to this kind of subversion was emphatic and brutal. However, while such work could lead to tragic reprisals, the slippery folktale form also offered dissenting authors such as Evgeny Shvart’s the ‘protection of fantasy’, as long as they ‘did not violate the conventional

138 Swift, p. 125.
139 Balina, pp. 256-58.
140 Ibid.
141 Oinas, ‘The Political Uses and Themes of Folklore’, p. 158.
rules of the fairy-tale plot and placed […] [their] characters and events outside of the concrete world of Soviet life’.\textsuperscript{144}

The government’s newly positive official attitude to the genre was ‘ominously contradictory’, and in an era when a satirical poem led to the Siberian death camps, a misreading of government policy could have similarly tragic consequences.\textsuperscript{145} It is possible to view \textit{The Malachite Casket} (with its proletarian heroes and heroines) as being written cynically, in response to the call for folklore demonstrating ‘the people’s positive attitude toward the Revolution and the present government’.\textsuperscript{146} As the Soviet Union’s ‘leading folklorist’, Iurii Sokolov, wrote in 1934 (the same year as Maxim Gorky’s influential address), folklore was to be treated as ‘the oral poetic creations of the broad folk masses […] [and] a weapon of class conflict’.\textsuperscript{147} Yet Bazhov’s darkly-toned tales highlight the environmental and societal risks of mining and industry during the era of Five Year Plans, agricultural collectivization, industrialization, and urbanization. The malachite casket he opened was akin to Pandora’s box in this way at least—Bazhov could not know how the contents would be received once they were set free, and what, if any, their impact might be.

In Bazhov’s tales the magical descent narrative enabled him to address themes of concealment and revelation, of arrests and magical disappearances, but at a slant. These elements are echoed in Bazhov’s own life and experience of revolution, civil war, and the Stalinist purges, as well as his time ‘underground’. The stories in \textit{The Malachite Casket} also allowed their author to return to his first, truest (or at least most uncompromised) self; the boy depicted listening, rapt, to the tales of a storyteller in the


\textsuperscript{145} Chandler, RMT, p. 287.

\textsuperscript{146} Miller, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid, p. 7.
mountain forests surrounding his childhood home. For as Zipes notes in his essay on the liberating potential of this magical form of folktale, ‘adults return to fairy tales and fantasy literature […] to recapture the child in themselves […] not as a frivolous project but as a serious undertaking for self-gratification and self-realisation’.\textsuperscript{148} And while Bazhov’s stories do not have the subversive bite of Zamyatin’s \textit{Fairy Tales for Grown-Up Children}, they can nonetheless be read as ‘liberating fairy tales’, created through ‘the fusion of actual references to disturbing social occurrences in contemporary society with familiar fairy-tale motifs employed in startling fashion’.\textsuperscript{149}

In 1940, Andrey Platonov—author of \textit{The Foundation Pit}, a dystopian and satirical 1930s Soviet novel, which remained unpublished until long after his death\textsuperscript{150}—published a review of \textit{The Malachite Casket}, writing that the stories were ‘presented in the true, living language that gives a sense of the time and place of the action, of the individuality of the teller and of the philosophy of the people’.\textsuperscript{151} A Soviet land-reclamation expert, Platonov witnessed the famines of the 1920s and 1930s that followed the civil war and the collectivization of agricultural land.\textsuperscript{152} \textit{The Foundation Pit} is replete with disturbing images of the underground, burial, and the abyss; its author was himself a “reworker” of folk themes and (unlike Bazhov) a courageously vocal anti-Stalinist.\textsuperscript{153} In his translator’s afterword to this allegorical work Chandler describes its Aesopian undercurrents, noting that ‘Platonov’s resistance to the nightmare he lived through is embodied […] in the texture of each individual sentence’.\textsuperscript{154} For Platonov, the tales in \textit{The Malachite Casket} resonated with authenticity, manifesting both ‘truth

\textsuperscript{150} Balina, p. 11.  
\textsuperscript{151} Chandler, RMT, p. 331.  
\textsuperscript{153} Propp, RF, p. 33.  
\textsuperscript{154} Chandler, \textit{The Foundation Pit}, p. 163.
and art’. This contemporaneous response to Bazhov’s magic tales frames and contextualizes the tension in *The Malachite Casket*, between the storyteller’s voice, his chosen genre and subject matter, and the politics of folklore in Stalinist Russia.

Enchanting reality: words about words

Having dealt in the introduction with the meaning of *skazka* and its translation into English as magic tale, a second Russian word requires explanation: *skaz*. For this word, rather than *skazka*, is how Bazhov describes his own stories, although *skaz* more usually refers to: ‘Biographical narratives and remembrances […] from ordinary people about their own lives, about the events they had witnessed, and about the remarkable people they had met’. In the *Handbook of Russian Literature*, ‘*Skaz*’ is defined as combining elements of both *skazka* (which are ‘unreal, magic, fantastic’) and *byl’* (‘claimed as “true”’). This hybrid form rests on the border between everyday speech (‘an anecdote from personal experience’) and ‘a work of oral narrative art’. After the 1917 Revolution, it came to have special resonance, as ‘stories of heroes of the civil war and World War II, [and] recollections of meeting with great civic figures’, were sought out and recorded as oral history.

AS Propp’s description of *The Malachite Casket* highlights, and as the author’s foreword to his collection lays claim, Bazhov’s tales were meant to be read as

---

155 By the use of ‘authenticity’ I mean, in this context, to encapsulate Platonov’s claim that Bazhov’s fairy tales are ‘in accordance with fact or stating the truth’ (OED Online, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed December 09, 2016]); that they capture the language and experiences of the people whose lives they depict and whose folklore they are based on; and that they contain only the slightest of discrepancies ‘between word and fact’. Chandler, RMT, p. 330-31.
156 The plural of *skaz* is *skazy*, as the plural of *skazka* is *skazky*.
158 Terras, p. 420.
159 Ibid.
160 Propp, RF, p. 33.
‘reworkings’ of traditional tales. However, Lipovetsky notes that the story of the book’s creation ‘is not well known, because it was deeply incompatible with the official Soviet discourse’, and Bazhov’s ‘rare genre definition’ of skaz is linked to the confused provenance of the collection’s earliest tales. In 1936, the stories Bazhov wrote ‘were intended to compensate for the lack of workers’ narratives in [...] [an] anthology of Ural folklore’. At this time the author meant his work to be received as collected rather than written, and submitted the first stories in the guise of local tales. ‘A "story" you say [...] the kind old women tell to children?’ Grandpa Slishko tells the young boy in the preface to The Malachite Casket. And goes on to explain that rather than these childish tales it is stories about ‘Olden Times’ that he remembers:

I’ve used my eyes and my ears in my lifetime. These tales of mine are not just stories; they are about real happenings too. ’Tis not everyone who can tell you such things. There’s an art to it.

With a kernel of fantasy, and a protective outer shell of pragmatism, Bazhov’s tales offer a ‘story-teller mediated’ and ‘ideologically correct vision of the tsarist past’ At their heart is buried an enchanted subterranean world: a place of both labour and punishment (the copper and malachite mines), and magic (the Mistress’ stone forest and bejewelled palace). And enclosing this imaginative secondary world is a work of realism: a Marxist and politically expedient depiction of ‘the creators of society’s material wealth’, and of the class conflicts and injustices of tsarist Russia. These two elements might seem impossible to amalgamate between the covers of one book yet, through the form of the magical descent narrative, this is what Bazhov achieved.

161 Propp, RF, p. 33.
162 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, pp. 265, 263.
164 Bazhov/Williams, IPF, p. 5.
166 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 264.
As Bazhov’s unorthodox and artful use of skaz implies, The Malachite Casket contains more than a collection of dogmatic and servile Marxist magic tales, and both Lipovetsky and Chandler read ‘ambiguity toward the authorship of [Bazhov’s] […] skazy’ in the form, content, and publishing history of the collection. This ambiguity—the coppery green tarnish on his golden magic tales—as well as the power of the genre Bazhov created, is illustrated by Vitaly Volovich’s print of ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ (1963), which captures the Mistress’s embodiment of her realm, and the eerie and folkloric qualities of the magic tale (see Appendix, Figure 1).

Seated on a malachite throne the form of the Mistress is roughly outlined in black. Her narrow face, sinuous and awkwardly-posed body, and long, black braid snaking down to her feet, all indicate serpentine qualities, and an affinity with the lizards that cluster around her feet. The Mistress is embellished with folkloric motifs from her ankle-length braid, sparkling crown and jewel-encrusted cloak, and magical lizard helpers, to the simultaneous appearance of the moon, sun and stars in the sky above.

The illustration is a linocut print, a populist medium that echoes the early dissemination of Russian folktales through lubki, and visually mimics propaganda posters, with the muted colour-palette, stars and sickle-shaped moon replicating Soviet iconography. This stylized, modernist image not only reflects Bazhov’s concern as a loyal Marxist subject of the Soviet state to ‘convey […] the poetry and glory of labour’, but also subversively recalls the icons found in Orthodox churches. The crown’s brilliance gives the Mistress a halo of white light, while the position of the moon and

---

168 Lubki are seventeenth to nineteenth century prints ‘with religious and secular subjects produced from wooden blocks and for the most part hand-coloured’. <http://www.nlr.ru/eng/coll/prints/lubok.html> [accessed 8 November 2017] The radical roots of the linocut were exemplified in the 2016 exhibition, ‘Dedicated to All Defenders of Human Freedoms: The Art of Paul Peter Piech’, at the People’s History Museum in Manchester.
stars, and the reptiles at her feet, recall salvific images of the Virgin Mary, crushing the serpent, Satan, beneath her heel. Although the print’s background depicts forest and mountain, the predominance of black ink and dark tones, as well as the rays of the setting sun, serve to transport the viewer deep in the Bazhov’s metaphorical underground. The image is striking and strange, illuminating the collection’s cultural resonance and enduring, ‘uncanny popularity’, and illustrating the unique amalgamation of forms within Bazhov’s magic tales.  

~Ж~

‘The Fairy Way of writing’

_The Malachite Casket_ depicts a myth-country that is remote, northern, and densely wooded, riddled with underground tunnels, chambers, and forests of stone trees, and populated by ordinary working people living alongside supernatural and magical spirits. The stories are steeped in the traditions, dialect, and landscape of the Urals, and the industrialized reality of life in tsarist mining villages is framed by an enchanted mountain landscape. For Bazhov’s peasant storyteller, enchanted realms are not located within the great palaces of St Petersburg, but amongst labourers, artisans, and mine workers. While the myth-country that results from Bazhov’s strange juxtapositions is unique, his geography of enchantment is not unorthodox; like castles and palaces, forests and peasant huts are also traditional settings for magic tales. In fact, it is the contrasting extremes of light and dark, riches and dire poverty, feast and hunger, beauty and squalor, which indicate to the reader that they have crossed into the land of ‘Faery’.  

---

169 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 281.  
The magic tale is traditionally located within an enchanted fictional realm described in mythical and quasi-Christian language by J.R.R. Tolkien in his 1938 lecture ‘On Fairy Stories’ as a ‘Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief’. The term ‘secondary worlds’, used to describe fantasy literature set in fictional universes, is now in common parlance. These utopian realms are located somewhere between ‘between the known and the unknown’, at the distant edges of human consciousness. An article on the terminology of fantasy literature describes the secondary world as ‘a place that’s entirely magical, like fairyland: the sort of place where fairytale happen’. In ‘Dire Cartographies’, an essay on utopias and dystopias, Atwood notes that writing about speculative worlds ‘is almost always bracketed by two journeys: the one that transports the tale-teller to the other place and the one that transports him (or her) back so he can deliver his report’. Bazhov’s heroes and heroines do not need magic horses or carpets to help transport them to the secondary world—they do not travel horizontally but vertically, on their own two feet and by way of a tunnel or mineshaft—but the outcome is the same, as through these underground passages they descend into the enchanted realm of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain.


171 Ibid.
173 The article elaborates that ‘When this term was coined by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy Stories," secondary worlds often included "lost continents" like Lemuria or Atlantis, or other undiscovered magical places on Earth. But nowadays, when people talk about secondary worlds, they usually mean someplace that’s basically another planet, like Westeros’. Charlie Jane Anders, ‘10 Key Terms That Will Help You Appreciate Fantasy Literature’, io9.gizmodo.com <http://bit.ly/1Y7HYKY> [accessed 3 June 2106]
The reader of a fairy tale similarly travels beyond time and space to a place that can only be found within the experiential world in our dreams. Like Stepan lying underneath the rowan tree, crossing the boundary to this other realm is a descent akin to the dreamer’s descent into sleep: ‘I fall inside myself [...] I myself become the abyss and the plunge, the density of deep water and the descent of the drowned body sinking backward’. The tale and the dream allow us ‘entry into the invisible world’. Closing the pages of the book, like waking from a night’s sleep, is an ascent, bringing us up and out of the dream world and back into daylight’s unambiguous representationality. Opening the covers of a book means to embark on a journey of descent, to go elsewhere, for ‘the turbulent fairy tale’ is also an ‘adventure story’. As the writer and painter, Cuyler Etheredge, once observed: a house full of adults and children reading is a house that has been abandoned. Every reader is elsewhere, and the reader of fairy tales, travels farthest, under the hills and faraway.

The writer of fantasy imagines the enchanted realm and, through the text of the story, a portal is created, allowing the reader to travel from the primary world to the secondary. This is where, in the traditional words of the Russian magic tale the hero (and so the reader) must ‘go beyond the thrice nine lands, to the thrice nine kingdom’; it is a place that lies beyond time and reason and geography, but not beyond imagination. This secondary world is anchored in the primary world and, as Joseph

---

175 The Russian theologian Pavel Florensky also employs both Christian and mythical language in his writing on the transcending role of the icon in the Eastern Orthodox spiritual tradition. He describes all art, both secular and religious, as ‘materialized dream, separated from the ordinary consciousness of waking life’. Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 32-33.
177 Florensky, p. 34.
179 In conversation with the author at Etheredge’s home in Dallas, Texas, circa 1997.
180 Afanas’ev, p. 509.
Addison described in his 1712 essay on the Gothic imagination, there is a ‘Fairy Way of writing’—a path or bridge that connects these two disparate realms.\(^{181}\)

When embarking on the text of a magic tale the reader travels the ‘Fairy Way’ to a strange place—call it a midnight forest of ‘wondrous’ trees, ‘cold and smooth like polished stone’.\(^{182}\) She sets off with no direction, no lantern, no clue; and through this breathing ‘stone forest’ must feel and puzzle her way.\(^{183}\) The reader of magic tales is like Katya, the heroine of ‘The Mountain Master’, who enters a subterranean realm to rescue her lover from the Mistress.\(^{184}\) And Katya is a descendent of the peasant girl Vasilisa the Fair, heroine of the traditional story recorded by the folklorist Afanas’ev, who is guided home through the night-time forest by a skull beaming light through its eye sockets (see Appendix, Figure 2).

In this traditional tale there is no beautiful Mistress of the Copper Mountain ruling over an enchanted underground realm. Instead Baba Yaga appears: a monstrous witch who eats ‘human beings as though they were chickens’, and whose hut is a charnel house with a ‘fence made of human bones, and on the spikes […] human skulls with staring eyes […] human legs for doorposts, human hands for bolts, and a mouth with sharp teeth in place of a lock’.\(^{185}\) Vasilisa arrives at Baba Yaga’s hut just as the sun is setting, and the onset of night is personified as a man, dressed all in black and riding a black horse.\(^{186}\) The rider gallops right up to the witch’s door and then vanishes ‘as though the earth had swallowed him, and in that moment night comes and ‘the eyes of all the skulls on the fence began to gleam’.\(^{187}\)


\(^{183}\) Ibid.

\(^{184}\) Ibid.

\(^{185}\) Afanas’ev, pp. 440-41.

\(^{186}\) Ibid, p. 441.

\(^{187}\) Afanas’ev, p. 441.
The reader of magic tales descends alongside Vasilisa and Katya into the darkness of both the forest and the underground realm, sharing their horror and fascination. Any gleam of moonlight or starlight is welcome, and so the reader brings to this shadowy place the bright of her own mind, her imaginative response to the text. The fire that Vasilisa eventually carries home does not illuminate; rather it burns to death her murderous stepmother and liberates Vasilisa to live out her happy-ever-after. If the world of the traditional magic tale is one of sharp contrasts, the myth-country of *The Malachite Casket* is more nuanced and shadowy. Yet it crackles with enchantment from the moment the reader opens the covers of the book and reads the words: ‘It happened long, long ago, in the days when the ancients lived here, at the place where they’re now finding gold in the sand’.189

In the Soviet Union the golden-tongued ‘promise that socialism would bring abundance’ was ‘literally an excursion into the world of Russian fairy tales’ and a reflection of the form’s affinity with double-meanings and contradictions.190 State policy referred in its propaganda to a traditional magic tale, ‘The Magic Tablecloth’, and failed so spectacularly to fulfil the promise of ‘an extravagant array of food and drink’ that the promise became a lie, and the fairy-tale allusion a fib that failed to mask the reality of scarcity and famine.191 Even with the opening of long buried archives following the fall of the Soviet Union, the ‘reality of life in Stalin’s Russia remains hard to understand’, in part because there exist ‘No sources of information—no memoirs, no diaries, no reports by informers for the secret police—[that] are entirely trustworthy’.192

The distinction between the fleeting nature of ‘factual’ information and the enduring

---

188 Afanas’ev, p. 446.
189 Bazhov/Williams, ‘Beloved Name’, p. 12.
190 Fitzpatrick, p. 89.
191 Ibid.
192 Chandler, *The Foundation Pit*, p. 162. Chandler notes that for the translator and researcher digging into Stalinist-era texts: ‘It is easier to be sure of the true beliefs of such distant figures as Chaucer and Dante than of the true beliefs of many of Platonov’s contemporaries’.
story, which ‘preserves and concentrates its strength […] even after a long time’, is therefore significant when reading texts created in an era of censorship, violent repression, and misinformation.¹⁹³

For Benjamin, in his hopeful consideration of storytelling, the difference between information and stories is one of form. The form makes the content, and also makes the story something. It is a container that holds the narrative, and gives it the strength and shape to endure; whilst formless information (such as news and propaganda) runs away like water through a sieve.¹⁹⁴ Benjamin’s consideration of the rise of capitalist-driven information (with its ‘claim to prompt verification’), versus storytelling (or ‘Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth’), as well as his writing on craft and the rhythms of manual work and their relation to the poetics of storytelling, have been the lifeblood of my consideration of Bazhov’s magic tales.¹⁹⁵ ‘The Storyteller’ is an essay that is ‘green as hope’, even while acknowledging a world that ‘is suffused with blood’; and his consideration of the storyteller as one whose ‘gift is the ability to relate his life’ has provided a means by which to consider Bazhov as a fantasy writer who allowed ‘the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his own story’.¹⁹⁶

Heat must be applied for base metals to amalgamate, or for the flexibility and beauty of a resistant material to be revealed; and for Bazhov the pressure applied to his writing was the threat of arrest, which drove him underground into hiding. In writing this thesis it has been essential to remember that ‘ignoring contextual considerations, is to ride roughshod over the dimension of meaning, which, in the Soviet context, is all

¹⁹³ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 90. Fitzpatrick, p. 89. From 1927, when there was a ‘major war-scare’, the Soviet Union was ‘on a “pre-mobilization” footing’ through the 1930s. This decade-long ‘crisis’ both impacted the amount of propaganda to which the Soviet population was exposed, and provided further justification for censoring and withholding information from the general public. Ibid.
¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 88, p. 84.
important’. To ignore these considerations would be to engage in an act of make-believe, colluding with regimes that forcefully silence their citizens, and pretending the magic table cloth is covered in a fairy feast, rather than the scraps and crumbs that can be seen with our reading-eyes and tasted with our telling-tongues.

~Ж~

\(^{197}\) Clark, p. 11.
Chapter 2: Shovel

Excavating the Role of the Storyteller

Once in a certain town, in a certain time, there lived a Storyteller. The mountainous land he lived in was ruled over by a wrathful Tsar. Greedy for gold to pay his soldiers, the Tsar ordered the mountains to be levelled to the ground, exposing the treasure they contained. The open-pit mines were worked night and day, and beside them heaps of slag grew so high they brushed the clouds. Like everyone else in his village, the Storyteller was made to work in the mine, scouring the black earth for a glint of gold or copper ore. When spring arrived it began to rain. The snow was washed away, the ground grew soft, and finally gave beneath the weight of water pouring off the slag heaps. The Storyteller’s village was submerged by a great wave of mud and water. Everything was lost. The soldiers ordered the miners to keep working, to forget their buried past. But the Storyteller took his shovel and crept away to the place where his home had once stood, and began to dig. First, he saw a glint of gold, and picked a tiny key out of the black earth. Next, he dug up a box made from green malachite with a golden lock. The key fit the lock perfectly, and the Storyteller opened the box.
‘Traces of the storyteller cling to the story’\textsuperscript{198}

In 1936, as Pavel Bazhov was publishing the first of his magic tales, Walter Benjamin wrote his part-hopeful, part-elegiac essay, ‘The Storyteller’. Based on his reading of Nikolai Leskov’s tales as ‘a hybrid between fairy tale and legend’, Benjamin described how in Russian folk belief the Resurrection is not so much ‘a transfiguration […] as a disenchantment, in a sense akin to a fairy tale’.\textsuperscript{199} This interpretation of Leskov’s fiction as a reworking of populist literary forms chimes with Bazhov’s own unique blending of folklore, local legend, and memoir, with socialist realism and literary fantasy. In Volovich’s illustration (Figure 1), this amalgamation is given visual representation. And Bazhov’s use of the term \textit{skazy} to describe his stories, recalls Leskov’s famous ‘\textit{Skaz} of the squint-eyed left-hander from Tula and the steel flea’; a title that placed ‘the work in a "folk" cultural context’.\textsuperscript{200} A social reformer and radical, Leskov used the magic tale’s utopianism as a way of mediating the repressive regime under which he lived.

Bazhov’s descent into the world of literary fairy tales marked a dramatic shift in genre for the former journalist, editor, and Communist Party activist.\textsuperscript{201} It was a change that occurred as the impact of Stalinist repression approached its zenith, with the resulting state-wide ‘flight into chaos’ impacting both Bazhov’s professional and

\textsuperscript{198} Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid, p. 420.
\textsuperscript{201} In the context of Bazhov’s vocation as revolutionary and storyteller, it is illuminating to consider the analogous career of the British writer, Arthur Ransome. A journalist based in St Petersburg, Russia at the time of the Revolution, Ransome returned to the UK in 1925 with Trotsky’s former secretary, Evgenia Shelepina, as his wife. His trip to Russia had been instigated by ‘An interest in folklore, together with a desire to escape an unhappy first marriage’. His collection, \textit{Old Peter’s Russian Tales}, was first published in 1916. Like Bazhov, Ransome created a storyteller, Old Peter, adding a ‘narrative framework’ to the tales. Also of note are revelations proving speculation that Ransome worked as a British spy in the Soviet Union. <http://www.arthur-ransome.org.uk/?page_id=46> [accessed 12 November 2107]
personal life. In the Soviet Union, as across all of Europe, during the third decade of the twentieth century ‘dark malignant forces’ were gathering. In addition to being the year Benjamin wrote his essay, and Bazhov the first of his fairy tales, 1936 saw the Berlin Olympic Games, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and the start of Yezhov’s brief and bloody tenure as head of Stalin’s secret police. ‘Better too much than not enough,’ he is reported to have instructed his NKVD checkists (precursors to the KGB), in reference to filling their quotas for arrests and executions.

This excess and brutality recalls the wild violence and disorder that is so often a compelling feature of fairy tales, with Yezhov cast as Baba Yaga in her bloodiest incarnation—an insatiable iron-toothed cannibal. The years 1937-38 were ‘the quintessential episode of Stalinist terror’, during which a ‘new definition of the target of terror’ was coined: ‘enemies of the people.’ Suddenly, like so many activists and functionaries, Bazhov was threatened by the Soviet government he had supported from the earliest days of the revolution; vulnerable to denunciation not only as an old (or pre-1917) revolutionary ‘with an Oppositionist past’, but also due to his six years of education at the Perm Seminary.

In her memoir, Elena Rozhdestvenskaya—the daughter of Bazhov’s editor at the Sverdlovsk publishing house—explains that her mother published the author’s early magic tales anonymously, in 1936, as a way to provide the ‘distressed writer […]

---

204 In Russia the height of Great Terror, in 1937, is known as the Yezhovshchina. It was the year when Stalin extended his political purge ‘from ex-oppositionists to the complete sweep he was to make of the Party’, including his own followers. Conquest, p. 145. Bazhov, as a former-revolutionary fighting for the Mensheviks, and an expelled Communist Party member, fitted both these categories.
205 Fitzpatrick, p. 191.
206 At the time of the 1917 Revolution Bazhov was affiliated with the Socialist Revolutionaries, and only joined the Communist Party in 1918, once the Bolsheviks had won the post-Revolution struggle for power. See Fitzpatrick, p. 192, and Chandler, RMT, pp. 223-24.
invaluable aid—moral and material’. 208 A close friend, as well as his editor, Claudia Rozhdestvenskaya sought to protect Bazhov, once telling him: ‘Do not to write anymore, Pavel Petrovich.’ 209 This fairy-tale-like interdiction, a curious one for an editor to give a house writer, came with a subtext that the author reportedly understood to mean: ‘Do not write about the present’. 210 In Stalinist Russia—where ‘censorship created many difficulties, ruining nerves and causing needless worry’—to write about the world around you was to open the door to trouble. 211 Far better, then, for the Soviet storyteller to look to fantasy and to the past for his tales, than to take inspiration from the confounded present or the radiant future.

In 1937 Bazhov was forced from his editorial position at ‘a local Sverdlovsk publishing house and expelled from the […] Communist Party for “the glorification of the enemies of the people”’. 212 His career as a writer, censor and editor of non-fiction, immersed in the material and political world, had led Bazhov to the brink of disaster. On 25 January 1937, a letter was written by a committee of the Sverdlovsk Communist Party accusing Bazhov of writing a ‘counter-revolutionary Trotskyist book’, and recommending he be expelled from the party. 213 Bazhov countered on 20 February 1937 with a long and detailed letter in his own defence, writing: ‘My error was unintentional, occurring solely from ignorance’. 214 Publicly denounced, however, Bazhov knew arrest was imminent, and with his wife went into hiding. 215

209 Ibid.
210 Ibid. This conversation, along with its ‘subtextual’ meaning, was reported to Elena Rozhdestvenskaya by another employee of the Sverdlovsk publishing house, Boris Ryabinin. In Russian the word for ‘subtext’—подтекст—is created with a prefix meaning ‘under’ plus the word ‘text’, transcribed into Cyrillic.
211 Ibid.
212 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 266.
214 Ibid.
In his autobiography Bazhov’s grandson, the Russian politician Yegor Gaidar, described how his grandfather received a letter summoning him to the offices of the local NKVD. Bazhov set out for his appointment with a small suitcase, believing he was embarking on a journey that would end in arrest and imprisonment. However, after waiting all day at the police station, Bazhov’s name was not called, and realising he had been overlooked or forgotten he walked ‘home to 11 Chapaev Street, and didn’t go out again’. Like the hero of ‘The Stone Flower’ Bazhov engineered his own disappearance, and ‘from that moment […] was nowhere to be found’. Following his near-escape, the storyteller and his wife locked the gates to their little house and sat tight for ‘a year and a half’, waiting for the trouble to blow over.

During this year underground, Bazhov ‘tended the vegetable garden and conjured over […] the enormous pile of folklore he had compiled during decades […] of work’. This archive was the raw material Bazhov turned over and reshaped in writing his stories. For although he remained loyal to the Communist regime throughout his life, when denounced by a colleague, fired from his job, and forced into hiding, the life-long journalist ‘stopped writing non-fiction’ and devoted himself solely to the creation of folkloric magic tales.

Four years later, in 1943, The Malachite Casket won the Stalin Prize for literature, an ironic turn of events not lost on Bazhov who ‘told a friend: “Hailed today, jailed tomorrow”’; words that echo the sense of rough justice found in many of his tales. The year underground had—through the tunnel of stories he wrote during this period of personal darkness—brought Bazhov into the bright glare of public life. In the

---

216 Gaidar, p. 7.
217 Ibid.
219 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 266-267.
221 Chandler, RMT, p. 225.
222 Ibid.
Stalinist era this was not a comfortable position to occupy, yet the transformation for Bazhov proved to be a lucky one. He did not die in a labour camp like the folklorist Nikolay Onchukov, nor see his ‘fifteen-year-old son […] sent to the Gulag’, like Andrey Platonov. Rather, through the writing of fairy tales, Bazhov brought about a personal disenchantment, and ‘in a fairy-tale-like way’ the golden light of good fortune would shine down on him for the rest of his days. Bazhov did not return to writing journalism in the years following the Stalin Prize, but followed the path of storytelling upwards, out of hiding and back into the Communist Party fold. The disgraced journalist and editor had enacted a sort of death through his disappearance ‘underground’, to be resurrected as an archetypal storyteller: an elderly man with a long white beard and a pocket full of skazy (see Appendix, Figure 3).

Illustrating this transformation is Eve Manning’s English-language edition of The Malachite Casket, published in Moscow in the late 1940s or early 50s, where there is no attempt to frame the tales through the introduction of an intermediary storyteller. The autobiographical foreword does not appear in Manning’s translation, as it does in the British edition published by Hutchinson at around the same time. Rather, in the Soviet English-language version, with a photographic portrait of the author acting as frontispiece (Figure 3), Bazhov assumes the role of storyteller, presenting his flowing beard, rumpled hair, and apple cheeks almost as a disguise. These visual markers are belied, however, by his cynical and questioning gaze. Interrogating Bazhov’s portrait, the viewer reflects this perception of wary-questioning back onto the subject. The bearded storyteller is too much the archetype, wearing his role like a costume. Part-village elder, part-shaman, part-retired revolutionary (in his military-style jacket), Bazhov’s portrait hides as much as it reveals. His eyes paradoxically both hold us back

---

223 Chandler, RMT, p. 330.
(or at least at arms length, his gaze being ironic, astute, and mistrusting), and invite us to enter a world that as storyteller he has created, and whose borders he controls.

~Ж~

A tale twice told: translating Bazhov’s tales

If nuggets of the storyteller’s own biography are hidden within the text of *The Malachite Casket* then one place to search for him is in English-language translations. Insight on the process of translating Bazhov’s words offers clues into the translation of his person—the amalgamation of revolutionary proletarian and storyteller—through the act of writing magic tales. Translation is a triangulation of the ‘translator, the text and the reader’, a form of second-guessing predicated on the text’s inability to ‘answer back’.225 This chancing on a hunch extends beyond the text in the translator’s mind, as s/he tries to navigate the original author’s semantic intentions. For Benjamin, a translation that is meant ‘for readers who do not understand the original’, or is created simply ‘to perform a transmitting function’—to impart information—is a bad translation; one that refuses to engage or deal with ‘all the obstacles to transformation’.226 Both translators and the authors of literary fairy tales work not ‘in the centre of the language forest but on the outside’, relying on intuition, on a chancy hunch.227 They call into ‘the wooded ridge’ but do not enter it (or at least enter only imaginatively), and then pin back their ears to listen hopefully for the faint echo of their cry.228 It is this sweet spot I was looking for in my readings of Bazhov, both in translations and in the original language; and once I found the ‘spot where the echo is

228 Ibid, p. 70.
able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one’, I began to dig.\textsuperscript{229}

The Russian-language \textit{Малахитовая шкатулка} I am working from is a lavish 1948 edition, published in Moscow and complete with a photograph of the author as a front-piece, colour-tinted illustrations by Vasily Bayuskin, and a glossary of those words used in the dialect of the Ural mountain region. This regionalism is essential to Bazhov’s stories, which are linguistically enriched by the soil in which they were created. Through the alchemical process of storytelling, Bazhov recreates the Urals of his childhood as a myth-country vital enough to withstand not only the icy judgement of Stalinist censors, but also to resonate with readers living in the former Soviet states of the present day.

On my bookshelves I have four Russian dictionaries, and a hefty tome entitled \textit{501 Russian Verbs}. These reference books date from the pocket dictionary taken on my schoolgirl trip to the Soviet Union in 1986, to the Collins Russian dictionary I downloaded as an e-book last year. Together with numerous grammars and textbooks, they attest to my ‘long and hopeless infatuation’ with the Russian language.\textsuperscript{230} For like the critic and Russophile Edmund Wilson, after years of intermittent study, and to my great sorrow, I still ‘cannot scan Russian verse’.\textsuperscript{231} My spoken-Russian remains of the sort that is good for telling people about my Tbilisi-born grandmother, for ordering dinner, and for asking the way back to my Moscow hotel. My reading of literary Russian remains dependent on multiple dictionaries, side-by-side readings with English translations, and desperate resort to Google Translate.\textsuperscript{232} For these reasons, when

\textsuperscript{229} Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{232} Fortunately, my own Russian-speaking friend, Zhanna, is kinder and more encouraging of my efforts than was Wilson’s literary pal, Vladimir Nabokov, with whom he famously and publicly feuded over translating Pushkin.
quoting from *The Malachite Casket* in this thesis, I have used published translations rather than my own, which I do not judge to be rigorous enough.

That said, the process of exploring Bazhov’s tales in their original language has been of great benefit to the process of writing about them, functioning as another sort of close reading and means of digging deep into the text. Equally, reading different translations has illuminated my consideration of Bazhov’s self-translation from journalist to storyteller. As James Riordan noted, when translating folktales ‘to speak the language is not enough: you must know the culture and the sound of the people, live cheek by jowl with them and [...] consume a pood of salt with them.’\(^{233}\) And while this intimacy with place, people and language has not been possible over the past four years, I claim that the act of making even rudimentary translations has been another sort of living cheek by jowl with the text of *The Malachite Casket*.

Although Bazhov’s work is not well known outside Russia there have been a small number of English translations of his stories. In 1944, while the Second World War was still raging, and the Soviet Union a valued ally to Britain and the United States, Alan Moray Williams, a British-born translator, poet (publishing under the nom de plume Robert the Rhymer) and journalist, created the first English-language version of *The Malachite Casket: Tales from the Urals*.\(^{234}\) His selection of twenty tales was published by Hutchinson and Co. in a sky-blue, clothbound edition. The book is not illustrated (possibly because it had to conform to the War Economy Standard), but it contains a portion of Bazhov’s autobiographical and framing introduction, ‘In Place of a


\(^{234}\) All three of *The Malachite Casket*’s Soviet-era translators have one thing in common: their life stories were as remarkable as Bazhov’s own. Williams was the son of an archaeologist, and learnt Russian during his time at Cambridge. Later, Williams visited Iceland, became fascinated with Scandinavia, and moved to Copenhagen. He spent the rest of his long life in Denmark, dying in Zealand in 1996. Obituary, 9 October 1996, *Icelandic Monitor Online*. <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/291311/> [accessed 6 August 2017]
Foreword: The Watch-House of Dumna Mountain’. 235 In this foreword Bazhov introduces his readers to the storyteller using the nickname, ‘Grandpa Slishko’, and also provides the archetypal character with a proper name and backstory: Vasily Khmelinin is ‘an illiterate old watchman’ and retired prospector, known to the children of Bazhov’s home village for his ‘wonderful stories’. 236

In order to facilitate Bazhov’s framing device, Williams employs a more literary English for the introduction, which describes how the educated managers looked down on Grandpa Slishko, not realising that the old storyteller ‘had a wonderfully deep understanding of the life of the mine-workers’, and was ‘a true artist’ with his ‘vivid and realistic’ depictions of their experiences. 237 Bazhov’s foreword is both autobiographical and scholarly, blending personal reminiscence and research with a Marxist ‘commentary’ on the tales’ as ‘documents of socio-historical value’. 238 After this introduction, the reader of Williams’ translation embarks on the first magic tale, ‘Beloved Name’, and tumbles into an altogether different world, as signified by the shift in authorial tone. The stories are translated by Williams into a form of folksy vernacular that contrasts with the language of the introduction and indicates the boundary we have crossed. ‘It happened long, long ago,’ the first tale begins, ‘in the days when the Ancients lived here’. 239 This tonal alteration reveals to the reader that Bazhov has changed roles, shape-shifting from narrator to storyteller. To emphasize the fairy-tale form (where inevitably things happen in another-place and another-time), Williams peppers the tales in the collection with informal abbreviations (such as ‘em’ for ‘them’), archaic words (like ‘twas’ and ‘farewell’), and conversational riffs (‘Easy, it was’, and

---

235 Bazhov/Williams, IPF, p. 5.
236 Ibid, p. 11 and p. 5.
237 Ibid, p. 11.
238 Ibid.
By including Bazhov’s introduction, Williams’ translation of The Malachite Casket colludes with the Soviet author, allowing him to stay hidden within the pages of his own book. Instead of hearing Bazhov’s authorial voice we are given such a wealth of detail about Grandpa Slishko that the old man comes to life as we read, and in the tales it is the storyteller’s voice we hear come ringing through.

In her own brief ‘Translator’s Note’, Eve Manning mourned the ‘heartbreaking’ but ‘inevitable loss of vivid local colour’ that, through Bazhov’s use of regional dialect, she saw as characterizing his work. Her 1945 translation of twenty tales from the collection, undertaken for the Moscow-based Foreign Languages Publishing House and illustrated by the Soviet artist O. Korovin, captures the poetics of Bazhov’s language without resorting to the repetitious and folksy quaintness of Williams’ version. Manning’s edition The Malachite Casket does not include the autobiographical foreword. Instead the collection opens to a photographic portrait of the author who, with his long beard and rumpled hair, seems to embody the role of storyteller, rather than distancing himself from it. Thanks to this integration of author and storyteller no discomforting tension exists between two voices. When the reader opens Manning’s book and reads the opening words—’One day two of the men from our village went to take a look at the hay’—there is no question as to whom the personal pronoun refers. The author depicted in the frontispiece photograph, and the storyteller, are one.

Of all of Bazhov’s translators Manning, a British woman living in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era, fascinates me the most. However, although her translation credits are numerous, there is almost no biographical information available that I have been able to uncover. She makes just one fleeting appearance in a memoir by a Jewish-American woman who moved to the Soviet Union as a teenager. Mary Leder

240 Bazhov/Williams, IPF, p. 12.
met Manning in 1933, while they were both working at the Foreign Languages Publishing House. She describes the British translator vividly as, ‘the very image of English womanhood—fresh-faced with pink cheeks, violet eyes, dark wavy hair, and a cheery manner’.

Although Manning was a cheerful and friendly work colleague, she was also extremely reserved. There were rumours that she ‘came from an upper-class family and that her father was a member of Parliament’, but none of this information is easily verifiable. Leder’s recollection that Manning ‘married someone from the Soviet Republic of Georgia,’ and remained living in Moscow, are confirmed by another brief mention of the translator in the Moscow Times.

The Russian radio presenter, Joe Adamov, reminisces that, among the foreigners he worked with on a programme called ‘Voice of Russia’, was ‘Eve Manning from England [who] could be heard on the air before, during and after the war’. However, apart from these two references and her numerous translating credits, Manning has all but vanished from history.

In 1974, three decades after the first English translations, James Riordan published a selection of the stories in *The Mistress of the Copper Mountain: Folk Tales from the Urals by Pavel Bazhov*. The working-class grandson of a chimney sweep, and a lifelong member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Riordan was a lecturer in Russian at Bradford University at the time of the publication. As a student he spent several years living in the Soviet Union, where he first overheard Bazhov’s tales told out-loud while bedridden in Sverdlovsk, and some years later sat down and ‘rewrote the

---

243 Ibid.
245 Archival research would no doubt provide more information about Eve Manning’s life and career, but regrettably is beyond the scope of this thesis.
246 James Riordan, *The Mistress of the Copper Mountain: Folk Tales from the Urals by Pavel Bazhov* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1974).
tales from memory’. 247 Although these remembered tales were checked ‘against Pavel Bazhov’s Uralsie skazy’, they are not translations; therefore, and despite the liveliness of Riordan’s retellings, I have not quoted them in this thesis. 248

Finally, in 2012, four of Bazhov’s tales were included in the Penguin Classics’ Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov, edited by Robert Chandler and newly translated by Anna Gunin. Although Gunin has not yet had the opportunity to translate the full collection, her newly commissioned translations capture with an illusory ease the beguiling qualities of Bazhov’s original tales. Her versions have a lyric simplicity that chimes well with the vital energy of Bazhov’s language, and provide the reader with ‘the echo of the original’. 249

Only Williams’ version of The Malachite Casket provides translations of all fourteen stories in the 1939 edition. However, rather than relying solely on his book, I have chosen to quote from each of Bazhov’s three translators. In his essay on ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923), Benjamin described translated work as a form that, in an act of literary doubling, ‘issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife’. 250 As a chorus of voices, Williams, Manning and Gunin enhance our understanding of Bazhov’s poetics, and illuminate the challenges faced when translating his uniquely hybrid form of socialist realist magic tales. The doubling of literary Russian into English, is notoriously fraught, with Russia’s body of nineteenth-century poetry described in its entirety by Nabokov as ‘untranslatable’. 251 For Bazhov’s translators, the pleasure in working with his ‘gems’ is complicated by not only his use of dialect, but also by differences in the history and dissemination of folklore in Russia

247 Lathey, p. 118.
248 Ibid.
250 Ibid, p. 72.
and northern Europe. Like the artisans using the technique of Russian mosaic to make a malachite casket, Bazhov’s translators work with fragments that when glued together ‘must match one another […] [but] need not be like one another’; just as a translation, rather than ‘resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification’. For the non-Russian speaking reader of The Malachite Casket it is Bazhov’s translators who hold the golden key that allows the door to the enchanted underworld to be unlocked and opened.

~Ж~

The Malachite Casket as magical object

In the Grimm brothers’ tale ‘The Golden Key’, a ‘poor boy’ wandering in the forest digs underground to find the little iron casket’ that he hopes will be full of ‘wonderful and precious’ things. But the iron casket is never opened. The phrase ‘bound to be’, coupled with the fact that the contents are not revealed to the reader (who remains fixed on the final page and waiting with bated breath), creates a sense of lingering uncertainty. The Grimm brothers gave their readers both the iron casket (a box standing in for a book of fairy tales) and the golden key to open the casket (which is the reader’s ability to open the book and read the words on the page, through this act absorbing the stories and making them their own). Like Bazhov, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s lives were transformed by their encounter with, and work collecting and rewriting folktales. The brothers also acted as the ‘key’ to the tales; collectors, editors

252 Anna Gunin, in an email to Rebecca Hurst, 4 June 2016.
253 Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, p. 79.
254 Zipes, TBG, pp. 472-73.
and publishers of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, they unlocked and opened the box of stories, placing it in the hands of their readers.\textsuperscript{255}

On the front cover of Manning’s translation of *The Malachite Casket* the book’s name appears in bold black print on a theatrical green scroll (see Appendix, Figure 4). A stylized green and gold malachite flower sits above the scroll, and beneath it a pattern of eleven lizards, the largest wearing a gold crown. This edition was doubled by its Moscow publisher with a Russian language version of the exact same design.

The image of the stone flower symbolizes the role of craft in this story, and the skill and hard labour involved in mining for, and working with, malachite. In Bazhov’s mythology the malachite flower (which comes to ‘full strength on the Day of the Snake’) is a source of creative and artistic inspiration. As the old master stone-carver Prokopich declares: ‘Any fool can work his tongue—it’s what he does with his hands that counts.’\textsuperscript{256} The stone flower is also, according to local legend, unlucky to anyone ‘who sets eyes’ on it.\textsuperscript{257} It represents the powerful and potentially destructive hold that the underground mines, and related work of stone carving, have on the men and women who inhabit these tales, and symbolizes the place Bazhov’s earthy protagonists inhabit in the upper world.

The flower is set above the ornate scroll on the front cover. Beneath the scroll, lizards symbolize the supernatural spirits of the underworld, in particular the nature-spirit and muse-like figure of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, represented by the crowned lizard at the centre of the pattern.\textsuperscript{258} The crown she wears and the position of her head—which points directly at the story title and the malachite flower—indicate the

\textsuperscript{255} Translated into English as *Children’s and Household Tales*.


\textsuperscript{257} Ibid, p. 240.

\textsuperscript{258} In the Western European tradition it is the salamander that is traditionally associated with folkloric traditions, as able to ‘to live in, or […] to endure, fire’. OED Online, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 18 November 2017]. In Russian, however, there is no word for ‘salamander’; the word *yascheritsa* is translated as lizard and newt, covering members of both the *Lacerta* and *Salamandridae* genus.
centrality of her role in Bazhov’s stories. Placed above the title and illustration, in a plain font, is the name P. Bazhov: the creator of these two interconnected worlds. The position of his name is a clear assertion of provenance and responsibility. This prominent claim of authorship is an emphatic move away from Bazhov’s original intention for the stories, written for inclusion in ‘an anthology of Urals folk literature’, and so purportedly ‘collected’ rather than original works of literature.259

The cover-piece as a whole is embossed and set slightly off-centre. Although askew, the image is workmanlike, visually pleasing, and functions as a discreet illustration of my argument that Bazhov himself is slightly off-centre, at least in the ideas he conceals within The Malachite Casket. The near-symmetrical ornamentation on the front cover is both decorative and functional, reflecting dualities and paradoxes buried within the magic tales. For in The Malachite Casket two realms interconnect—those of the fairy and the folk—representing the unique and strange collusion in the stories between socialist realist fiction and fantasy. These worlds do not completely merge in Bazhov’s tales, but rather coexist, with characters making their way from one to the other by way of the enchanted underground.

Once the covers of The Malachite Casket are cracked open, this connection of both literary forms and realms is symbolized by the treasure chest itself—a magical object ‘that makes for tension and provides the turn of events’, and which is found within two stories.260 When Bazhov published his collection of magic tales in 1939, all fourteen stories were drawn together as The Malachite Casket, and the titular tale was one of those written in 1938, during or around the author’s time in hiding. However, the treasure chest makes an earlier appearance in the first tale Bazhov wrote—‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’. In this story the casket was given to the hero, Stepan,

259 Chandler, RMT, p. 221.
by the Mistress as a reward for his ‘True heart’: ‘You didn’t snatch my wealth,’ she says, ‘you didn’t give up your Nastasya for a maid of stone’. And she presented him with ‘a casket of malachite’ containing ‘jewels and ornaments’, as a gift for Nastasya, the village girl he was engaged to marry.

The malachite casket is a magical object infused with symbolism beyond its role as a mere plot device, functioning as a talisman that guides the narrative, enabling it to take shape beneath the reader’s gaze. It makes good the German philosopher, Ernst Bloch’s, assertion that in fairy tales treasure ‘is the very touchstone, which unlocks life and allows its splendors to be acquired.’ The casket is the keystone in the mythical world Bazhov created, ‘locking the whole together’. And its creator, the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, is a totemic and unifying character whose significance stretches beyond the two stories in which she appears. The product of Bazhov’s imagination, the Mistress is a multi-faceted archetype: mountain-spirit and guardian, trickster and enchantress, half-human (though she describes herself as ‘a maid of stone’) and half-reptile (being able to transmogrify into a lizard). Wearing a ‘dress of silken malachite’ she is embodied and enlivened by Bazhov’s descriptions of her ‘quicksilver’ movements and long ‘blue-black plait […] tied with ribbons that shimmered now red, now green […] tinkling very softly like copper leaf’. The figure of the Mistress casts a coppery-green shadow across Bazhov’s collection of magic tales.

As a gift from the Mistress of the Copper Mountain the malachite casket is an enchanted object that promises good fortune, but delivers something slightly other. The casket shrinks so that Stepan is able to hide it within the folds of his shirt and smuggle it

---

262 Ibid.
home from the mine as a memento of his sojourn in the enchanted underground, and it is filled with jewels that bring a literal brilliance into the lives of those who touch it or possess it.

A ‘brilliant’ is ‘a diamond of the finest cut’, and used as an adjective ‘brilliant’ means glittering or lustrous. The jewels in the malachite casket are a sparkling ‘glamour-gift’, enchanting whoever dares to wear them.267 When worn by an impostor (and there are several who try to take possession of the casket as the stories unfold) the rings and earrings maliciously nip and pinch and pull, and the necklace feels ‘icy cold’.268 In contrast, when Tanyushka—Stepan’s young daughter and the casket’s self-selected heir—tries on the jewellery, she describes wearing it in sensual language as ‘like sitting in the sun and somebody stroking you very, very softly’.269 This supernatural warmth and light manifests again when the casket is hidden away by the girl’s mother. Buried in the cellar, it magically reveals itself to Tanyushka, shining ‘up through the cracks of the floor’.270 At first afraid the cellar is on fire, the young girl finds and opens the buried casket, guided by precious stones sparkling so brightly that a light shines ‘from them like the sun’ (see Appendix, Figure 5).271 In The Malachite Casket, the underground is a place of darkness, brilliance, and beguiling beauty.

The casket connects the peasant characters aboveground with the Mistress’s enchanted underworld. It also forms an uncanny material link between Tanyushka and her father, from whose death at the end of ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ she never truly recovers. Tanyushka grows up as one who has been orphaned, a fact acknowledged by her mother who says to those admiring her daughter’s good looks:

269 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
‘Beauty, aye, but not our kind of beauty. Like a changeling’. 272 Most striking of all are Tanyushka’s green eyes, which Stepan once joked were not strange to him: ‘with all the malachite I’ve brought up […] I’ve got her for remembrance’. 273 What her malachite green eyes truly remind him of, however, Stepan does not reveal to his wife and family.

The casket made from malachite is a uniquely Russian object, and for Bazhov it was the container that held his stories and gave his collection a tangible form. Both treasure chest and book, the malachite casket is a container for the storyteller, mimicking the fairy-tale form itself—tightly constrained by its inherent ‘economy, rhythm, and hard logic’—and giving shape to the tales Bazhov was compelled to tell. 274 Bernheimer, in her essay ‘Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale’, expands on Calvino’s concept, identifying the four components of traditional fairy tales that ‘comprise the hard logic’ of the form as: ‘flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic’. 275 For both Calvino and Bernheimer a marker of the form is the way in which one thing follows another in defiance of everyday logic, but absolutely consistent to the internal logic of Faery. In this way not only are fairy tales wired with their own hard logic, but as readers we are hardwired to receive and make sense of them. As Lüthi wrote, ‘The form of folktales does not derive from their content but has a life of its own.’ 276 It is no surprise therefore that a malachite casket full of treasure can shrink to the size of a walnut, in order to be concealed inside a man’s shirt; 277 or that when hidden underground it glows bright as the sun with its own internal light. 278

In Bazhov’s tales the malachite casket is an object as unequivocally Russian as a forest of birch trees: that ripe and clichéd symbol ‘of patriotism and nostalgia in Russian

---

273 Ibid.
275 Bernheimer, ‘Fairy Tale is Form’, p. 64.
276 Lüthi, Once Upon a Time, p. 3.
literature,’ and folkloric symbol of new growth, fertility, purity and magical divination. Russians make many things out of birch wood, from brooms and slippers to bread boxes. A box in Russian is korobka: a humble and everyday or domestic container. The Russian word used by Bazhov for his casket, however, is shkatulka, a foreign word that derives from the Polish szkatulka (possibly by way of the Italian cassetta), and means treasure or jewellery box. The malachite casket, then, is no ordinary container, but a treasure chest belonging to Bloch’s category of ‘wish instruments’ that are magically offered to the weak and, when taken by a hopeful imagination, are transformed into a gadget to facilitate change, unlocking the promise of happy-ever-after.

Although malachite has specifically Russian cultural connotations, the casket or treasure chest is a universally recognisable object. The casket’s various manifestations are diverse, transcending time and culture: from the use of the word as a euphemism for a coffin in the United States; to the ‘hope chest’ or dowry chest that is filled with linen and crockery and the promise of marriage and happy-ever-after; to the ‘tabernacle’ in which the sacred host is kept in Catholic churches; to the always-concealed Arc of the Covenant which appears in the Hebrew Bible; to the box full of ‘gifts’ that Pandora could not resist cracking open; to the dead ‘seaman’s chest’ in Treasure Island, its ‘corners somewhat smashed and broken as by long, rough usage’ and containing the directions to a pirate’s hidden trove, triggering Jim Hawkin’s adventure, and so the tale; to the unlocked but never-opened ‘little iron casket’ in ‘The Golden Key’, the story that traditionally ends all the editions of the Grimm

281 Yelena V. Grant, ‘Russian Mosaic’ and its Italian Connection: Malachite in the Decorative Arts in the 1780s-1800s,’ (Washington DC: Masters Program in the History of Decorative Arts The Smithsonian Associates and the Corcoran College of Art + Design, 2011). These specific cultural connotations, as they relate to Bazhov’s stories, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.  
brothers’ fairy tales; and finally to the Russian fairy-tale villain Koshchei the Deathless, who keeps his death hidden far away:

In the sea there is an island, on that island stands an oak, under the oak a coffer is buried, in the coffer is hare, in the hare is a duck, in the duck is an egg and in the egg is my death.

Around the world, through time and across cultures, the casket is a container for things precious and secret, tangible and esoteric, hidden and revealed.

A book, in shape and in practice, is very similar to a casket; and a book, like a treasure chest, holds far more than it would appear to contain at first glance. The covers of a book can be lifted like the lid of a box, and there is the same sense of anticipation looking inside a new volume for the first time as there is peering into a casket just unlocked and opened. Both a book and a casket are hinged, and lifting the lid or opening the cover is an act of revelation and release. Books and caskets can be similarly locked—from five-year diaries fastened with a small padlock to the chained libraries of medieval Europe—hiding the secrets they contain. The small space of a treasure chest may be crammed with objects that give their possessor a disproportionate degree of wealth, power and influence; and wealth can grant wishes almost as effortlessly as the jinn in the lamp. Similarly the size of a book defies the scope of its reach, for a book can contain a whole world of stories, ideas and information—or, for that matter, a world of trouble. Both the treasure chest and the book are objects of aspiration and ascent; the means by which we can raise ourselves up in the world.

---

283 Zipes, TBG, p. 471. Zipes notes that the story remained the last in the collection ‘throughout the Grimms’ seven editions’, signifying ‘the never-ending quality of folk tales’ (p. 516).


285 Because early book collections tended to be small (there weren’t many books to be had), they were kept locked in ‘book chests’, only later to be replaced by whole rooms (libraries) dedicated to securing and storing books. It was in these early libraries that certain volumes were chained to the shelves they were stored upon. See Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, Science and Technology in Medieval European Life (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing, 2006), p. 65-66.
In 1940, a year after the publication of the first edition of *The Malachite Casket*, Bazhov wrote a story about an artisan who made a pair of album or book covers from sheets of polished malachite: a story which therefore transforms a book into a malachite casket. Conversely from nineteenth-century Russia we can see an example of a malachite box made in the form of a book (see Appendix, Figure 6). Bazhov’s casket, like Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘dead man’s chest’ in *Treasure Island*, is a totemic object within the story, functioning as the spark that ignites the magic tale. The role of the casket, in the context of Bazhov’s stories, is manifold, and its true treasure or value is as a magical gift, or ‘utensil for wishing’, for both the storyteller and his characters. The casket endures as subject and object, inspiring and containing this collection of magic tales; and it can also be read as the symbol of ‘the miracle of the quick change, of sudden luck’ that, in the years following the publication of *The Malachite Casket*, Bazhov enjoyed.

In Bazhov’s tales the malachite casket pushes beyond the boundaries of its function as a simple plot device, doubling its role as a magical object of heightened potency and symbolic significance. Using the ruse of the twice-used title his enchanted box refers back to its own creation: his tales are collected under the title *The Malachite Casket* and so, textually, are contained within the treasure chest. Within *The Malachite Casket* is the story of the stories Bazhov wrote, his personal ‘Tale of Tales’. And the casket first makes its magical appearance in ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’. This is the story that marked Bazhov’s transition, from journalist and editor to the writer.

290 *Lo cunto de li cunti*: the title of a two-volume collection of fairy tales published by the Neapolitan nobleman Giambattista Basile in 1634/1636, also known as the *Pentamerone*. Warner, *Beast to Blonde*, p. 17.
who ‘discovered’ a collection of folkloric magic tales; the story that led to and so ‘contained’, or seeded, all the others.

~Ж~

Descent 1: ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’

‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ begins, like many fairy tales, with a journey away from home and into the forest, undertaken by an unmarried man. However, in this story Stepan, the young hero, does not leave home to seek his fortune or rescue a princess abducted by a twelve-headed dragon with ‘fiery wings’. Rather, he takes advantage of a holiday from work in the Gumeshki mine to walk in the woods with a friend, and check on grass growing in his meadow ‘a bit of a way off’ from the village. The opening paragraph evokes in plain but engaging language the lives of peasant miners, and Bazhov’s magic tale opens with its feet planted firmly on realism’s solid ground.

Set in a forest where the sun is shining and the birds are ‘singing as happy as you like’, the story also begins aboveground. The landscape is a place of light and fecundity, and counters Stepan’s everyday life underground mining for malachite ore, lapis lazuli, and copper. Although young and physically strong, Stepan is already being poisoned by the unhealthy nature of his work, suggested by the ‘hint of green in his eyes’. While his friend—only a ‘little older’—is already ‘forever coughing’, his eyes and skin tinged green and ‘completely burnt out from the work’. In the third

291 Afanas’ev, p. 299.
293 Ibid, p. 12.
295 Ibid.
paragraph of the tale there is a tonal shift as Bazhov’s language loses its matter-of-factness and becomes more poetically allusive.

Before they reach the grass meadows the two friends, physically exhausted by their work in the mines, lay down under a rowan tree to take a nap. Their tumble into sleep (beneath a tree that in Russian folk traditions offers protection to those going into the forest at midsummer in search of the ‘mythical "flower of fire"'; said to bloom only on that day) is the first descent in this story—unless we count the reader’s own descent into Bazhov’s myth-country. And it is a falling ‘straight to sleep’ that gives the reader a first shivering sense of magic. Soon after Stepan is woken by a sharp sensation ‘as if someone had jabbed him in the side’, and sees in front of him the Mistress of the Copper Mountain. She appears as a beautiful young woman in her ‘dress of silken malachite’, although at the end of their encounter the Mistress vanishes ‘behind the hill, with just a flash of her green tail’, transmogrified into a strange creature, half-girl and half-lizard. The sun is still shining and the birds sing, but in these opening paragraphs the shadow of enchanted underground falls across the page.

As the spirit of the mountains, the Mistress embodies and protects her subterranean realm from the encroachment of early industrialization. She is a mischief-maker (a familiar trope in fairy tales), teasing and testing Stepan; but her intent is serious and she orders the young man to oppose further mining in Krasnogorsk mountain. This is not an impossible task, akin to killing a twelve-headed dragon, but it is a heroic one, for the story is set in the time of serfdom. Stepan, like Bazhov himself, and millions of Soviet citizens in the 1930s, is not a free man in his ability to speak or act. His predicament mirrors the reality of life in Stalinist Russia, where people

296 Gilchrist, p. 155.
299 Afanas’ev, p. 299.
saw family members, friends and colleagues arrested, and were unable or unwilling to come to their defence for fear of retribution.

When the tornado of violence swirling around him threatened, Bazhov silenced himself by going into hiding. The hero of his magic tale, unlike the storyteller, speaks out courageously, giving the bailiff the Mistress’s message. This act of vocal opposition has dire consequences: Stepan is flogged, taken down into the mine, chained to the ‘worst working’ the bailiff could find—‘wet’ and with ‘no good ore’, and given an impossible quota to fulfil.\(^{300}\) The description of this second, literal descent, fully reveals Bazhov’s unique blending of a realistic depiction of the working conditions of peasant miners with the enchanted underworld of the magic tale. The language describing Stepan at his work is factual and precise, but enchantment, even in this brutal world of underground labour, is always close at hand. And no sooner had Stepan started to ‘swing his pick’ than the malachite comes ‘tumbling down as if someone were throwing it’.\(^{301}\) Labouring in mines as punishment was a familiar if little discussed aspect of life under Stalinism as, in the era of Five-Year plans, were impossible work quotas.\(^{302}\) And the gold mines in the Gulag system were particularly notorious death camps. In his short story ‘Graphite’ the former convict, Varlam Shalamov, described the fate of those sentenced to the Soviet far east:

Many of those who died in the mines of Kolyma, where they could not survive for long, produced gold for the state only in the form of their own teeth, which were knocked out after they died. There was more gold in their fillings than these people were able to extract with pick and shovel during their brief lives in the mines.\(^ {303}\) 

\(^{300}\) Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, p. 15.

\(^{301}\) Ibid, p. 16.

\(^{302}\) Fitzpatrick, p. 4.

Unlike both the Russian tsars and Soviet leaders of the Communist Party, the Mistress protects not only her mountain but ‘the little heroes and poor people’ who work beneath its forested slopes.\(^{304}\)

Thanks to the Mistress, Stepan is liberated from his chains, and both hero and reader travel deeper into the mountain, discovering there an enchanted world. Stepan is taken into a palace, following the Mistress through the ‘great chambers underneath the ground’.\(^{305}\) As they explore the palace the everyday language used to describe the working mine becomes more ornate, reflecting the magical world to which the narrative has descended. It is the language of ‘the heyday of Symbolism—the Silver Age of Russian literature’; the pre-Revolutionary world where Bazhov came of age, and which still gilded his socialist tongue.\(^{306}\) The account of Stepan’s sojourn in the enchanted underground is a nugget of gold flashing bright in an otherwise plainly told tale.

Walking through one room Stepan sees walls covered with ‘copper flowers’, and in others ‘blue walls […] of lapis lazuli’.\(^{307}\) Just as fantastically, the dress the Mistress wore ‘kept changing’, glinting like glass one moment only to ‘shimmer with colours, or sparkle like it had diamonds all over it, or go coppery red and then shine a silky green again.’\(^{308}\) The Mistress, with her magical dress and casket, is the force that draws both the storyteller and his reader out of the realm of socialist realism and into Tolkien-esque high fantasy. She makes her home in the mountain, but also embodies the mountain, projecting a powerful aura of sovereignty and self-possession.

The enchanted lizards that release Stepan from his chains are left fulfilling his work quota, while other lizards serve him ‘good cabbage soup and buns stuffed with

---


\(^{305}\) Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, p. 16.

\(^{306}\) Chandler, RMT, p. 223.

\(^{307}\) Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, p. 16.

\(^{308}\) Ibid.
fish, and mutton and boiled grain’. This meal of Russian peasant food is elevated to a fairy feast by the context in which it is served, after Stepan has been rewarded for his honesty with the malachite casket (filled with ‘every sort of feminine finery’, jewellery that is sharp, glittering and contrived). As a final interdiction the Mistress instructs him: ‘see ye don’t get thinking and remembering me’; yet immediately after ordering Stepan to forget she serves him food, and Stepan eats. The feast functions as the Russian equivalent of Persephone’s pomegranate seeds, ensuring Stepan remains psychologically trapped in the enchanted underground. When the meal is finished, and before releasing him from her palace, the Mistress gives Stepan another gift: her own tears hardened into tiny green gems, ‘a whole handful’. The tears are at odds with her prohibition against nostalgia. Bidding her farewell, Stepan was also ‘downcast’, and even when married and with ‘all to make a man glad’ he continues to pine away.

During his subterranean adventures Stepan at first follows the familiar path of the reluctant fairy tale hero who encounters a magical figure, is set tasks, suffers trials and tribulations, and is at last rewarded. But Bazhov’s 1936 story does not follow this path to a happy-ever-after conclusion. At the very beginning of the tale, when he realizes he is in the presence of the ‘malachite girl’, Stepan’s only thought is to avoid her, and escape this stroke of ill fortune. This first encounter foreshadows the story’s conclusion, where descent into the Mistress’s realm results in Stepan’s death; and in this closing scene Bazhov returns to the short sentences and everyday language with which the story opened. Found at the entrance to the mine, the tale’s hero lies ‘dead near a tall stone, with a sort of smile on his face’. In his hands are clasped the

---

312 Ibid.
313 Ibid. pp. 18, 20.
Mistress’s green tears, a symbol of the ambivalent gift Stepan received as his reward. These gems are rare and valuable copper emeralds, which as a result of their supernatural origins ‘crumbled into dust’ when taken out of Stepan’s hand. From the very beginning of the tale Stepan had a ‘green look about him’, and like this tinge of malachite the Mistress fatally entered his body and soul. Physically he escapes from the enchanted underground, but in spirit remains there until his death.

As a storyteller Bazhov provides two different endings to ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, revealing the tensions within the skaz form. The first, false-ending resolves the socialist realist plot. The honest worker, with the Mistress’s help, is liberated from serfdom. Once Stepan is a free man, married and with children, the story seems to have worked its way to a fairy-tale conclusion. The world of magic, however, continues to intrude, and in the final paragraphs Stepan loses both health and heart. This second, tragic ending offers Stepan a way back to the enchanted underground, although it is a journey from which he can never return.

The tale of ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ serves as a green and gold introduction to both the magical object of the malachite casket and the supernatural spirit of the mountain. It is a story firmly rooted in the spirit and vernacular of the everyday, plainly told and ending with the words, ‘Well, what do you make of that?’ A question that invites a closer reading; one that burrows beneath the immediate narrative of everyday folk experiencing extraordinary things, before returning to their everyday lives. Like the poor boy in ‘The Golden Key’, Stepan is another impoverished young man who travels into the forest and finds a magic casket underground. In contrast to the anticipatory conclusion of ‘The Golden Key’, however, this supernatural

317 Ibid, p. 11.
encounter transforms Stepan’s life, and the end of Stepan’s story is a melancholy one.\textsuperscript{319} The narrative appears to lack the fairy-tale form’s traditional high spirits, and the journey underground sets the pervasive, malachite-green tone for the rest of the collection. Yet there is one distinguishing element to the tale—the storyteller’s own, irrepressible voice—that provides the possibility of a more hopeful reading, and also points the way to the story’s sequel, ‘The Malachite Casket’. As Benjamin writes, ‘A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen’, and although the tale he tells is a sad one, in ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ the storyteller’s voice—utterly at home in the secondary world he creates—never falters.\textsuperscript{320} ~Ж~

\textbf{Descent 2: ‘The Malachite Casket’}

In European folktales binary landscapes are often established within the framework of domesticity and wilderness, a familiar trope of trouble-at-home precipitating a flight into the forest, which functions as another sort of descent. The reader of this category of tale travels into darkness, danger, and the possibility of transformation.\textsuperscript{321} Written two years after ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, in 1938, ‘The Malachite Casket’ is linked by narrative to the earlier tale, though stylistically it is quite different. The first tale, in its folkloric simplicity, captures the quality of an oral storytelling; its sequel is more complex, populated, and magical. ‘The Malachite Casket’ (like all the stories in Bazhov’s collection), is a tale of contrasting black, green and gold, as the domestic world rubs against the enchanted underground.

\textsuperscript{320} Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{321} A classic fairy tale plot that can be summed up as: \textit{out of the frying pan and into the fire}. 
The role of the storyteller, as a frame for the stories, and as Bazhov’s double, is essential in mediating the experience of *The Malachite Casket*. Without the character of Grandpa Slishko, the socialist realist strand to the stories would be contrived and opportunistic, at odds with the magical world that Bazhov invokes. In the voice of Slishko the story finds its natural home. Descending to Bazhov’s myth-country the reader hears only the storyteller’s voice, and accepts his authority as guide: an ‘old man with a ready wit, who “knew every inch of our sands”’.322 It is the storyteller’s voice—even in the editions of the book which do not include the framing introduction—which safeguards against the darkness of descent evoking despair. Or that, more prosaically, ensures ‘the purse crammed full’ of emeralds does not turn out to be full of ‘such a stench as no one could endure’ and nothing more.323 Bazhov-as-storyteller is unflinching in the violent details he provides of peasant life in tsarist Russia, where miners were ‘flogged to death’, or left in chains underground, languishing there for ‘six month, for twelve’ until they wasted to ‘nothing but a shadow’, too weak and broken to work.324 Yet the reader’s faith in Grandpa Slishko, and the old man’s pragmatism and humour, is what ensures that the gold of ‘liberating magic’ shines through on the malachite-dusted pages.325

Since the 1940s, Russian artists have been drawn to Bazhov’s magic tales as a subject for illustration, creating their own visual vocabulary to match the storyteller’s smoke-roughened brogue. Elucidating the ‘particular systems’ of ‘light and shade’ that make up Bazhov’s magic tales of descent are Vyacheslav Nazaruk’s gem-bright paintings (see Appendix, Figure 5). In contrast to Volovich’s night-hued prints (Figure

322 Bazhov/Williams, IPF, p. 6.
323 Bazhov/Williams, ‘Sochen’s And His Stones’, pp. 40, 41.
324 Bazhov/Williams, ‘The Two Lizards’, p. 68.
which interweave the socialist realist and traditional fairy-tale imagery found in the collection, Nazaruk’s paintings capture the brilliant tonal contrasts and colour within the stories. His illustration of ‘The Malachite Casket’ depicts a shadowy cellar lit up by the magical radiance emitting from a treasure chest. Illuminated by the golden light are Tanyushka, Stephan’s daughter, and (disguised as an itinerant peasant woman and, in appearance, Tanyushka’s double) the Mistress of the Copper Mountain. A tiny green lizard—one of the Mistress’ supernatural servants—crouches in the bottom right-hand corner. Tanyushka is wearing a more western-style dress of malachite-green fabric, while the Mistress is ‘disguised’ in hand-woven, traditional garb decorated with pre-Christian folk motifs. In Nazaruk’s painting the cellar is a place of shadowy beauty, while the domestic everyday world is glimpsed through the open trapdoor. Of the upper world, only the corner of a kitchen table and a samovar are visible. It is the darkness of the underground that dominates the painting, framing and encroaching upon the two women.

The word ‘underground’ takes us deep into human and geological prehistory. In Nazaruk’s painting this underground functions as a threshold—a space that connects the above and the below by way of a ladder-staircase. Through the space of the cellar Bazhov’s readers climb a ‘ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth’, descending to a realm of fantastic dreams and claustrophobic nightmares. As the underground evokes what is secret and hidden—for example the truth of Stalin’s gold mine death camps in distant Kolyma, or the 1940 massacre of 20,000 ‘Polish officers, soldiers, and civilians captured by the Red Army’, in the forest of Katyn—so too does it evoke a world that is dreadful to a species without night vision. In a place where there

---

327 In Russian folk traditions the samovar is thought to tell stories as it bubbles and steams.
328 The Katyn massacre took place in 1940, when the Soviet Union was still abiding by the terms of its nonaggression pact with Hitler. The truth about the numbers of people buried in the forest, and who
is no natural light—just the press of total and absolute darkness—plants do not grow
and humans feel vulnerable and confined. Descending to subterranean worlds, even if
only imaginatively, can be a terrifying experience; but it is an experience that humans
are compelled to live out again and again.

Within the home, it is the cellar that manifests as ‘the dark entity of the house,
the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony
with its depths’. 329 When he descended into hiding, shutting himself up in his house for
several months, Bazhov turned his home into a cellar, and through his imagination made
‘its very depth active’. 330 Cut off from the outside world, with only his wife for
company, and dividing his time between his vegetable garden and writer’s desk, it was
through his magic tales that the storyteller discovered that on ‘excavated ground,
dreams have no limit’. 331 Writing stories for his collection of magic tales illuminated
Bazhov’s underground world, just as the malachite casket, in Nazaruk’s painting, fills
the cellar with a brilliant light.

Cellars are dark and earthy, traditionally used to store root vegetables, preserved
food, wine and fuel. They offer protection, a shelter to hide in wartime, or when
threatened by tornadoes or hurricane, and represent both the grave and the unfathomable
depths of human the subconscious. 332 Paradoxically, the uncanny underground, with its
connotations of death and interment, is also a place of womblike comfort. This
contradiction has always fascinated me, and some of my favourite children’s books—

330 Ibid.
331 Ibid.
332 In the Freudian tradition the cellar is symbolic of the human unconscious: a place of repressed trauma. However, the cellar also represents safety from wartime bombing raids, or other danger. In *Maus*, for example, Art Spiegelman describes the cellar where his parents, like many other Polish Jews, were forced to take shelter.
stories I returned to again and again—including lengthy passages set underground.\textsuperscript{333} I am not alone in my love of ‘descent narratives’; stories in which ‘every reader […] [is] a katabatic traveller who journeys “into the underworld” of the text where the truth, the meaning they seek “lies buried”’.\textsuperscript{334}

A recurring motif from classical times to the present, the journey to the underworld is a common theme in fairy tales, which also arguably tunnel into the human subconscious. In ‘The Secret Ball’, twelve princesses disappear every night by climbing ‘down a ladder’ and making their way along a ‘passage to the underground kingdom, to the realm of the accursed king’.\textsuperscript{335} In another Russian magic tale ‘The Three Kingdoms, Copper, Silver, and Golden’ are reached by entering an iron door inside a mountain cave.\textsuperscript{336} By the nineteenth century—cited by Kiera Vaclavik in her study of descent narratives in children’s literature as the ‘quintessential age of the underground […] with its mines, metro lines, railways tunnels and archaeological sites’—the psychological symbolism of the underground was inherent to Russian literary, as well as folk, traditions.\textsuperscript{337} It was in 1864 (a year before Lewis Carroll published \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland}), that Fyodor Dostoevsky published \textit{Notes from the Underground}, creating the bitter, diffuse, and haunting character of the ‘underground man’.\textsuperscript{338}

The theme of descent appears early in Bazhov’s stories—predating his own time underground by a year—and it is a theme he returns to repeatedly, in the space of cellars, mines, stone forests, and subterranean palaces. Through these journeys the

\textsuperscript{333} Among them: Lewis Carroll’s \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} (1865); George MacDonald’s \textit{The Princess and the Goblin} (1872); John Masefield’s \textit{The Midnight Folk} (1927) and \textit{The Box of Delights} (1935); Arthur Ransome’s \textit{Pigeon Post} (1936); C.S. Lewis’s \textit{The Silver Chair} (1953); Alan Garner’s \textit{Weirdstone of Brisingamen: A Tale of Alderley} (1960); and Ursula Le Guin’s \textit{Tombs of Atuan} (1970)
\textsuperscript{334} Vaclavik, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{335} Afanas’ev, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{336} Ibid, pp. 376-77.
\textsuperscript{337} Vaclavik, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{338} Terras, p. 104.
purportedly socialist tales travel into territory filled with elements of purest Faery. The
Mistress, the Snake god Poloz and his red-haired daughter, the Blue Crone, and the
Brown Earth Cat with fiery ears, are all supernatural embodiments of this enchanted
underground. They alternatively guide, reward, test, hinder, and punish the humans they
encounter. And whilst the ruddy Poloz personifies the Urals’ buried gold, it is the
formidable Mistress who—as signified by her dress made from silken malachite and
copper—embodies the mountain itself. She protects its precious stones and metals, and
manifests as the abiding spirit of the collection.

For Tanyushka, heroine of ‘The Malachite Casket’, the cellar and the casket it
contains provide a route back to her dead father, and through him to the Mistress of the
Copper Mountain. Her connection to the mountain spirit is hinted at, when the
storyteller recounts how her father joked that her black hair and green eyes were ‘a
remembrance’ of his work mining malachite.\textsuperscript{339} In Nazaruk’s painting this connection is
visually emphasized by the doubling of Tanyushka and the Mistress; both women are
portrayed with pale skin, black hair, and green-shadowed eyes. Tanyushka kneels at her
supernatural double’s fee, and slides a ring onto the finger of her out-stretched left hand;
behind her the Mistress encourages and mimics her protégée, making the same graceful
gesture.

After Stepan’s death his wife, Nastasya, buries the casket in the cellar to protect
it, and to discourage her daughter’s obsessive interest in the jewels it contains.
However, the casket reveals itself to its true owner, letting out a brilliant light that
shines ‘up through the cracks in the floor’.\textsuperscript{340} Tanyushka’s descent to the cellar indicates
the start of a journey underground in the footsteps of her dead father. It is not long after
finding the buried casket that she meets the Mistress, disguised as a pilgrim or itinerant

traveller. The Mistress is invited into the family home, and begins calling Tanyushka ‘Daughter’, emphasising Nastasya’s assertion that her child is ‘Like a changeling’.\(^{341}\) The Mistress stays long enough to deepen the rift between mother and daughter. During her time with the family she teaches Tanyushka to make fine embroidery portraits, and gives her a magic glass button as a ‘remembrance’ before she turns away and ‘all of a sudden’ vanishes.\(^{342}\)

In contrast with the grit of ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, its sequel is a story as ornate and richly embroidered as one of Tanyushka’s ‘fine silk’ portraits.\(^{343}\) Describing Tanyushka’s prophetic vision, shown to her by the Mistress, Bazhov writes of:

>a beautiful maiden, the kind you hear of in fairy-tales. Her hair was dark as night and her eyes shone green. She was decked with precious stones, and her robe was of green velvet that gleamed all shades.\(^{344}\)

His descriptions of jewels, clothes, and palaces, are lavish, and the plot he creates is intricate and absorbing. However, although Bazhov’s narrative is crammed full of details familiar to readers of both traditional and literary fairy tales, ‘The Malachite Casket’ veers away from the trope of the happy ending. At the end of the story Tanyushka rejects the riches traditionally sought in such tales as symbols of a weak, deceitful ruling class. ‘You’ve lied again,’ she tells her aristocratic and dissolute suitor. ‘I don’t want to see any more of ye. Take your gems!’\(^{345}\) And the magic tale concludes with its heroine’s disappearance—the second literal descent in the story—as she leans against the malachite wall of a St Petersburg palace and melts away.

The storyteller’s conclusion re-grounds the tale in the Ural mountain locale, repeating village gossip. After Tanyushka’s vanishing, ‘talk started going round that the

\(^{342}\) Ibid, pp. 26, 30.
\(^{343}\) Ibid, p. 38.
\(^{344}\) Ibid, p. 29.
\(^{345}\) Ibid, p. 44.
Mistress of the Copper Mountain has a double: folks would see two maids in malachite robes. And there ‘The Malachite Casket’ ends, with the transformation of a village girl into the Mistress’s ambivalent underground daughter-double; an ending that is not infused with melancholy as Stepan’s story, but which leaves the reader with a sense of disquiet and the metallic aftertaste of magic.

~Ж~

Once, in a certain town, in a certain time, there lived a Storyteller who was hiding from a greedy and wrathful Tsar. In fear for his life, the Storyteller hid in an old mineshaft, and soon was lost in a maze of dark tunnels. And there he might have stayed were it not for the appearance of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain wearing robes of silken malachite and carrying a miner’s lamp. By its light she guided the Storyteller through great caverns and a forest of stone trees, to her underground palace. The Mistress let him bathe and sleep and, when he woke, her magic helpers—a crowd of emerald-bright lizards—served him a delicious feast. Hungry as he was, the Storyteller forgot the rules he knew quite well in the upper realm (always refuse a fairy feast!), and ate. Afterwards, the Mistress took her lamp and led him out of her magic realm and up through the old mine shafts, until they found themselves under the linden tree in the Storyteller’s vegetable garden. He turned to thank her, but saw only a green lizard scampering away beneath the tree’s roots.

~Ж~
The philosopher, Ernst Bloch, never lost his childhood taste for magic, and his 1930 essay ‘The Fairy Tale Moves on its Own in Time’, reveals and revels in a genre luminous with longing. In his reflections on the ‘miraculous rise’ of the humble fairy-tale hero/ine (plain Jack or Kate, in English folk tales, and Katya or Ivan in the Russian tradition) from ‘anonymous masses to visible happiness,’ he described how the ‘lightning of gold radiates upon them’. Gold, for Bloch, is the colour of hope. And he describes fairy tales as the utopian fantasies of common people in which their uncommon lives become limned with the gold of ‘Vor-Schein, or anticipatory illumination’, the lodestone of his optimistic philosophical enquiries.

Although Bloch’s radical utopianism and philosophical approach to fairy tales is unique, the trope of the happy ending as a prevailing marker of the form is widely acknowledged in the field of fairy-tale studies. Twentieth-century writers largely share Benjamin’s assessment that ‘The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times and children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits’. Concurring with this assessment in one of her many eloquent pieces of writing on the fairy tale, Angela Carter observed of stories in the oral tradition that:

In the context of societies from which most of these stories spring, their goal is not a conservative one but a Utopian one, indeed a form of heroic optimism – as if to say, one day we might be happy, even if it won’t last.
For Lüthi the fairy tale—compressed, mutable and abstracted—is an anti-totalitarian form that not only offers hope but vanquishes death.\textsuperscript{351} As he explains: ‘The fairy tale conquers time by ignoring it. Part of the power which it has to delight the reader derives from this triumph over time and the passage of time.’\textsuperscript{352} And the writer and mythographer, Marina Warner, also notes that a defining characteristic of the fairy tale is its optimism: that it must ‘express hope’.\textsuperscript{353} These stories, she declares, ‘evoke every kind of violence, injustice, and mischance, but in order to declare it need not continue’.\textsuperscript{354} Utopianism is inherent to the form; a seam of gold that runs through all but the darkest of stories.\textsuperscript{355} The fairy tale, however mussed and bloodied its pages become in the telling, most often ends \textit{happily ever after}.

A German-Jew, Bloch left his home in 1933, fleeing the forces of ‘violence, injustice, and mischance’,\textsuperscript{356} and subsequently lived in Switzerland and France before emigrating to the United States.\textsuperscript{357} Like Bazhov, he survived some of the most traumatic political events of the twentieth century, and as a committed communist was an apologist for Stalinism, rationalising its excesses, for example the Moscow Show Trials of 1936-37.\textsuperscript{358} Yet Bloch’s writing on fairy tales encourages us to look beyond the form’s ability to say the unsayable and settle our gaze on its inherent, irrepressible optimism. This motif of ‘dreaming ahead’ is also key to Bazhov’s work. At the end of ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ the tale’s hero, Stepan dies; but in the tale’s sequel his daughter inherits the magical malachite casket and transcends her class

\textsuperscript{351} Lüthi, \textit{Once Upon a Time}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{353} Warner, \textit{Once Upon a Time}, p. xxiii.
\textsuperscript{354} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{355} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{357} Ibid, p. xviii.
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid, p. xx.
origins, not through marriage into the aristocracy, but by becoming the Mistress’s daughter-double.359

Through his socialist realist magic tales Bazhov ascended back into the sunny uplands of Soviet society, and in 1946 was elected to the Supreme Soviet. Yet the golden shimmer of his utopian stories was tarnished by malachite green, and it was this, I argue, which has ensured the collection a long life in the Russian imagination. Bazhov, the storyteller, and The Malachite Casket flourished not despite, but because of the book’s dark tones; because the tales are, in Lipovetsky’s words, both ‘frightening and comforting’; they shine bright, but are also threaded with a green ambivalence that makes them ring true. Although Bazhov’s personal victory-over-circumstance in publishing these stories was by happenstance rather than cunning, the form he created is the golden key that unlocks this enduring success.

Bloch and Bazhov personally bore witness to the consequences of ‘good dreams’ that had gone ‘too far’.360 In 1961, having moved from the United States to the GDR, but encountering opposition and censorship there as a result of his unorthodox views on Marxism, Bloch defected to West Germany. His lecture entitled ‘Can Hope Be Disappointed?’ was delivered in November of that same year.361 The still-hopeful Bloch advocated—as he would for the rest of his life—for art to retain ‘its anticipatory function even after the revolution’.362 In ‘The Fairy Tale Moves on its Own in Time’, Bloch questioned how such tales can ‘mirror our wish-projections against a background that has long since disappeared’.363 He explored the natural and enduring optimism of fairy tales, even when transposed to an industrialized world radically different from the feudal villages in which they were first imagined. This capitalist society was one

362 Ibid.
363 Ibid.
Bazhov was also compelled to interrogate, using the fairy-tale form itself as the foundation of his enquiry. The ‘crafty man’ used his double-edged storyteller’s tongue to describe ‘copper-smelting works’, blast furnaces, industrial sabotage, and an enchanted subterranean palace complete with its own marble bath-house, all bound together in one narrative that signals the radically optimistic potential of the fairy-tale genre.

Augmented by the work of American fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes, and in particular his essay on ‘The Potential of Liberating Fairy Tales for Children’, Bloch’s Marxist readings have energized and informed my own subterranean exploration of twentieth-century Soviet magic tales. In their writing on the utopian promise of fairy tales, both Bloch and Zipes ask what these tales can tell us about human nature in the face of history. *The Malachite Casket* provides one answer to this question, with Stalinist-era stories ‘about the Ancients, about the riches of the earth, and about buried treasure’. Bazhov’s tales, emerging from the depths of an old man’s ‘wonderfully deep understanding of the life of the mine-workers’, and alloyed with a natural storyteller’s artistry, create a history of a place and its people ‘far more vivid and realistic than anything to be found in the works of the official historians’. Or so their author claims. The stories offer one sort of response to a political crisis during which verifiable facts were playthings in the hands of a paranoid dictator, to be tweaked or rewritten at his whim. Their veracity is like ‘a tiny scrap of gold’, a glimmer of truth flashing in the bottom of a panful of sand and gravel.

Bazhov’s literary stories, like traditional magic tales, reflect the violence and turbulence of human existence, yet through their historical setting insist upon the

---

364 Bazhov/Williams, ‘The Two Lizards’, pp. 63, 76.
365 Bazhov/Williams, IPF, p. 8.
367 Ibid.
inevitability of a more hopeful tomorrow. They are steadfast in their belief in a golden future, where people will live ‘happily and in harmony’, as Marx and Engels were in the inevitability of human progress. In literary fairy tales, with a few notable exceptions, and reflecting the conventions of traditional oral tales, tomorrow is always better than today. Even the exceptions to the rule of happy-ever-after are ambivalent rather than tragic, for example Wilde’s ‘The Little Prince’, or Andersen’s ‘The Red Shoes’, which both end with calamity tempered by the Christian promise of redemption and resurrection, and are infused with nostalgia that evokes a grown man's impossible longing for an idealised world of childhood.

In order not to be dazzled by the golden polish of fairy tales it is worth remembering that the very first Utopia, imagined by Thomas More in 1516, is inevitably unfilled: the etymology of the name of his commonwealth island being ‘not-place’. In his fictional account More reveals that he never visited Utopia himself, but is retelling a second-hand tale through a source whose very name, like that of Bazhov’s storyteller, marks him out as unreliable. Utopia is always imminent, or ‘by definition elsewhere’; but ‘we must travel hopefully if we are to arrive’.

Creating a sense of elsewhere in The Malachite Casket was a task Bazhov accomplished by a temporal sleight-of-hand, setting the stories in a Russian past lying just beyond the edge-lands of living memory. Their geographical setting, on the very precipice of European Russia, in and beneath the mountains around Yekaterinburg, contributes to this sense of beyond. The otherworldly remove is equivocal, as Bazhov’s myth-country is nested within a real place, and refers to real events, such as the Cossack revolt of 1773, led by ‘a fellow called Pugachev’. In ‘The Watch-house on Dumna

---

369 Zipes, TBG, p. xxv. OED Online [accessed 15 June 2017]
Mountain’, Bazhov explains how Grandpa Slishko would point out ‘places that were visible from the mountain’ where his stories had taken place.\(^{372}\) This myth-country is the topographical double of real places Bazhov returned to in the guise of storyteller. The Ural mountains were his equivalent of Tolkien’s Shires; a realm that is oddly familiar, but which can only be visited textually. The myth-country mirrors the real world, as ‘a Secondary World which your mind can enter’, descending in the footsteps of the storyteller, and guided by the light from his lamp.\(^{373}\)

The sense of between-worlds sets *The Malachite Casket* apparently at odds with the traditions of the fairy-tale form, where the secondary world has its own geography and its own laws, and whose borders can be found only by ‘some chance crossing of the ways’.\(^{374}\) It has been argued that ‘the fairy tale of socialist realism’ breaches the temporal boundaries of the genre.\(^{375}\) I counter that they break the rules only in as much as the world of Faery might be said to have rules. The upheavals of the Napoleonic wars, burgeoning nationalism, and acute financial and familial problems shaped Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s scholarly and patriotic interest in ‘Volk culture’, and their development as ‘literary historians’\(^{376}\). Their project, compiling and publishing the first two volumes of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812/15, was as much a utopian as a literary one, dedicated to the creation of Germany as a myth-country. And while their books became ‘the home of all we feel to be unique in that kind of story’, their tales, like Bazhov’s, were politically and historically charged, shaped by a particular time and place.\(^{377}\)

---

\(^{372}\) Bazhov/Williams, IPF, p. 7.

\(^{373}\) Tolkien, p. 36.

\(^{374}\) Ibid, p. 16.

\(^{375}\) Balina, p. 118.

\(^{376}\) Zipes, TBG, p. xxiv.

The ability to adapt and change, while retaining aspects of its familiar and instantly recognisable form, is one of the acclaimed strengths of the fairy tale. And it is this vigour and flexibility that has allowed traditional tales to be endlessly reshaped by successive generations of storytellers. Bazhov’s creation of a myth-country, set in a past that is historical, spatial and folkloric, is what in fact places his tales squarely in the secondary world. His fairy tales reveal each of the genre’s ‘three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man’.

In *The Malachite Casket* magic, nature, and humanity’s struggle for survival are all key themes, as Bazhov encourages his readers to follow the tail of Poloz the Great Snake: ‘Wherever he goes, the gold follows’, and all we have to do is dig down along his trail.

To the question, ‘Where do fairy tales originate?’, one double-tongued answer is: from underground. During the year Bazhov spent in hiding, locked inside his own home, ‘afraid to go out into the streets,’ he worked on his vegetable patch ‘by day, composing stories, and […] devoted his nights to writing them out’.

Bazhov dug up the best of his tales in his garden during the nightmare years of 1936-39: fabulous, gem-bright *skazy* that carry the reader along the ‘the Fairy Way’, and yet remain ‘rooted in reality’. Whilst himself living ‘underground’, Bazhov pulled stories out of the dark earth like potatoes, and it is no coincidence that in telling these tales he dug himself back to the Ural Mountains of his childhood home. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke called a writer’s childhood ‘this marvellous, lavish source, this treasure-house of memories’.

---

378 Tolkien, p. 28.
380 Chandler, RMT, p. 225.
It is a ‘treasure-house’ containing ‘the old "secret tales" of the Ural workers, which for many years had been circulating underground’, that Bazhov plunders in his storytelling.\(^{383}\) And the motif of people and objects concealed in the supernatural underground winds its way down through Bazhov’s fairy tales to their very heart.

In ‘That Dear Name’, the storyteller creates an origin-myth based on an encounter between the indigenous peoples of the Ural Mountains, and Cossack adventurers. When the Cossacks find gold, things turn sour. As the narrator of the story explains, ‘Men are drawn to gold like flies to honey. No matter how many perish, more follow after.’\(^{384}\) In this Marxist-tinted story utopian gold is tarnished by human greed and violence, reflecting the reality that in the Soviet Union gold had more than just symbolic value. Today, after centuries of exploitation of their mineral resources, Russia is still the second largest gold producer in the world: gold has helped fund tsarist autocratic excesses, Stalinist industrialization, and Putin’s post-Soviet state.\(^{385}\)

The 1912 massacre of striking workers in the Lena goldfields signalled a revival of the 1905 Russian labour movement, with waves of protests and strikes culminating in the Revolutions of 1917.\(^{386}\) Under Stalin, from 1929 onwards, a network of penal labour camps was established, with prison slave labour being used ‘to colonize and exploit the industrial resources of the Far North and Siberia’.\(^{387}\) Within five years, the annual gold production of one network of these camps, the Dalstroi, ‘exceeded the total gold production of the Soviet Union in 1928’.\(^{388}\) But despite these results, prisoner-geologists in the Gulag system were pressed to search with increasing desperation for new goldfields. In one instance a team surveying Vaigach island in Russia’s Arctic north,\(^{383}\) Chandler, RMT, p. 225.\(^{384}\) Bazhov/Manning, ‘That Dear Name’, p. 238. In Williams’ translation the story is called ‘Beloved Name’.\(^{385}\) <http://investinrussia.com/data/files/sectors/0_EY-gold-mining-industry-in-russia.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2017]\(^{386}\) Riasanovksy, p. 429.\(^{387}\) Figes, p. 113.\(^{388}\) Ibid, p. 117.
heard and recorded stories told by their indigenous Nenets guides of ‘ancient legends about the "golden woman", a totem doll of solid gold’.389

Bazhov’s tale, ‘That Dear Name’ has a subterranean and unsettling conclusion that reflects both tsarist Russia’s and the Soviet Union’s brutal, dystopian relationship with their natural resources and environment. The tale’s wounded hero (a tragic figure reminiscent of the Fisher King, the legendary Arthurian protector of the Holy Grail) prophecies on his death bed that his unnamed lover will live to experience an era when gold has no power. Until that utopian future, the cave where he died remains magically sealed off from the world. There is always light in the cave, although it is deep under the mountain: ‘The floor is smooth, of the best marble, with a spring in the middle, and the water like tears. And all round gold is stacked like wood.’390 The hero’s lover sits by his corpse, weeping always yet becoming ‘no older. As she was at eighteen, so she is now.’391 The young women is described as boldly ‘resolute’ and tall as a giant, with eyes black as ‘coals, cheeks like roses in bloom [and] a braid that reached to her heels’; she is also ‘possessed of secret powers’.392 Her immortality, beauty, and underground home make her a precursor to the Mistress of the Copper Mountain; her story is the keystone supporting a series of interlinked tales. The deathbed promise of her eventual release from the mountain cave—that she will be summoned from the underground by one who knows and will ‘loudly call […] [her] Dear Name’—is a vividly utopian and salvific one.

‘That Dear Name’ ends, however, without truly ending; there is no resolution to the narrative, only the unfulfilled promise of a better future. I read this lack as ambivalence towards the post-Revolutionary Soviet Union: a world where capitalism

391 Ibid.
392 Ibid.
(with its false promises of streets paved with gold) has purportedly been supplanted by the golden realisation of a utopian and communist society. For within the secondary world created on the pages of *The Malachite Casket* there is no sense that this utopian future has been realized, and the green-gem Mistress’s tears—perhaps a symbol of idealist hope for the Soviet Union’s radiant future—crumble to dust in Stepan’s hand. Bazhov’s framing device of an elderly storyteller-narrator means the story is told in the expectation of the prophecy still-to-be-fulfilled, as the narrator explains: ‘This is not a simple tale. It’s one to think on, and draw the wisdom from’.\(^{393}\) It is a tale to give hope and succour, indicating that such things are still needed. And it is a tale that takes the reader deep underground, where s/he must remain patiently with the giant-like young woman, waiting for prophesized arrival of a golden future.

Bazhov, working in his prison-home, reimagined a world in which the promise of utopia could still be dreamed of; his tales, as Lipovetsky writes, promise both ‘escape from Soviet history and the discovery of the uncanny in the place of a protective, private, local home’.\(^{394}\) Our first home—the cave—was a place for dreaming, as well as a place of refuge, and it is ‘the house that shelters day-dreaming […] [and] protects the dreamer’.\(^{395}\) In *The Republic*, Plato created an allegory in which humans were imprisoned underground, and viewed the outside world only as dreamlike shadows on a cave wall. And our early ancestors, Palaeolithic humans, sheltered in caves and recorded their dreams in charcoal and ochre, illustrating the walls of their underground homes. In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, dreams of ‘a new world’ manifested as a sort of hell for its citizens, blinded by and trapped ‘Amid the snowstorm’s whirl’.\(^{396}\) No

\(^{393}\) Bazhov/Manning, ‘That Dear Name’, p. 242.

\(^{394}\) Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s *Skazy*’, p. 281.

\(^{395}\) Ibid.

wonder a writer, hidden away in his home-turned-prison, would seek to record his shadowy dreams, as a prisoner records the passing days on his cell wall.

Writing when he did at the height of the Stalinist repressions, Bazhov’s decision to turn storyteller was both opportunistic and hazardous. *The Malachite Casket* (with its peasant and labourer heroes) was written partly in response to the 1930’s call for folklore that demonstrated ‘the people’s positive attitude toward the Revolution’. Yet Bazhov’s dark tales both highlight and demonstrate the environmental and societal risks of mining and industrialization during the era of Five Year Plans. And the analogies he creates between the tribulations suffered by miners in the era of serfdom, and the forced use of prison labour in Soviet mines, are unmistakable.

In his epic work of non-fiction, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn documented and indicted the Soviet system of penal labour camps, many of them built around industrial mining complexes in the far north and east of the country. Describing the working conditions prisoners had to endure, Solzhenitsyn asked:

> Who could be sent down coal mine shafts on lifts without brake shoes, into mine tunnels without pit props, without protection against flooding? For whom alone in the twentieth century was it unnecessary to spend money on wasteful workman’s safety precautions?

These are the labour camps—a stinking Archipelago that ‘takes its vengeance on the Soviet Union for its creation’—where, ‘in March 1938 a secret instruction was circulated […] *Reduce the number of prisoners.* (And not by releasing them, of course)’. These are the camps in which Bazhov narrowly avoided meeting a fate very different from the one he enjoyed; where, had he been arrested and convicted, he would have dug for gold instead of potatoes and stories. Where, weakened by cold and hunger and unable to walk from the barracks to the goldfields, he would have been

397 Miller, p. 10.
399 Ibid, p.547.
400 Solzhenitsyn, p. 211.
‘dragged to work on sledges by other "goners" who had not yet become quite so weak’. Bazhov escaped the fate endured by millions of his fellow citizens not because of the stories he wrote, but in spite of them.

_The Malachite Casket_ was written, then, with a half-glance over the author’s shoulder to the prevailing and unforgiving politics of the day, and the glorification of the humble worker. Bazhov was a supporter and survivor of the 1917 Revolution, and once established as a beloved teller of magic tales he would go on to write stories during World War II that overtly pandered to the nationalist aims of the ruling Bolshevik government. These later stories include a ‘servile skazy about Vladimir Lenin’—although, unlike Akhmatova, he refrained from writing directly about and in praise of Comrade Stalin. Writing magic tales brought Bazhov fame and state approval. The fate of Nikolay Onchukov, another Soviet era collector of folklore who in 1931 was arrested ‘on a trumped-up charge of counter-revolutionary activity’ and died in a labour camp eleven years later, offers a clear example of how unlikely and unexpected was such an outcome.

Even when writing from the respite (if not safety) of his own ‘underground’, Bazhov’s stories are filled with asides that speak not only to a wish to ingratiate himself with the Soviet regime, but also articulate his own apparently sincere belief in the revolutionary and utopian goals of the Communist Party. Describing how Stephan was shackled to the workface ‘with a long chain, so he’s able to work’, Bazhov-as-storyteller comments: ‘You know what it was in those days—serfdom, they abused

---

401 Solzhenitsyn, p. 211.
402 However, as Lipovetsky notes, these stories were not the ones that penetrated the popular imagination or endured. Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 265. In the 1940s, Akhmatova wrote and published patriotic and ‘war-inspired poems’, and in 1950, in a desperate and unsuccessful attempt to secure the release of her son from prison, wrote a series of poems glorying Stalin <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Anna-Akhmatova> [accessed 30 May, 2016]
403 Two of Onchukov’s stories are included in Robert Chandler’s anthology, RMT, pp. 132-33.
Bazhov lived in ‘an age of utopianism’, and in a place where citizens were required to perform, both privately and publicly, their commitment to and belief in a Marxist and ‘radiant future totally different from the miserable past’. Yet the brutal excesses of the Stalinist-present were intimately connected to the violence of the tsarist past. The Soviet Gulag was built using long-established tsarist-era prisons, penal colonies, and conventions of internal exile as punishment for political prisoners and convicts alike. And Bazhov’s overseer Kondratich—‘a foul-tempered beast who knew ‘not the smallest things [...] about mining’, only about ‘How to flog people’—is mirrored by Solzhenitsyn’s brigadier who lost ‘the whole membership of his brigade [...] several times in one gold-washing season in Kolyma’, and who ‘did not use his tongue, merely his stave’ to goad his prisoner-workers to meet their quota and punish them when they failed.

Ironically mirroring the slave labour of the penal colonies were the modern heroes of the mid-1930s Soviet Union, ‘shockworkers’ like the ‘record-breaking Donbass coal miner’, Aleksey Stakhanov: an ‘ordinary celebratory’ who gave his name to a movement and whose image appeared on a Soviet postage stamp (see Appendix, Figure 7). Stakhanov’s relaxed, open, and clean face, and the drill carried on his shoulder like a rifle, mark him as an enthusiastic, dedicated soldier committed to fighting for a communist utopia. Behind him, in bright gold, red and orange, are other heroic ‘shockworkers’, in factories, fields and laboratories. In tsarist Russia ‘work had been an exhausting, soul-destroying chore’; in the new Soviet era it was ‘a

404 Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ p. 15.
405 Fitzpatrick, p.67.
407 Fitzpatrick, p.74.
transformative experience […] imbued with a sense of purpose’. \(^{408}\) The image on the postage stamp depicts, in utilitarian miniature, this brave new world of work.

Uniting the worlds of labour and Faery is the Stakhanovite tractor-driver, Pasha Angelina, who wrote on seeing Stalin: ‘It was as if I was carried into a new, fairytale world’. \(^{409}\) Her words echo the dissonance between the brutal reality of the implementation of Stalin’s Five Year Plans, the ruthless utopianism of the Soviet government, and the childlike and misplaced devotion it inspired in ordinary people who strove to fulfil its impossible goals and quotas. In the wake of Gorky’s 1934 speech and the revival of interest in folktales two new genres were born: first, the ‘Soviet byliny, Soviet songs, laments, tales’ which came to known as noviny (or new songs); and the second, ‘labeled pseudo-folklore’ or ‘fakelore’, and which consisted of ‘songs and tales created to extol Stalin and his cohorts’. \(^{410}\) It was in this new tradition that Bazhov created his own hybrid form: the skaz.

Although written as part of a popular movement fighting for “the renovation of life”’ through folktale, Bazhov’s early skazy are not didactic or dogmatic; the spirit of optimism is constantly disrupted in The Malachite Casket by the tales’ ambivalent endings. \(^{411}\) The melancholy, long-suffering Stepan cannot be compared to the ‘positive’ heroes of the Socialist Realist novels Cement (1924) and The Blast Furnace (1925). \(^{412}\) Hardly a ‘new man of action’, Stepan is closer in character to ‘the typical martyr prince of pre-revolutionary radical hagiography’, betraying his creator’s own pre-Bolshevik roots and sensibilities. \(^{413}\) Bazhov was a writer who lived and participated in his times; but he was not a man of his times, and this allegiance to, and nostalgia for, a pre-

\(^{408}\) Fitzpatrick, p.75.
\(^{409}\) Ibid.
\(^{410}\) Oinas, ‘Folklore and Politics’, pp. 49, 55.
\(^{411}\) Balina, p. 107.
\(^{412}\) Clark, p. 73.
\(^{413}\) Ibid.
Stalinist vision of a radical future seeps into his magic tales like spring water trickling into a mineshaft.

Also at odds with the spirit of fakelore are the conflicted and quarrelsome peasant workers that populate the pages of *The Malachite Casket*; the tales’ potentially discomforting parallels with some of the worst excesses and abuses of the Soviet state (‘There were all manner of abuses against folk’); and what Lipovetsky calls ‘the phantasm of escape’ from an uncanny and ‘unstable’ home in their insistence on a journey of descent. Stepan, shackled to the workface in ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, demands comparison with the extensive use of slave labour in Soviet Russia, from the gold mines of Kolyma to the labourers whose bones lined the White Sea Canal. In one camp, miners who did not meet their quota for the day were stripped naked in temperatures that fell as low as 60 degrees below zero; cold water was then poured on them ‘and in this state they had to run to the compound’. Another mine in the far-east, Serpantinka (a name that evokes Bazhov’s reptilian Mistress, and also the folklore he draws upon relating to the affinity between snakes and gold) was used as a death camp. Prisoners were executed there in vast numbers, a rebellion was put down by aerial bombardment, and when new deposits were discovered there in 1954 ‘they had to mine among human bones’.

At the end of ‘The Stone Flower’ (written like ‘The Malachite Casket’ in 1938, at the height of the Terror, and during Bazhov’s time in hiding) Danilko destroys the moonflower chalice he has been making and runs ‘out of the hut. And from that moment […] was nowhere to be found’. It is a moment of despair, and reveals Danilko’s disillusionment with his youthful belief in an ideal or perfectible form. Like

---

414 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 281.
one of his conflicted and estranged protagonists, Bazhov also engineered an escape that was a ‘vanishing […] into thin air’, fleeing underground from the threat of arrest and also from a homeland infected by the Great Terror during which ‘approximately 25 million people were repressed’. As Bloch wrote, ‘the fairy tale does not allow itself to be fooled by the present owners of paradise’. Bazhov tales can also be read as expressing ambivalence about the promised radiant future, reflecting what was happening in ‘the chaotic present’, and carefully reimagining or reconstructing it through the lens of ‘the miserable past’.

In Bazhov’s double-edged magic tales the glance-over-the-shoulder is cast in both directions, and the brightness of gold is tarnished with malachite green. The green that dims the storyteller’s golden dreams is the colour of hapless naivety, much like the hope-against-hope green of Ivan Karamazov’s ‘sticky little leaves’ of springtime. As a storyteller Bazhov, like Bloch, refused to be disappointed or desolate, even during the months when he was hiding underground in fear for his life. He remained hopeful, and when invited back into the Communist Party fold returned willingly. The gold of his utopian belief in the Marxist struggle prevailed; but Bazhov’s descent into darkness during the Great Terror had left its mark. He emerged with ‘a hint of green in his eyes’.

~Ж~

---

418 Repressed ‘between 1928, when Stalin seized control of the Party leadership, and 1953’ = those ‘shot by execution squads’, and also ‘Gulag prisoners’, resettled ‘kulaks’, ‘slave labourers’ and ‘deported nationalities’. Also those who had to lie about or disown their families; children of prisoners sent to orphanages; those denounced and fired from their job (as Bazhov was in 1937); those unable to attend university. As Orlando Figes explains, often ‘there was no longer any “normal life” to which people could return’ even after the Terror ended. Finally, the figure of 25 million does not include those who died from famine during the collectivization of farms, or during World War II. A direct result of these decades of sustained trauma was ‘A silent and conformist population’. Figes, p. xxxi.
420 Fitzpatrick, p. 67.
The malachite from which Bazhov’s magical treasure chest was made is a green mineral and copper ore, its presence signifying the copper and other carbonate minerals buried deep under the earth. References to mining in *The Malachite Casket* are detailed and specific, and become blended with the magical elements. As Bazhov writes in his foreword:

[…] the Gumyoshevsky mine was a place where three different kinds of stories were to be found: about the Ancients, about the richest of the earth, and about buried treasure. Not unnaturally, stories of one kind became mixed up with those of another.423

Within the context of Bazhov’s time ‘underground’, and the theme of things buried or concealed in the stories he wrote during that period, malachite is as symbolically significant as gold. By the 1930s the green stone had a specific cultural resonance both within the Soviet Union and internationally, being viewed as iconically ‘Russian’ as silver birch forests and the multi-coloured cupolas of St Basil’s Cathedral.424 And within Russia itself malachite had a regional significance. For over a hundred years it was mined in the Ural Mountains around Bazhov’s native city of Yekaterinburg, and many generations of local families (including Bazhov’s own) were involved in mining and other related industries.

Malachite is a beautiful and malleable mineral that has been used decoratively by humans for thousands of years. It was mined on an industrial scale in tsarist Russia after the discovery of the rich Ural deposits in the 1760s.425 As a result, and thanks to the Enlightenment-era fascination with geology and mineral collecting, malachite was used by Italian-trained Russian craftsmen to make jewellery, boxes, clocks, book

---

423 Bazhov/Williams, IPF, p. 8. The Ancients Bazhov refers to are the indigenous inhabitants of the Ural Mountains, including Finno-Ugric speaking tribes, and the Turkic-speaking Bashkirs. Some of Bazhov’s magic tales, including ‘Silver Hoof’ and ‘Golden Hair’, draw directly on the folklore of these minority ethnic groups.  
424 Grant, p. 24, p.28.  
425 Ibid, p. 32.
covers, plaques, vases, and even pillars. Imperial Russia’s obsession with the precious green stone culminated in the 1830s, when a malachite room was built in the royal family’s Winter Palace in St Petersburg.\textsuperscript{426} This very room—built in the decades following the defeat of Napoleon and at a time when St Petersburg was the capital of a great empire—appears at the climax of ‘The Malachite Casket’.\textsuperscript{427} In the closing pages of this story, Stepan’s daughter is taken to St Petersburg by her wealthy suitor. There, in front of the entire court she rejects him and melts into the malachite, leaving only ‘gems sparkling on the wall, stuck in the places where her head, neck and arms had been’.\textsuperscript{428} By supernatural means Tanyushka is transported from the worldly and corrupt city, and returned to her home in the Ural Mountains.

In ‘The Stone Flower’, the intricacies of malachite carving and the lives of Urals craftsmen are described in painstaking detail. The art historian Yelena V. Grant, in her thesis on the decorative use of malachite in Russia, explains how it was the Russian display of malachite objects at the 1851 Crystal Palace World Fair that definitively created the connection between the Russian nation and the green mineral.\textsuperscript{429} This was an association Soviet scholars were at pains to emphasize, patriotically if inaccurately ascribing the ‘Russian mosaic’ stonecutting technique to the innovation of native craftsmen, and claiming that the ‘Roots of the wonderful “stone flower” created by stonecutters of the Urals go deeply into the Russian soil’.\textsuperscript{430} As a Ural-born Russian patriot, Bazhov was repeating this politicized Soviet view of malachite in his magic

\textsuperscript{426} Grant, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{427} Apparently taking liberties with history in order to facilitate his own myth-making, Bazhov sets the story during the reign of Catherine the Great, so some thirty years before the Malachite Room was created.
\textsuperscript{428} Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Malachite Casket’, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{429} Grant, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{430} Ibid, p. 28.
tales where, on his workbench the humble craftsman transforms ‘stone into beautiful art’. 431

In the 1903*Encyclopaedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences of the World* the entry under ‘Malachite’ reads: ‘Malachite jewellery will attract a noble lover.’ 432 Other entries note that the New Zealand ‘Green-stone’ is carried as a charm that brings good fortune, 433 and that green ‘Jade is [...] a sacred stone, a divine stone’ and used in many parts of the world as a lucky charm. 434 Green malachite is still popularly believed to hold special powers, including those of protection, love, and success. A piece of malachite jewellery can detect an imminent threat, and will break into pieces when danger is near. 435

The mineral is depicted in *The Malachite Casket*, however, is beautiful but destructive, even deadly; the folkloric and traditional association of green semi-precious stones with good fortune and protection are not reflected in Bazhov’s Ural mythology. In ‘The Stone Flower’ the master craftsman Prokopich explains that the dust from cutting and mining the stone is ‘sheer poison’, and tries to protect Danilko from its effects by delaying the boy’s apprenticeship. 436 It is another of Danilko’s champions, the witchlike Granny Vikhorikha, who tells the boy a story about the stone flower which is ‘said to grow on the malachite mountain’, and fully blooms ‘on the Day of the Snake’, bringing ill fortune to anyone who sees it. 437 In contradiction to its anecdotal and popular association with protection and good fortune, malachite plays an ambivalent role in Bazhov’s collection of tales. A source of beauty and wealth, this

431 Grant, p. 28.
432 Cora Linn Daniels and C. M. Stevans, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences of the World* (New York: The Minerva Group, 2003), p. 737. And although this was not Tanyushka’s intention in ‘The Malachite Casket’, her attracting a wealthy if unwelcome suitor was in part the result of wearing the malachite jewellery from her father’s treasure chest.
434 Ibid, p. 734.
most Russian stone is also the root-cause of bad luck and even disaster, particularly for the male characters. Stepan, for example, following his encounter with the Mistress, fails to fully come back across the Fairy Way. Forbidden to return to the Mistress’s enchanted realm, and unable to cross back into his former life, he is left fatally stranded, a romantic but tragic figure.

The ‘hint of green’ in Stepan’s eyes foreshadows not only his tragic decline and death, but the ambivalent utopianism of the collection as a whole. Bazhov’s stories of workers struggling towards a better future end—often as not—with death, disappearance, or a disconcerting sense of neither happy-ever-after, nor sorrow, but something in between. In his essay ‘Against Self-Criticism’, the Freudian analyst and writer, Adam Philips, describes ambivalence as not mixed feelings, but ‘opposing feelings’. And this definition chimes with the Oxford English Dictionary’s as ‘The coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or thing.’ Ambivalence refers to the conflict we experience over something, or someone, of great significance in our lives; if it is not of vital importance to us, then we do not feel ambivalent about it. As Philips explains, ‘We are ambivalent, in Freud’s view, about anything and everything that matters to us […] [it] is the way we recognize that someone or something has become significant’.

The significance of malachite is highlighted in Bazhov’s stories by the care with which he depicts the art of stone carving. In ‘The Stone Flower’ Danilko demonstrates the skills he has learnt during his apprenticeship: ‘how to rough out the stone, how to saw it, how to cut the chamfer, when and with what to glue it together, how to burnish it, how to mount the stone on copper or wood’. And this artisanal technique of

---

working with burnished fragments to create a new object or piece of art is mimicked in Bazhov’s own writing practice. Malachite, when cut and polished, is iridescent green, with an irregular, layered pattern swirling across its surface. Craftsmen, using the technique of ‘Russian mosaic’, learned to work with this pattern when possible, following the shapes and images it creates. Often, however, the object’s form (the curved surface of a chalice, for example) dictated the impulse of the natural pattern be ignored. Then the malachite was cut into small pieces, glued back together with bits of malachite paste, and highly polished to blur the faults and fractures. This mosaic methodology mirrors the way a new or literary fairy tale is written, and again recalls that the writer who ‘mines the treasure of folklore must not only accept the tradition, but overcome it.’

Old patterns are followed up to a point, then combined with new characters, plots, and settings until the lines are blurred. For Bazhov malachite had a specific link to the Ural Mountains, to Russia, and to his newfound and creative role as a storyteller. However, his depiction of the green stone in *The Malachite Casket*, and its prominent place in the mythology he was creating both reflected, and set itself at odds to, the patriotic, politicized Soviet position.

Ambivalence is not the opposite of utopian gold in Bazhov’s tales, but its malachite-green counterpart. Tales such as ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’ and ‘Sinyushka’s Well’ betray the hopefulness of their socialist realist beginnings, and end with descent into death and grieving. As Lipovetsky notes, the character of the Mistress ‘ controls all ores and stones except gold’ in Bazhov’s mythology, while even her precious flower is ‘made of cold stone, thus manifesting death along with sexuality’.

Serving as the protector of her mountain she hides its treasures and defends the oppressed. Yet for the men in Bazhov’s stories meeting the Mistress is an event from

---

442 Propp, RF, p. 7.
443 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 272.
which they do not fully recover—and her the role as protector and defender is complicated by her simultaneous function as vagina dentata: the devouring and castrating fairy. The Mistress’ golden impulses and promises of reward and protection are spoiled by a tarnish that casts even the most optimistic of Bazhov’s tales in an ambivalent green light.

Descent 3: ‘The Stone Flower’

In a scene from Ptushko’s film, ‘The Stone Flower’ (in Russian Kamenny tsvetok) the Mistress shows Danilko her ‘most precious place’: the cave, which contains her dowry, is saturated with green light. Playing with a handful of precious stones, the Mistress (in a speech taken from ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’) attempts to seduce the young stone carver. He replies sturdily that marriage was ‘[…] not what I came here for’, and demands instead that she show him the Stone Flower. ‘If I show it to you will you love me?’ the Mistress asks him, confirming her role in this story as uncanny muse and female temptress, a danger to any warm-blooded man unlucky enough to encounter her, let alone go with her into the enchanted underground.

The story of Danilko and his quest for the legendary stone flower was, like ‘The Malachite Casket’, written in the year 1938. It is another tale that derives its title from an object with provenance in the Mistress’s realm. These objects are ‘wish instruments’, although certainly not ‘comforting’ ones. The jewels inside the malachite casket engineer Tanyushka’s separation from her family, and the stone flower plays a role in

---

444 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 279.
446 Ibid, 1:01:54
447 Ibid, 1:01:55.
Danilko’s disappearance, and his long separation from his family. Both casket and flower are objects not of consolation, but of vanishing.

In Bazhov’s myth-country the stone flower is a paradox. It is a living organism made from the deadest of all dead things: immobile, ancient, and eternal (at least when contemplated from the context of humanity’s comparatively brief history). And it functions as the symbol of the Mistress, and both the dread and longing humans feel for her underground kingdom. The opening sentences of ‘The Stone Flower’, like the beginning of ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, ground the reader in a specific time and place. ‘They say that our towns too had their share of craftsmen,’ Bazhov writes in his storyteller’s voice, of the mountain villages around Yekaterinburg. The stone flower, growing deep within the Mistress’s underground kingdom, manifests Danilko’s desire to transcend craft and create a moonflower so ‘alive’ that setting eyes on it you would be compelled to ‘reach out and touch it’.

The ‘moonflower’ (in Russian durman) Danilko seeks to bring to life from malachite stone is a member of the Datura genus: a form of deadly nightshade also known as thorn-apple, and distinguished by its ‘toothed leaves’, ‘upright trumpet-shaped flower’, and hallucinogenic properties. Early in the story, when Danilko questions Granny Vikhorikha about flowers with magical properties, the moonflower is not one of those she names:

‘Have you heard of the fern flower, said to appear on Ivan Kupala Day? That flower is magic; it will find you buried treasure […] And then there’s the stone flower that’s said to grow in the malachite mountain. It’s at full strength on the Day of the Snake. Unlucky is he who sets eyes on the stone flower.’

Bazhov’s depiction of the fern flower is corroborated by the English folklorist Cherry Gilchrist, who writes of a ‘mythical flower of fire’, said to bloom only one night a year, on the feast of St John the Baptist (Ivan Kupala).\(^{453}\) Treasure seekers who find the flower must remain in a protective circle, ignoring the threats and torments of howling demons, until first light, when they may either find ‘the treasure buried nearby’, ‘or take the flower home […] as a talisman for love and happiness’.\(^{454}\) Unlike the fern flower (or tsvetok paporotnika), Bazhov’s ‘stone flower’ is a creation of his imagination, only manifested later in the tale as a ‘moonflower’. \(Datura\) inoxia’s steely white blossoms and dark green foliage are beloved by gardeners for their beauty and ease of propagation, and by mystics, shamans, medics, asthmatics, poisoners, and suburban American teenagers for their sedative properties and use ‘as a poison or an intoxicating or hallucinogenic drug’.\(^{455}\)

A plant whose ingestion reportedly causes bizarre and violent behaviour, ‘sensory deprivation’, and amnesia, the appearance of the moonflower reveals another stratum of insight into the motif of the stone flower, and Danilko’s sudden and dramatic disappearance on the night before his wedding.\(^{456}\) Doctors in the US treating young people who have ingested \(Datura\) seeds describe their patients in folkloric terms: ‘Hot as a hare, blind as a bat, dry as a bone, red as a beet, mad as a hatter’.\(^{457}\) This saying resonates with and illuminates Danilko’s dazed and confused behaviour at the end of the story when, in a trance-like state, he ‘took a hammer and smashed it down onto the

\(^{453}\) Gilchrist, p. 155.
\(^{454}\) Ibid.
\(^{455}\) OED Online, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 3 January 2018]
\(^{457}\) Ibid.
moonflower. The chalice shattered with a crunch’, and Danilko ran from Prokopich’s hut and vanished into the night.  

Writing on the uncanny in Bazhov’s *skazy* Lipovetsky refers to the Freudian connection between flowers and ‘women’s genitals’, and the flower’s mythical blossoming on ‘the Day of the Snake’ reinforces this interpretation. The motif of the stone flower is not just symbolic of sex, however; it also refers to art—particularly the fraught and demanding experience of making art—and functions as a manifestation of the Russian formalist concept of *osstranenie*, or ‘making strange’. It is an object that ‘The technique of art […] [makes] "unfamiliar"’. The reader shares Danilko’s experience of the stone flower as an artefact that imparts ‘the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known’. As one of the old stone carvers tells Danilko in answer to his persistent question: ‘Whoever so much as glimpses it, the whole world will go dark for him’.

The stone flower first takes shape within Danilko’s imagination, and then on his work bench, as a manifestation of the craftsmen’s struggle to turn base material (such as a block of stone) into an object of art. The image of the flower is irresistibly planted in his imagination in childhood, when the Granny Vikhorikha tells him it grows ‘in the malachite mountain’. The old woman’s tale comes with a warning: ‘Unlucky is he who sets eyes on the stone flower.’ In the tradition of fairy tales, Danilko is undeterred by this interdiction; the image of the stone flower has entered his imagination like a hallucinogenic surging through his bloodstream, and he is
intoxicated. Once his apprenticeship is over, he is given permission to make a carving of his own design. For Danilko, this is the opportunity to become an artist; to pursue and articulate the true beauty of the stone. It is a creative calling beyond that of the humble stonecarver—a dream that must be realized—and one that has near-disastrous consequences for Danilko and his loved ones.466

‘The Stone Flower’ begins, however, in the socialist realist vein Bazhov developed in ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, with folksy asides (‘Such rare trinkets you’d be struck with wonder: how ever did they manage that?’), and descriptions of the class struggle in tsarist Russia (‘Well, everyone knows what punishment you could expect in those days. Whatever the misdeed, you bared your back’).467 And as the master craftsmen is introduced Bazhov foreshadows the ambivalent role malachite will play in this story. The search for Prokopich’s apprentice is hindered not only by his violent teaching methods—‘nothing but roughness and wallops’—but also by the villagers’ awareness that ‘this malachite craft was an unhealthy business’.468 Parents are reluctant to hand their sons over to Prokopich’s rough care.

Only with the appearance of a young orphan, a stock figure in many fairy tales, does a story that seems to be going the way of Cement—‘the prototypical Soviet novel’, with its focus on the dusty reality of working life—turn to magic.469 In The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual, Katrina Clark writes that while it is ‘an embryonic example’ of ‘fully-fledged’ socialist realist novels, ‘many of Cement’s basic values became hallmarks of the Stalinist ethos of the thirties and forties’.470 It is also a work of fiction concerned with the transformative powers of resistant materials; the iconography of

467 Ibid, pp. 236, 239.
468 Ibid, p. 236.
469 Clark, p. 69. Cement was a famous work of early Soviet literature, published in 1925.
470 Ibid.
*Cement* can be read into or at least placed alongside that of ‘The Stone Flower’, as a story about hardness, resilience, and the act of making things. It is this sudden veering away from the direction of enchantment, and then back again that, in Bazhov’s work, is the means of making the familiar strange.

Danilko-the-Scrawny is a utopian dreamer, and the opening paragraphs of ‘The Stone Flower’ tell the story of his developing artistic sensibility; a way of seeing and understanding the world that makes him, in the eyes of his fellow villagers, a holy fool.471 Failing time and again in the work set by his overseer, young Danilko is a child lost in dreams, and the language Bazhov employs reflects this sensitivity. Describing the cause of his reverie to the old herdsmen (during which a herd of cows were lost, and for which man and boy were flogged), Danilko explains how he got lost in looking:

> There was a wee insect crawling across a leaf. It was bluish-grey, and peeping out from under its wing was a bit of yellow. The leaf was a nice broad one [...] Its edges were jagged, like curved little frills. The outside was darker, but in the middle it was green as can be, as if freshly painted.472

This level of detail is unusual in a traditional magic tale, and acts as a marker that, for all their folkloric aspirations, Bazhov’s stories are literary works of the imagination. Far from the simple stories Grandpa Slishko claims to be telling, they are aesthetically ornate Kunstmärchen, akin to Andersen’s ‘The Snow Queen’, Wilde’s ‘The Selfish Giant’, or the Grimm brothers’ ‘The Juniper Tree’. As the fairy-tale scholar Kate Bernheimer argues, one of the signifiers of the traditional fairy-tale form is the unity of the secondary world, and the absence of what Lüthi coined as ‘beauty shock’, in a place

471 Bazhov/Gunin, ‘The Stone Flower’, p. 237. The motif of the Holy Fool is a familiar one in Russian art and culture. From the hero of Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Idiot*, to saintly practitioners of holy foolishness (iurodstvo) such as St Symeon, St Basil and St Xenia.

472 Ibid, p. 238.
where all characters expect the unexpected is a matter of course. Bernheimer insists on the non-representational nature of traditional tales:

In fairy tales, every thought is as real as every rabbit. Every witch as real as every breadcrumb. Every happy reversal of fortune is as real as every disaster [...] In fairy tales there is no reality outside the pages but only the one reality, not copies of a purer reality, but one reality in its infinite variations and difference, which flows through all pages and lives and dies everywhere. There is nothing to represent because there is nothing beyond.

In Bazhov’s writing, however, the drag of the beyond can be felt, undeniable as the pull of gravity, by reader and writer alike. *The Malachite Casket* is influenced by the *sturm und drang* of German Romanticism, the ‘grand, illogical, intuitive associations’ of French Symbolism, the adamantly prosaic dictates of Socialist Realism, and the constraints of the traditional folktale. The creative tension in *The Malachite Casket* is as a result of these worlds—the literary, the socialist realist, and the magical—rubbing against each other. And although the boundaries between these literary genres are not seamless, crossing them is matter of course for Bazhov’s characters. They know another world exists alongside their own and are not surprised to encounter it.

The development of Danilko’s story rather than depicting a flat, abstracted Everyman, gives depth and nuance to his character—another indication that these tales belies the simplicity Bazhov would claim for them. In the guise of the holy fool there is, from the opening pages, a mystical quality about the orphan, particularly in his response to the natural world. But Danilko proves he is no fool as the story progresses. However, his development as a craftsman and artist sets him apart from the other villagers as he pursues his dream of bringing out ‘the full power’ and beauty of the malachite. This

---

474 Ibid.
romanticism, rooted in Bazhov’s youth in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and in the ‘idealism and aestheticism’ of the Russian Symbolist movement that blossomed ‘between 1900 and 1910’, reveals the ambivalence at the heart of The Malachite Casket.477

The deadly beauty of malachite, as well as the potential of ‘The Stone Flower’ to tell a double-edged tale, was recognized almost a decade after its first publication by Sergey Prokofiev. The Soviet composer saw the self-reflexive story at the heart of ‘The Stone Flower’—‘an artistic creation about an artistic creation’—and in 1948, during his own time of troubles, started work on the score of his final ballet, basing the piece on Bazhov’s tale.478

After two decades living abroad Prokofiev returned permanently to the Soviet Union in the inauspicious year of 1936. For the composer, as for all internationally-acclaimed artists living and working under Stalin, ‘official approbation tended to alternate with official condemnation’.479 Over the next ten years Prokofiev danced to his master’s tune with varying degrees of success, but in 1948, and for the first time, ‘he became afraid’.480 In February ’48, an official resolution of denunciation was passed against him, and shortly after the mother of his children was arrested and ‘found guilty of espionage and betrayal of the homeland and assigned a sentence of twenty years in the harsh camps.’481 In the summer of the same year Prokofiev began to score Bazhov’s magic tale, drawn to ‘The Stone Flower’ as an ‘homage to craftsmanship, and the search for perfection in one’s work’. His biographer, Simon Morrison, notes how this motif was doubled in Prokofiev’s personal life. Beset by ill-health and chivvied by State

477 Terras, p. 460.
478 Morrison, p. 350.
480 Ibid.
481 Ibid, pp. 305, 309. This method of indirectly applying pressure on, and punishing nationally and internationally renowned artists, through their family, was one frequently used by Stalin.
censors, ‘the composer […] became a dutiful laborer, upholding the pre-Enlightenment notion of music making as a craft designed to please the patron and audience’. The strain of creating the ballet contributed to his final illness, and Prokofiev (like Stalin) died in 1953. Quibbling by Communist party bureaucrats at the Bolshoi theatre delayed the premiere of ‘The Stone Flower’ until 1954, and so the composer never heard the finished work performed.483

Themes of craft and duty were also of importance to Bazhov, whose framing strategy and device of the storyteller, as well as his personal history as revolutionary activist, highlight tension between the artist’s responsibility to the collective and his own creative impulses. ‘The Stone Flower’ emphasizes the relationship between the apprentice and his master, a tradition in artisanal crafts, and one which intrinsically de-emphasizes the role of the individual artist-maker. Coming home from his childhood wanderings in the forest Danilko would immediately pester Prokopich with questions about ‘the craft’.484 Bazhov describes how the boy would:

[...] tell Prokopich about one thing and another, and then he’d ask, "What’s this for?" or, "How did you do that?" Prokopich would first explain and then demonstrate. And Danilko would take it all in.485

The development of the relationship between the master and his apprentice, from their first night together—when the old man watched the boy sleeping, and observed how ‘he stretched out under the sheepskin coat and started to whistle lightly through his nose’—is among the most movingly written scenes in the collection.486 There is no attempt made here on Bazhov’s part to emotionally or linguistically distance himself from the story, and the words flow from the author’s pen unmediated by the storyteller’s voice.

482 Morrison, p. 350.
483 Morrison, pp. 357, 368.
485 Ibid.
Craft, in ‘The Stone Flower’, is depicted as being passed down from generation to generation, and a work of art is no one man’s (or woman’s possession), no matter how talented. This portrayal gives value to continuity and tradition, and emphasizes the significance of the communal life in the era of collectivization. Crucially, it is at a gathering of stone workers, who are admiring the maturing of his skill, that Danilko’s impulse to pursue art over all other obligations reaches the point of crisis. For although ‘The Stone Flower’ tries hard to deflect attention from this fact—with its repudiation of the individual artistic experience as a dangerous and ultimately selfish obsession that threatens the collective—the story is inherently and passionately concerned with that unique and solitary experience.

The theme of conflict caused by the individual, at odds with authority and with the collective, is central to ‘The Stone Flower’, and also its sequel, ‘The Mountain Craftsman’. This tension is addressed by Bazhov in scenes ranging from depictions of the artist’s obligation to craft versus family commitments, to personal loyalty versus the demands of the village and its conventions. Purporting to be about one thing—the danger of individual creativity—it is in fact a tale that is concerned with its very opposite: the utopian struggle of the artist compelled to create a piece of work that is both beautiful and honest. And this tension, or dichotomy, is reflected in the story’s ending:

Some said that he had gone crazy and disappeared into the forest; some said that the Mistress had taken him as one of her mountain masters. But really it was all very different. And that is another story.487

~Ж~

Descent 4: ‘The Mountain Master’

The sequel to ‘The Stone Flower’ begins with the word ‘Katya’, the name of the young woman to whom Danilko was betrothed at the time of his disappearance. Katya is also the first word of the final sentence in the tale, signifying her role as heroine and protagonist. While ‘The Stone Flower’ is narrated from the point-of-view of Danilko, ‘The Mountain Master’ is told from Katya’s perspective, and bookends the story of absence and endurance with her name. The title of the tale, however, emphasizes the underground motifs it contains, referring to the honorific name given to Danilko on his return from the Mistress’ subterranean workshop: ‘Everyone in the trade called Danilko the ”Mountain Master”. There was no one who could hold a candle to him.’ This title reveals the village’s acknowledgement of the secret Danilko and Katya share, although outwardly it is accepted that he spent his years away in Kolyvan, a town over 1000 miles to the east of Sverdlovsk, deep in the Altai or ‘Golden’ Mountains.

A famous centre of silver mining in tsarist Russia, the town was acclaimed for its ‘Kolyvan masters who presented [to] the world the masterpieces of stone-cutting art’. By the early 1930s, Kolyvan was also one of the administrative komendatura or ‘labour settlements’ in Western Siberia where ‘hundreds of thousands of “kulak” peasants […] were summarily exiled’ during the collectivization of agriculture. In a campaign of ethnic- and class-cleansing, these peasant exiles were forced to work in

---

490 Ibid.
‘agriculture, logging, and gold- and coal-mining operations’; were ‘pursued and punished’ if caught trying to escape; and died in their thousands from ‘disease, exposure, starvation and cannibalism’. Kolyvan’s history, like that of much of Siberia, is of the exploitation of its natural resources, the glorification of industrialization and progress in spite of the great human and environmental cost, and the oppression of its peasant workers by both the tsarist and Soviet regimes. It is a history Bazhov does not address directly—in 1939 it would have been impossible for him to do so—but its appearance in his magic tale obliquely reveals these associations, adding a deeper resonance to the fib by which Danilko conceals the truth of his time in the Mistress’ workshop.

The fib is necessary not only to explain Danilko’s sudden (and illegal) disappearance, but also because the Mistress, when she releases the stone carver from her enchanted workshop, prohibits him from telling ‘anyone about the mountain’. Danilko does not violate this interdiction, but adheres to it faithfully. Through the stories collected in The Malachite Casket, the Mistress remorselessly separates her protégés from their families and makes demands of them that result in punishment, exile, and death. Yet she commands and keeps their loyalty.

Katya’s search for her lover takes her deep into an underground stone forest. There, after calling out for her lover three times, she finds herself facing the Mistress, and demands his return with the words, ‘Give me my living Danilko. Where are you hiding him? What right do you have to lure away a man who’s already betrothed?’ As the heroine of this tale, Katya shows both agency, determination, and courage. Once

Danilko has been set free, however, she bows to Mistress saying, ‘Forgive me my rough words!’ For all her zealous anger, Katya—like Stepan, Nastasya, Tanyushka, and Danilko—recognizes and submits to the Mistress’ power. This supernatural authority might not be kind or just, but its righteousness is not questioned. Similarly, for Bazhov, the Soviet regime could not be directly challenged or held to account, even during its most incomprehensible excesses.

The prohibition on ‘telling’, and Katya and Danilko’s determination to keep the secret about his disappearance, has a subtextual resonance with the reality of life in Stalinist Russia. Victims of the Great Terror, and their families, kept the secret of arrest and imprisonment for decades, if not lifetimes; a ruinous legacy of ‘traumas passed from one generation to the next’. And Danilko’s disappearance, in addition to recalling those who vanished into the Gulag, reflects a rite-of-passage common to many political activists in tsarist Russia, and Soviet dissidents in the years after 1917: of internal exile or exile abroad.

While ‘The Mountain Master’s’ title alludes to the secret of Danilko’s disappearance, its opening word—‘Katya’—indicates the heroine to whom the tale truly belongs. ‘The Mountain Master’ is a story with absence at its heart, and the narrative is built around the lives of those who must hold fast to the memory of their lost loved ones. Katya is abandoned by her lover, and three years pass in just two sentences before she is, in swift succession, orphaned and ostracized by her siblings and fellow villagers. Her association with death and the underworld is fixed by the fifth paragraph, where the storyteller describes how—guessing that Danilko has descended to the underworld—the village at first ‘left her alone’, and then ‘began calling her the corpse’s bride’.  

498 Figes, p. 645.
499 Ibid.
An ‘old maid’ at twenty, Katya takes refuge with Prokopich. The elderly stone carver is dying, but there is time for him to ‘show her a few things’ about his work with malachite, ‘like how to turn a plaque, make handles for knives and forks’.

What he teaches her is ‘Not real craftsmanship’, yet is enough for Katya to make the last of her radical transformations. Jilted corpse-bride and orphan, she pushes against the boundaries of convention and taboo by taking on a man’s role as a stone carver, ignoring Prokopich’s initial protestations that ‘Working with malachite is no job for a girl.’

When the old man dies Katya is orphaned again, and in her isolation occupies a liminal state of both vulnerability and power. Her siblings warn her that living alone and waiting for a lover long-presumed dead ‘is sinful’—a transgression that, like Danilko’s obsession with the stone flower, places her outside the life of the collective and makes her vulnerable to delusions. ‘Watch out,’ her brothers and sisters tell her, ‘or you’ll start seeing things.’

Yet this liminal state of defiant individuality not only places Katya at odds with her community, but also empowers her to search for Danilko in the enchanted underground, and engineer his rescue.

Before she can enter the Mistress’ realm Katya must prove her purity and courage, and to do this the storyteller sets her a series of tasks and tests, drawing on both socialist realist and fairy-tale traditions. Once her siblings leave Katya consoles herself first with housework, following in the footsteps of Vasilisa the Fair who is tasked by Baba Yaga to ‘sweep the yard, clean the hut, cook the dinner, wash the linen, and go to the cornbin and sort out a bushel of wheat’.

However, after completing her domestic chores, Katya ‘went to the workbench […] [and] began arranging everything

---

501 Ibid.
502 Ibid.
504 Ibid.
to suit her […] the tools she needed most close by, and […] the rest to one side’. As a socialist realist heroine Katya finds redemption through physical labour. As the heroine of a magic tale she transgresses the boundary that traditionally separates the roles of men and women, and so initiates the quest that will take her out of her home and into the Ural Mountains, finally allowing her to descend to the Mistress’ stone forest.

A strong female protagonist, Katya both reflected and contested the zeitgeist of the 1930s Soviet Union. At this time women were responsible not only for all their traditional work centred around the home, but were also expected to work in factories and on collective farms. Soviet Russia was a staunchly patriarchal society, ruled by Stalin—the ‘man of steel’—who was known to the peasantry as Batyushka, or ‘Little Father’. However, women like Pasha Angelina—in 1933 the organizer of an all-female tractor brigade—were mythologized for their ability to contribute to the building of a new, Communist society, and it is in this tradition of strong, hard-working, and exploited women that Katya belongs.  

Katya’s story begins in ‘The Stone Flower’ with her appearance as Danilko’s soon-to-be bride, where she is described simply as ‘a comely girl’. If the Mistress symbolizes wilderness and natural beauty, Katya stands for everyday life and the unremarkable domestic realm. But her character is revealed to have greater depth, perhaps initially hinted at by her last name—Letyemina—which shares a root with the Russian verb ‘to fly’, or letát. In Bazhov’s interlinked tales Katya represents those of us who live aboveground and she is doubled below, like other Bazhov heroines, by the Mistress of the Copper Mountain.

Once Danilko disappears into the Mistress’s workshops Katya remains in the home they would have shared. She is mistress of the domestic sphere, waiting patiently

---

507 Fitzpatrick, p. 74.
for her lover’s return. However, Katya’s waiting is not passive or fatalistic. If her role is a universal and gendered one, familiar in both fairy tales and socialist realist fiction, she doesn’t ‘play it straight’. Rather, her actions—rejecting her family’s efforts to find her another husband, choosing to live alone, and most radically of all undertaking man’s work and becoming a malachite carver—might appear as an ironic counterpoint to a tradition of passive fairy-tale heroines. When young village men break into her home, Katya picks up an axe and confronts them shouting: ‘Cross the doorstep and you get your head smashed in.’ Described by Bazhov as ‘a fully-grown woman, with broad shoulders, a determined look in her eyes’, and clearly knowing ‘what to do with an axe’, Katya plays the self-actualising female heroine of her own story.

The folklorist Jack Haney, in his introduction to wondertales in The Complete Russian Folktale, claims that in the Russian tradition heroines function ‘primarily as the object of the hero’s quest’. However, I counter that for every nameless Armless Maiden, submitting meekly to the violent blows of fate and fortune, there is the Frog Princess, Marya Morevna, and Yelena the Wise; Russian fairy-tale heroines who are not disarmed or dismembered, but wrest back control of their stories and fight their own bloody battles. The image of Katya, willing to fight for her life and to protect her home, chimes not only with the with the Stakhanovite Pasha Angelina, but also with Soviet iconography of female soldiers such as Roza Shanina, who fought at the frontline in the civil war of the 1920s and died in active service during World War II.

In The Malachite Casket Katya is not the only one of Bazhov’s heroines to subvert gendered expectations. In ‘The Cat’s Ears’ Dunya, a miner’s daughter, abandons her oppressed village to become a rebel fighter, living in the forest and

510 Ibid.
512 Afanas’ev, pp. 119, 295, 553, 575.
513 <https://rozasdiary.com/category/rozas-diary/> [accessed 19.02.18]
instilling fear of the ‘taste of her Bashkir whip’ with which, from the back of her horse, she could ‘strike down a man’ or kill a wolf. Katya is perhaps the most workaday of Bazhov’s heroines, but she too makes the fabulous journey between worlds.

Finally, and in common with many of the stories The Malachite Casket ‘The Mountain Master’ ends with a dash of ambivalence to sour the sweet of happy-ever-after. As the storyteller concludes: ‘People say they lived happily and in harmony […] Only from time to time Danilko would sink deep into thought. Katya, of course, understood what he was thinking, but she said nothing’. In fairy tales written for publication under a totalitarian and patriarchal society, the male characters are, almost without exception, reduced or depleted by their encounter with the Mistress. The women, however, confront her as near-equals. They share her strength and resolve. She is their fantastic double; the wildness that counters and contains their domesticity; and the enchanted landscape that enhances their sense of home.

~Ж~

---

Conclusion: When Content and Form

Speak with one Voice

Vigorous and adaptable, the fairy tale has been reborn on the tongues of successive generations of storytellers. The wilful fairy tale truly moves on its own in time, and despite its tremendous age and the patina of the centuries visible upon its surface, ‘The mirror of the fairy tale has not become opaque’. And in the Soviet Union of 1930s fairy tales were written that reflected society back upon itself, achieving a resonance that seems at odds with the prevailing spirit of change and upheaval. Pavel Bazhov was a Soviet storyteller’s whose skazy are tales in which form and content speak with one voice; the vertical descent narratives in The Malachite Casket literally function as, or double, the tales’ precipitous downward journeys, allowing their readers to travel deep underground into darkness and tragedy.

As the novelist Margaret Atwood writes, in Negotiating with the Dead: ‘all writing of the narrative kind […] is motivated deep down […] by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld’. And so the traveller on the path to Bazhov’s realm of everyday magic must begin their journey below ground. From the Sumerian/Babylonian underworld where, after his death, the hero Gilgamesh sat ‘in judgement over the dead’, to the seven pātālas or netherworlds of the Hindu tradition (where ‘demons and chthonic beings dwell’), to the Chinese depictions of the ten ‘Hell Courts’ (purportedly visited by the Tang dynasty Emperor Taizong), the underworld has had a potent hold on the

---

516 The title of Hayden White’s book, The Content of the Form, provided the heading for this section, and also helped frame my thinking on the ways in which the content of fairy tales shapes the form those tales take (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).


518 Margaret Atwood, Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 45.
human imagination for as long as art has been made and stories have been told. In the literary tradition of Western Europe, the poet Homer described Odysseus’ descent into the Greek underworld of Hades, whilst Virgil wrote of Aeneas’s journey to the underworld, and returned as Dante’s guide through the circles of hell in The Divine Comedy.

Five hundred years later, in a 1932 essay on Picasso and his use of ‘crude, earthy shapes’ in his art, Carl Jung reflected on the symbolism of the ‘nektyia—the journey to Hades, the descent into the subconscious, and the leave taking from the upper world’. Jung also referred to this journey as katabasis, or a ‘descent into the lower world’; while in his book Catabasis: Vergil and the wisdom-tradition, Raymond J. Clark describes the descent narrative in literature as 'a Journey of the Dead made by a living person in the flesh who returns to our world to tell the tale'.

Slavic folklore is also rich in mythical underworlds, from the city of Kitezh, said to have ‘sunk into Svetlojar Lake to keep it from falling into the hands of the tatars’, to the belief of Russian peasants in ‘the absolute sanctity of "Mother Damp Earth" [...] throughout the centuries'. Folklorist Linda Ivanits, in Russian Folk Belief, describes legends telling ‘of treasure buried at some unusual site such as a sink hole or strange rock formation’ that reflect many of the motifs in Bazhov’s tales. In the Russian folk tradition ‘these places were dangerous and "unclean"’, and the ‘vast wealth entrusted to

---

K.E. Brashier, Reed College, Oregon <http://www.reed.edu/hellscrolls/> [accessed 26 May 2016]
525 Ivanits, p. 44.
Mother Damp Earth for safekeeping […] [was] watched over by some supernatural force’. These folkloric beliefs resonate with depictions of the underground in Bazhov’s tales as a place that is potentially deadly but alluring, and where precious stones and metals are concealed and protected by the Mistress of the Copper Mountain.

As with Freud’s definition of the uncanny, Jung’s ideas about nekyia and katabasis now have cultural resonance as a literary trope. The katabic journey in modern literature is one that subliminally recalls the classic journeys to the underworld, invoking ‘extraordinary situations like near-death experiences and borderline states’. These literary stories of descent are described by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, a Russian author of contemporary or ‘real fairy tales’, as ‘Orchards of Unusual Possibilities’. Petrushevskaya’s orchards are akin to Bazhov’s vegetable garden, full of buried treasure, and gem-like curiosities. The journey to the underworld is one that can result in unpredictable transformations; and yet, always curious, humanity cannot resist exploring the darkness.

Doubling himself as writer and fictional hero or pilgrim, Dante travelled within the text of The Divine Comedy into the underworld, and so made his own nekyia, or narrative of descent. By mythologizing himself the writer assumes a shamanic role, moving between worlds through the liminal text of a story and crossing the porous borders of life and imagination. In Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing, Hélène Cixous, notes that the writers she loves are ‘descenders, explorers of the lowest and deepest,’ whose work is that ‘of digging, of unburying’. Descent to the underworld is

---

526 Ivanits, p. 44.
528 Ibid.
one of the tasks writers undertake, and Cixous’ words allude to the multiplicity of meanings folded into the conceit of this journey.

In Bazhov’s tales the meaning of a descent is trebled to encompass: the realistic descent of the fairy-tale hero, Stepan, into the mountain where as punishment he was shackled to the workface ‘with a long chain’; the fantastic descent into the underground ‘grove where golden flowers grow’; and the psychological descent the writer makes, referred to by the poet and essayist, Annie Dillard, in *The Writer’s Life*, as the transformation of a ‘line of words’ into ‘a miner’s pick [...] You wield it, and it digs a path you follow’. Following the writer’s ‘line of words’ is the reader, ‘a katabatic traveller’ who descends into a textual underworld searching for ‘buried’ truth or meaning. Like Cixous, Bazhov was a writer who had to descend and spend time in the dark and shadows of the underworld, conversing with spirits, before he was able to let ‘down a shaft into real life’ and get his ‘feel [...] into words’ and his magic tales onto paper.

Bazhov began writing *The Malachite Casket* at a time in Russian history when the very ‘air was saturated with violence’, when the government he had supported his entire adult life was waging war against its peasant population; a campaign of violence that ‘marked the beginning of the end of the village, and with it the end of a thousand-year Russian patriarchal society.’ As Zipes has written, there are ‘profound meanings in the classical fairy tales that stem from human conflicts of the past and still speak to

---

530 Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, p. 15.
531 Afanas’ev, ‘The Secret Ball’ in *Russian Fairy Tales*, p. 225. A version of this tale was also collected by the Brothers Grimm, and is known as ‘The Worn Out Dancing Shoes’ or the ‘Twelve Dancing Princesses’ (Zipes, TBG, p. 431.)
533 Vaclavik, p. 3. In this discussion of the literary *katabasis* as ‘not only a journey undertaken by protagonists *within* narrative’, but also performed by ‘the writer and reader’, Vaclavik quotes Evans Lansing Smith, author of *Rape and Revelation: The Descent to the Underworld in Modernism* (Lanham, MD/London: University Press of America), 1990, p. 130.
us’. Confronting an impossible reality—a ‘demolished house’ and a world that was ‘brutal and coarse’—the magical descent narrative provided Bazhov with a voice and a framework for stories that otherwise could not be told. Whether his intentions were subversive isn’t known, though evidence indicates that he did not consciously write tales that challenged or undermined the Stalinist regime. Like any literary textual analysis, my reading of disquiet or even oblique dissent in The Malachite Casket is subjective, if not entirely idiosyncratic. Archival research that might (although given the totalitarian regime under which Bazhov lived, quite likely not) have clarified the issue was beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the P.P. Bazhov House Museum in Yekaterinburg offers a potentially rich stratum for future research. For now, like Lipovetsky, I can say this: in my own descent to Bazhov’s enchanted underground a sense of the tales as an act of quiet resistance, an expression of unease, and even an attempt at restoration was ‘rendered perceptible’ by my subtextual excavations. During his months ‘underground’ Bazhov gave narrative shape to stories that lay hidden deep within his psyche—and for this project the magic tale, and particularly the descent narrative, proved to be the ideal form.

As a revolutionary and journalist Bazhov recognized that in a Soviet Union ‘falling into bottomlessness’, information—a ‘form of communication’ that ‘does not survive the moment in which it was new’—was privileged over stories. Yet it was to skazy and not journalism that Bazhov turned in his time of troubles, creating tales in which, despite their socialist realist elements, ‘extraordinary things, marvellous things’

536 Zipes, IFT, p. 136.
537 Anna Akhmatova, ‘The Last Toast’ (1934), Selected Poems, p. 58.
538 See Robert Chandler’s introduction to Bazhov’s tales in RMT, pp. 221-25. Yegor Gaidar’s memoir, Days of Defeat and Victory, also contains anecdotes that speak to Bazhov’s overtly unflagging loyalty to both the Communist party and the Soviet government, even under the leadership of Stalin, p. 6.
539 OED Online’ [accessed 23 May 2018]
were related.\textsuperscript{541} Excavating the stories in \textit{The Malachite Casket} exposes Bazhov’s use—to fabulous effect—of a number of traditional fairy-tale tropes, which he used to reflect upon the consequences of censorship and misinformation, and the manipulation of political power. Two stories written in 1939, after Bazhov and his wife had emerged from hiding, and included in the first edition of \textit{The Malachite Casket}—‘The Cat’s Ears’ and ‘The Two Lizards’—radically develop the symbolism of the hidden underground and the consequences of repression.

Set in the 1770s during a peasant revolt led by a Cossack pretender to the Russian throne, the protagonist of ‘The Cat’s Ear’ is a peasant girl who sets out on a dangerous ‘night journey’ in search of news of the rebellion. This information is being withheld from her village, where the Master and his bailiff have ensured that their ‘serfs were watched, held in a tight grip’ to prevent news of the uprising from reaching them.\textsuperscript{542} Bazhov’s plot employs ‘the Fairy Way’ of writing, whilst also mirroring the difficulties and dangers ordinary people faced in Stalinist Russia in their efforts to find accurate sources of information. Like ‘The Stone Flower’, it is a literary text that demands a historicizing or ‘political interpretation’ in order ‘to deliver its long forgotten message’.\textsuperscript{543} Facing the truth, no matter how traumatic the consequences, is a key motif in fairy tales, and a dangerous one to employ in the Soviet Union, where a whole nation was infantilized by a government that withheld and manipulated all information, whether crucial or trivial.

Beginning in the tsarist era, but endemic by the 1930s, ‘obtrusive and relentless censorship’ was as ‘an essential co-factor in Russian literary history’, and an intrinsic aspect of life for writers such as Bulgakov and Akhmatova, who despite its flaws

\textsuperscript{541} Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{542} Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Malachite Casket’, p.131.
refused to abandon their homeland. To counter this crisis of information an underground press known as samizdat (literally self-published) developed from the earliest days of the USSR, as writers and readers clandestinely copied and distributed repressed literature; a system that was perilous for all involved. As late as 1982 Irina Ratushinskaya was arrested for the crime of writing poems, and through ‘a clandestine samizdat publication’ making her work available to Soviet as well as western readers.

Another method of covert communication, carried over from the tsarist era, was to bury what could not be said openly within the text itself, resulting in an almost-magical means of ‘Reading what has never been written, listening to what has never been said’. Due to the climate of fear and reprisal the ability to read between the lines was acute ‘in the [Russian] reading public’, while Soviet writers, by necessity, used Aesopian language to create texts riddled with ‘allusions and omissions’. Therefore to read any work of literature written under Stalinism requires double vision; a means of digging deep to reveal what lies both between and beneath the lines of text. When the writer buries ideas too dangerous to be ‘said out loud’, the reader must learn to travel underground, tunnelling into and sifting through the lines of text.

Throughout its history the fairy tale has been remarkable for its ability to travel through time and space, with the result that variations of certain tales can be found in different cultures around the world. It is this ‘unbound character’ of fairy tales, which ensures it is able to constantly renew, remaining ‘fresh as longing and love’ even when depicting a world ‘that has long since disappeared’. Bazhov’s contemporary, the Russian author Teffi, also used the fairy-tale form in response to her experience of a
society fractured by revolution and war. ‘A Little Fairy Tale’ is set in France (where she lived in exile from 1919), but for its reader the story functions as ‘a concise primer of Russian folklore’. Teffi’s ironic wit illuminates her own predicament through her tale of an exiled witch who uses the jargon of Soviet bureaucracy to articulate her plight. Rather than eating Grisha, a child lost in the French woods near his exiled family’s new home, Baba Yaga tells him she is so homesick that she has lost her appetite for little Russian boys. Weeping and bemoaning her fate and the loss of a folkloric Russia that has been ‘liquidated’ she explains:

I’m unhappy; I’m in a bad way [...] There isn’t even going to be any proper snow here. How am I going to whirl up a whirlwind? How can I sweep over my tracks with a broom. All this is going to be the end of me, it’s clear as daylight.

Finally, admitting she doesn’t have a proper stove to roast him on, Baba Yaga sends Grisha home. In this twentieth-century fairy tale of displacement Teffi’s sorrow over the loss of her motherland is bitterly apparent, despite her ironic language. Although as a Russian citizen living in exile she had relative freedom of expression, it was the magic tale that best captured and contained her plight.

Unlike Teffi, the magic tale—and particularly magical descent narrative—was the only form of literature in which Bazhov could allude to the trauma at the heart of Soviet society, whilst also expressing his steadfast commitment to a utopian ‘vision of the future’. For Bazhov, as for Benjamin, the difference between information and story was one of form. And the magic tale’s tropes and conventions of form are amalgamated with the content, making a container of ‘chaste compactness’ and enduring shape. As a Marxist, Bazhov’s quest into the world of fantasy was to forge a

549 Chandler, RMT, p. 166.
550 Ibid, pp. 174-75.
551 Ibid, p. 177.
554 Ibid, pp. 81, 90.
dialectical connection between everyday materiality—the world he knew so well as a journalist and researcher, and through his own family history—and the dream of a golden future. To this end he used magic to construct a narrative tunnel, psychologically connecting the experience of reality in tsarist Russia with the Soviet Union of the 1930s through a utopian enchanted underground.\footnote{Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 89.}

In English, the word magic has a sense of the artisanal about it, of handiwork and craft. Both the word ‘magic’—by which I mean forces that defy, transgress and overturn the laws of the natural world—and the meanings it carries in its stocky arms, are similarly ancient.\footnote{Defined in the OED Online as ‘The use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world.’ \url{<http://www.oed.com>} [accessed 11 December 2016]}

In Europe, prior to the Enlightenment, magic was considered a ‘legitimate and necessary’ field of scholarship and enquiry, as shown by Queen Elizabeth I’s patronage of the alchemist and astrologer John Dee.\footnote{OED Online’ \url{<http://www.oed.com>} [accessed 11 December 2016]}
The word ‘magic’ is folkish, nubby, and grafting; it is as concise and punchy as the fairy-tale form; both full of nonsense and no-nonsense. While magic is snappy and speedy, enchantment is a more consequential process of transformation or metamorphosis.\footnote{The verb ‘enchant’ derives from a Latin root that also gives the English language ‘chant’ and ‘incant’. OED Online, \url{<http://www.oed.com>} [accessed January 13, 2017]. It is a word that keeps company with glamour, bind, spell, enrapture and delude. With its fussy prefix ‘enchant’ lacks magic’s compact self-sufficiency and perhaps, too, its impulse to helpfulness.}

In fairy tales a magical object is a gift usually given with good intentions, even if—as in the tale ‘Sweet Porridge’ or ‘The Malachite Casket’—things later go awry.\footnote{In this classic tale the owner of a magical pot forgets the words to stop the flow of gruel. The story almost ends in catastrophe, with the town swamped and ‘only one house […] left standing without any porridge in it.’ And even when at last someone stops the pot, ‘whoever sought to go back into the town had to eat his way through’. TBG, ‘Sweet Porridge’, p. 343.}

An enchanted object, however, is a more vexed proposition, as we know from Briar Rose’s spindle and the death-like hundred year sleep it bestowed upon her.\footnote{TBG, ‘Briar Rose’, p. 163.}
One of the markers by which the reader recognizes a fairy tale as distinct from other forms of short fiction is the ‘suspension of natural physical laws’ producing a ‘magical state of reality […] which leads to wonder’. Echoing the concept of Italo Calvino’s ‘hard logic’ of fairy tales, Warner reflects that the ‘laws of enchantment’ run counter to the laws of the primary world. The presence of magic, she explains, is ubiquitous to the fairy tale form; it is what leads us down to the subterranean kingdom ‘of stone flowers, and […] like sparks of fire […] golden bees’, a place ‘so beautiful that you could gaze for a hundred years and still not gaze your fill’. Magic, when encountered in fairy tales, is the feather that knocks the reader right off their feet. Magic will bring about change for better or worse, bigger or smaller, with the gift of a talking doll or a flying carpet or a pair of glass slippers. Magic is in the bottle labelled ‘Drink Me’, and the cake labelled ‘Eat Me’, and its main ingredient is the promise and power of transformation. While its rules are arbitrary, its morals variable, and the outcome of an encounter with magical objects or beings never quite what we expect, we are still thankful for the experience of liberating transformation. To quote Rumpelstiltskin in ‘Little Man’ (Michael Cummingham’s retelling of the Grimm’s tale), magic is not a science but an art, and as a result ‘not one hundred percent reliable’. The only thing guaranteed in a fairy tale is that what you are hoping for is not what you will end up with; the dream of streets paved with gold, or a living flower carved from green stone, will manifest as a piece of shattered malachite.

560 Warner, Once Upon a Time, p. xxii.
561 Calvino, p. 35. Warner, Once Upon a Time, p. 20.
562 Warner, Once Upon a Time, p. 20.
565 ‘[…] and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.’ (King James Bible, Book of Revelation 21:12). Also from Joseph Jacobs’ collection of English Fairy Tales: ‘Now Dick had heard a great many strange things about the great city called London; for the country people at that time thought…that the streets were all paved with gold’. Jacobs, 1890 (republished 2013), p. 93.
For the Freudian analyst and writer Bruno Bettelheim, the magic prevalent in fairy tales fulfils or speaks to a child’s need for wonder.\footnote{Bettelheim, p. 45.} Unlike Warner, Bettelheim does not provide a definition of magic, which for him is of interest (as the title of his book, \textit{The Uses of Enchantment}, implies) primarily for its functionality and for the impact on the reader rather than on the narrative. The magic of fairy tales he equates to the animist world view held by pre-pubescent children; a world in which inanimate objects share the child’s thoughts and emotions.\footnote{Ibid.} This magical thinking does not end in childhood, however, as Bettelheim presumes. The sense that the natural, material world is infused with unseen but powerful forces resonates with adults as much as children. And even a lifelong Marxist like Bazhov could conjure up a world in which magic animated both landscapes and material objects. In his stories a buried casket magically reveals itself as the jewels it contains sparkled ‘in different colours and a light came from them like the sun’; and the Mistress’s lizards come running and to lay ‘the table with all sort of things’, preparing and serving a scrumptious feast.\footnote{Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Malachite Casket’, p. 26. Bazhov/Manning, ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, p. 17.}

In \textit{Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights}, Warner describes the matter of magic as one that is fundamental to the experience of humanity, following ‘processes inherent to human consciousness and connected to constructive and imaginative thought.’\footnote{Marina Warner, \textit{Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights} (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), p. 23.} Concurring with Bettelheim that the secondary world of fairy tales is an animist one, she burrows more deeply into the concept as a narrative and literary device.\footnote{Warner, \textit{Once Upon a Time}, p. 20.} Magic in fairy tales is not only a means by which the storyteller creates wonder in the reader’s mind; it is also ‘bound up with the faculties of reasoning
and [...] structures the processes of imagination’. For both the writer and reader of fairy tales magic is essential and inherent; it is ‘part of everyday reality’ in secondary worlds, and the fairy tale’s plot is driven forward by the catalyst of ‘magic as causation’.

The world of magic tales, where the impossible is not just possible, but normalized and anticipated, ironically mirrors the reality of life in Stalinist Russia, with its fabulous Five-Year Plans, its absurdist show trials, and its orphanages full of children who had lost their parents to the snowy wastes of Siberia. In impossible fairy tales the delicate substance of glass can be ‘used for shoes; also for a mountain’ and a speaking mirror; while a woman’s robes can be cut and sewn from silken malachite stone. As described by Lüthi, magic in fairy-tale narratives occurs as ‘a matter of course’ and is key to the all-inclusiveness or sublimation of the secondary world. This is magic of the everyday; the saturating and ‘vital substance in the fairy tale’. Without magic the crossing cannot be made from the empirical world to the fairy tale realm by either writer or reader; it is what illuminates the work of Andersen, Wilde, and Carter. In any fairy tale magic is the seam that the storyteller mines for narrative gold; it pours light on the fairy tale so that characters, objects, and events all stand out in sharp relief; and it is the underground tunnel of the imagination that connects everything to everything else. Magic highlights the pattern and manifests both the isolation and sublimation that is, for Lüthi, the essence of the fairy-tale genre. Magic happens in the blink of an eye. It is the force that blows opens a doorway in the mountain rock-face revealing ‘an elegant staircase’. It is the capricious law by which all fairy-tale characters

---

572 Warner, Stranger Magic, p. 23.  
574 Lüthi, Once Upon a Time, p. 45.  
575 Ibid, p. 46.
and objects must abide. And it is the mystery ingredient in the alchemical spice-mix that flavours Leonora Carrington’s surreal paintings and fiction: including her fairy-tale descent narrative, *The Hearing Trumpet*, and memoir of incarnation and abuse in an insane asylum in *Down Below*.

As readers we know then what a magic tale sounds like, looks like, maybe even smells and tastes like: the clamour of a fast-running stream; a hollow path descending deep into the forest; the earthy sweetness of blackberries. Our sense of the fantastic is keen in this regard, and when we descend into a text we also remember the ancient forests whose ‘gifts and perils [...] are both the background and the source of these tales’. The poetry I have written in the first part of this thesis, *The Iron Bridge*, is in part a consideration of enchanted landscapes, and the sometimes awkward or uncanny juxtapositions of the material world and the imaginary. The fairy tale is unsentimental and (like a good Leninist) does not trouble itself ‘with individual destinies’. It is brief and fast-moving, yet also somehow ‘a universe in miniature’ packed full of resonant and recognisable images. As well as the forest we might expect to encounter in a fairy tale the equally familiar ‘palace and tower, throne and roses, humans and fairies’.

However, an inherent sense of ‘knowing’ as a reader does not entirely resolve the thorny problem of usage and historicity; particularly with regard to stories that have been translated from Russian.

The world of the traditional Russian fairy tale is one that reflects tsarist Russia’s predominantly peasant and rural culture; it is steeped in practical and profane magic.

Pre-Revolutionary rural Russia was deeply influenced by the shamanic and animist

---

576 Bazhov/Williams, ‘The Two Lizards’, p. 70.
578 Maitland, p. 6.
beliefs and practices of pre-Christian cultures; traditions that are still held to in parts of Siberia. 581 And it was a world that revolved around village life and fragile domesticity bordered by a wilderness of forests, rivers, and steppes of black earth stretching from Central Europe and across Asia. As a result of these sprawling, shifting borders—both geographical and political—‘Russian magical traditions cannot be fixed’ within time or place. 582 Many elements of these rich and varied traditions are found, however, in both the Russian tales collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in Bazhov’s literary magic tales.

Magic, or volshebny, as it appears in The Malachite Casket, is as unmanageable as the magic porridge pot, and as black as a loaf of Russian rye bread. The crudest and most comic instance of unruly magic is in the 1937 story ‘Sochen and his Stones’, in which a greedy and lazy fool finds that his bag of hard-won brilliants turns to shit at the moment he presents them to his master. 583 Yet for all its unpredictability, it is the presence of magic or wonder in Bazhov’s tales that accounts for their charm and enduring popularity. In Manning’s edition of The Malachite Casket, the Mistress of the Copper Mountain is depicted on the title page wearing her beautiful dress of silken malachite (see Appendix, Figure 8). She holds a small lantern in her right hand, and her left hand is pointing down towards her enchanted underground kingdom. On the facing page is Stepan, standing with a broken chain at his feet. He still holds his pickaxe—a symbol of his peasant roots and working life in the mines deep within the Gumeshki mountain. However, as the broken chain indicates, magic has liberated him from his old life; the pickaxe head rests on the ground at his feet and he is turning with vigorous, even passionate attention, towards the Mistress. Through supernatural means Stepan is both unbound and spellbound, and the Mistress’s enchantment proves harder to slip free

581 Gilchrist, p. 4.
582 Ibid.
583 Bazhov/Williams, ‘Sochen and his Stones’, pp. 41-42.
from than the iron chains of his village’s overseer. The illustration illuminates and elucidates the conflict that runs deep through many of Bazhov’s stories; when the magical and real worlds collide the outcome for human protagonists is tragic or, at best, confounding.

As well as tales of rough justice and half-magic, resonating within Bazhov’s stories are the parallel themes of darkness and the underground; of things both literally and metaphorically hidden and revealed; of gold and precious minerals buried in the earth, and of the hard physical work involved in digging them out; and of the supernatural realm that lies just beneath or beyond the experiential world. Geographically set in the forested Ural Mountains, and harkening back to tsarist Russia of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Bazhov’s utopian project—writing a collection of literary magic tales based on his peasant childhood—became, in part, an ambivalently reconstructive one. As Lipovetsky suggests, the tales contained in *The Malachite Casket* provide ‘an escape to an alternate reality’ from the ‘crises experienced by Soviet children and adults alike’. And in the act of writing the storyteller created a ‘universe in miniature’; an enchanted myth-country that lives on to the present day.

Parallels in both ‘The Stone Flower’ and ‘The Mountain Craftsman’ between Danylko, the magic tale’s hero, and ‘a Gulag inmate working in a mine, once noticed cannot be unseen; a pattern has been revealed and, alongside Katya, the reader must descend to the stone forest to look for answers.’ The son of former serfs, Bazhov was attracted to the utopian and revolutionary ideals of communism as a young man, and in

---

584 Edward Eager, author of the now classic children’s book *Half Magic*, believed ‘that magic has a life of its own and will thwart you if it can’ (Eager, *Half Magic* (1954) 1999, p. xii). His series of books, describing four rather ordinary siblings and their encounter with wildly unpredictable magical forces, were inspired by the everyday and also capricious magic depicted in E. Nesbit’s Edwardian children’s books.
585 Lipovetsky, ‘Pavel Bazhov’s Skazy’, p. 265.
586 Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time*, p. 25.
587 Chandler, RMT, p. 222.
1905 was arrested and briefly imprisoned for ‘subversive political activities’. He went on to support the 1917 Revolution and the Communist regime that followed, fighting ‘on the side of the Reds’ during the Civil War of 1918-1921. Like Danilko—the malachite carver in his story ‘The Stone Flower’—Bazhov’s utopian idealism led him to believe in and actively pursue a world that could be perfected; an idealism that under Bolshevism resulted in state terror and totalitarianism. And both Danilko and his creator were imprisoned ‘underground’ as a result of their encounter with, and attraction to, a utopian vision of perfection.

Hidden within The Malachite Casket’s enchanted subterranean realm, therefore, is the story of Bazhov’s own time underground, and of his personal experience of the Stalinist Terror. But these dark themes are well-concealed within the text of a purportedly socialist realist collection of magic tales, and a double, or Aesopian reading, is required to bring them to light. What lies hidden between the lines can be discerned by readers proficient at teasing apart encoded texts until the concealed pattern emerges: a method of close reading that, in the context of Bazhov’s stories, is comparable to the delicate task of working with malachite to reveal the pattern hidden within the stone.

In ‘The Mountain Craftsmen’ Katya saws through a slab of stone and discovers a pattern depicting ‘A bird […] flying down from a tree, its wings spread, while another bird was flying from below to meet it’. Later in the story, when she is out searching for malachite, the mountain magically opens up beneath her and reveals the Mistress’s underworld. Catching a glimpse of Danilko ‘down below her, through the gaps in the trees’, Katya ‘leaped towards him’ without hesitation. The malachite pattern of the flying birds not only recalls to the reader Katya’s last name—Letyemina—but also the

---

588 Gaidar, p. 7.
589 Ibid.
594 Ibid.
story of Danilko’s time underground in the workshops of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, and the manner in which he is rescued.

Yet despite his hopeful idealism, the traditional fairy tale ending of happy-ever-after was politically impossible for Bazhov to conceive. The concept of happy-ever-after as having been made manifest by the 1917 Revolution was intrinsic to the Bolshevik imagination, and as a loyal Communist party member Bazhov could not set his tales in the Soviet present. To do so would cast a shadow of doubt across Bolshevik claims of a golden and fairy tale-like present (at least for the deserving proletariat), and so his stories are set in the world of tsarist Russia, where utopia was still an unfulfilled dream rather than a lived reality. In the darkness of this past world, with its brutal overseers, vindictive masters, and harsh working conditions, the treasures of the magical malachite casket gleam with the golden promise of progress. The casket symbolises the liberating but unfulfilled dream of a better world. Yet contained within The Malachite Casket is a paradoxically: although set in the past, Bazhov’s tales were being imagined and written in post-Revolutionary Russia. The Soviet Union was a country being built on Marxist lines; it was the utopian dream made material. Stalin had declared that men such as Bazhov were born into a generation destined ‘To make fairy tales come true.’ The dream made real, however, is no longer a dream, and as Atwood wryly observes while ‘we can only imagine Utopias, Dystopias we’ve already had.’ In a traditional fairy tale the utopian ending is never more than hinted at by the words ‘happily ever after’. No detail is provided, and the listener or reader is left to

---

593 Fitzpatrick, p. 68.
wonder at the magical outcome, which remains hazy as a dream dissipating in the morning light.

As the experiences of Platonov and Zamyatin illustrate, in the Soviet Union there were things that could not be said aloud without potentially dangerous consequences. New ways of ‘saying the unsayable’ were therefore sought by Russian writers, while their readers learned ‘new ways of interpreting them’. One of Akhmatova’s projects during the decades she was unable to openly write or publish her own poetry, was to analyse Alexander Pushkin’s ‘cryptography’. The poet used her scholarly essays on his encoded writings—started when she was under house arrest in 1929—to make a hidden ‘record’ of her reflections on her own poetic destiny and the fate of her generation. The dissembling and interpretive skills of Soviet writers and readers, as they evade the censor’s constraints, are mirrored in the skill of the malachite artisans in Bazhov’s tales, whose work reveals patterns and images hidden within the green stone. And, like the peasant heroes of *The Malachite Casket*, dissident Soviet writers risked imprisonment and death at the hands of a repressive totalitarian regime.

In a climate of increasing ideological restrictions and reprisals, writers living under Stalinism sought various ways of negotiating the system of censorship and publishing. Strategies included creating work only for the drawer, memorising work and then destroying the evidence of what had been written, focusing on translations instead of original works of literature, and smuggling work out of the Soviet Union to be published abroad. Akhmatova’s epic poem *Requiem*—a poem about ‘memory and commemoration of the dead’—for many years existed only in the memories of eleven friends, selected to learn the poem by heart in order to preserve it at a time when it

---

595 Sandormirskaja, p. 63.
596 Ibid, p. 72.
597 Ibid.
could not be written down.\textsuperscript{598} While the poet Sophia Parnok, like Akhmatova banned from publishing her work from 1928 until her death in 1933, ‘wrote either for her “secret drawer,” or not at all’.\textsuperscript{599}

Adam Phillips describes in his essay ‘On Translating a Person’ how, for many East European poets living under repressive Communist regimes, translation became ‘the art […] of disguising the original; of finding a way of writing something that is sufficiently acceptable, or sufficiently irrelevant to the censor’.\textsuperscript{600} Akhmatova and the poet Osip Mandelstam were both skilled and prolific translators in the years following the Revolution. Other writers sought to deflect attention or distance themselves from their own words in the way they framed their work.\textsuperscript{601} Reading Russian literature of the 1930s is untenable without situating the work within the broader political and sociohistoric context, but an almost impassable abyss separates then and now. A gap not dissimilar to the abyss that separated those who lived through imprisonment and exile, and those who escaped.

The narrator of Shalamov’s short story, ‘The Train’, explains how the experience of the Gulag proved impossible to share with those he left behind. On returning to Moscow after serving seventeen years in Siberian labour camps, his narrator is met by his wife at the Yaroslavl Train Station:

\[\ldots\text{just as she had met me so many times before. This trip, however, had been a long one }\ldots\text{ I was not returning from a business trip. I was returning from hell.}\textsuperscript{602}\]

\textsuperscript{600} Phillips, ‘On Translating a Person’, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{601} Rachel Platonov has written about a unique example of this technique to distancing or deflection in her paper ‘The ‘Wicked Songs of Guilleaume du Vintrais: A Sixteenth-Century French Poet in the Gulag’. She discusses the case of two Gulag inmates, Iurii Veinert and Iakov Kharon who wrote and ‘translated’ the work of the entirely fictional poet ‘Guilleaume du Vintrais’. The Slavonic and East European Review, Vol. 90, No. 3 [July 2012].
\textsuperscript{602} Shalamov, p. 402.
Kolyma Tales, Shalamov’s collection of short stories documenting the alienating experiences of those in the Gulag, was not published in the Soviet Union until after his death in 1989.603 Instead, the stories were smuggled out of the country and published abroad. Shalamov was subsequently forced to denounce his own work; but even after doing so he continued to write stories that function as descent narratives, carrying his future readers down into the underworld of the Gulag. In the moment of their writing, however, Shalamov buried these tales in his desk drawer, not knowing when they might see the light of day.604

When working as a writer under a totalitarian regime, the issue of the ‘real’ story versus the ‘true’ story is baffling. The ‘real’ story is manipulated by the state, with its hegemonic control of media, the judicial system, and academic and cultural organizations. For the writer living under totalitarianism, the content and form of their ‘true’ story most likely does not mesh with the state’s ‘real’ story; another form for expressing their truth must be found. The Nobel prize winning non-fiction writer, Svetlana Alexievich, was born in the Soviet Union and grew up in Belarus. A witness to the aftermath of the explosion of Reactor No. 4 on 26 April 1986, Alexievich struggled for years to find a form in which to place the content of her experiences: ‘The truth was that I had no idea how to write about it, what method to use, what approach to take […] after Chernobyl, something had cracked open.’605 Ten years later Alexievich found the form to contain her words. A remarkable collection of oral histories, transcribed, ordered, and framed as an eviscerating act of testimony and indictment, Chernobyl

---

603 Shalamov, p. xv.
604 Ibid.
Prayer demands to be read as a historical narrative which ‘is found rather than constructed’.  

Bazhov’s magic tales, in contrast to Shalamov’s short fiction, where deemed acceptable by Stalinist era censors; the fairy tale provided ‘the obligatory utopian closure that allies the genre with totalitarian scenarios of a secular paradise’, allowing The Malachite Casket to be published and win prizes. Yet the prevalence of dark and ambivalent endings in Bazhov’s tales appears to facilitate and insist upon a more radical reading: that by resisting this totalitarian form of utopianism he concealed within The Malachite Casket a subversion of ‘the optimism of the fairy-tale paradigm’.  

Whatever the source of their inspiration, and in spite of his initial hesitation in openly adopting the role of storyteller, the magical descent narratives Bazhov wrote during the Great Terror are uniquely his own. A collector of folklore, he took the traditional folklore of the Ural mountains and both plundered and transformed it, not only accepting but reimagining the storytelling tradition, and the enchanted subterranean realm from which his tales emerged.  

The stories in The Malachite Casket are unlike anything else Bazhov wrote, perhaps because in 1936 he discovered for the first time his subject and his voice, creating fantasy literature out of the folktales and lived experience of Ural miners and factory workers. A form that is both traditional and radical, the fairy tale—including and especially the golden-mouthed descent narrative—is inherently open to retellings that draw upon the genre’s utopianism. And Bazhov’s tales, uniquely, are not only limned with gold, but infused with both the stink and mystery of alchemy, and the skill it takes to make alloys, amalgamating mercury with metals. Factual information about

---

608 Ibid.
609 Propp, RF, p. 7.
mining life is juxtaposed against purest fantasy. Escaping from a pack of wolves by sheltering between two columns of blue fire that spring out of the ground, Dunya—the heroine of ‘The Cat’s Ears’—catches a whiff of sulphur, and remembers stories she has heard about the Brown Cat ‘with ears of fire that lived [underground] in the sands where the gold-spotted copper was found.’ A miner’s daughter, Dunya knows that copper and gold are often found woven together in the same vein; and in the stories collected in The Malachite Casket magic and realism are similarly, and unforgettably alloyed.

Bazhov’s tales are permeated with melancholy at odds with the conventions of the fairy-tale form, and which adds a malachite-green tarnish to their utopian lustre. They are touched and skewed by a sort of half-magic: by Bazhov’s faith in Marxism as a means of making sense of the world, and by the folktales and mining lore he heard as a child and years later ‘reworked’ into his stories.

~Ж~

611 Propp, RFT, p. 33.
Once, in a certain town, in a certain time, in a land ruled over by a greedy and wrathful Tsar, there lived a Storyteller. One day, walking in the forest near the old mines, he met the Mistress of the Copper Mountain. ‘I have a message for the Tsar,’ she told the Storyteller, ‘and you must deliver it. Tell him he must leave my mountain. He must free his prisoners. He must give up his crown.’ ‘If I tell him those things,’ said the Storyteller, ‘he will kill me.’ ‘Nonetheless,’ said the Mistress, ‘you must find a way.’ That night, fear kept the Storyteller from sleeping, so he took a trowel and went into his vegetable garden to spend an hour or two planting rows of beans and peas in the soft black earth. There was a moon bright as lamplight to guide him. As he worked, the Storyteller remembered a tale from his childhood, told by an old man in his village. He remembered the old man’s words at the story’s bittersweet end: ‘This tale you’ve heard is not just a story; it is about real life, too. And it’s not everyone who can tell such things.’ And laying down his shovel the Storyteller walked back into his house, sat down at his desk, and began to write.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Бажов, Павел, Малахитовая шкатулка (Москва: ОГИЗ, Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1948)


Ptushko, Aleksandr, *The Stone Flower* (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1946)

Secondary Sources


Berger, John, *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001)

Bernheimer, Kate, ‘Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale’ in *The Writer’s Notebook*, ed. by Dorothy Allison (Portland: Tin House Books, 2009), 61-73


Calvino, Italo, Six Memos for the Next Millennium (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988)


--- The Debutante and Other Stories (London: Silver Press, 2017)

--- The Hearing Trumpet (Boston, MA: Exact Change, 1996)


--- Sonja in a Kingdom of Wonder (Соня в царствѣ дива) (New York: Evertype, 2013)


Clark, Raymond J., Catabasis: Vergil and the wisdom-tradition (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1979)


Cunningham, Michael, A Wild Swan and Other Tales (London: Fourth Estate, 2015)


Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Norton, 2011)

--- *Notes from the Underground/The Double* (London: Penguin Classics, 1972)


von Franz, Marie-Louise, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1987)


Gallop, Jane, ‘The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounter,’ in *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 14 (Fall 2000), pp. 7-17


--- *Psychology of the Unconscious* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1949)


Комлев, Андрей, ‘Бажов и Свердловское отделение Союза советских писателей’, «Урал» 2004, №1


Lyons, Martyn, *Reading Culture and Writing Practices in Nineteenth-century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 139-50


Maitland, Sara, *Gossip From the Forest* (London: Granta, 2012)


Petrushevskaya, Ludmilla, *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour’s Baby: Scary Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2011)

--- *There Once Lived a Girl Who Seduced Her Sister’s Husband, And He Hanged Himself: Love Stories* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2013)


Pinkerton, John, A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World (London, 1809)


Propp, Vladimir, ‘Historical Roots of the Wondertale’ in Theory and History of Folklore (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 100-23

--- Morphology of the Folktale (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013)


Ransome, Arthur, Pigeon Post (London; Jonathon Cape, 1983)

--- Old Peter’s Russian Tales (London; Jonathon Cape, 1984)

Ratushinskaya, Irina. No, I’m Not Afraid (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986)


Riasanovsky, Nicholas V., A History of Russia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)

Rilke, Rainer Maria, Letters to a Young Poet (London: Penguin Classics, 2012)

Riordan, James, The Mistress of the Copper Mountain: Folk Tales from the Urals (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1974)


Рождественская, Елена. ‘Моему неизменно окрыляющему редактору: вспоминя Павла Петровича Бажова’. «Урал» 2005, №1

Royle, Nicholas, The Uncanny (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003)


Stevenson, Robert Louis, Treasure Island (New York: Signet Editions, 2016)


Figure 1: Vitaly Volovich, ‘The Mistress of the Copper Mountain’, 1963.
Figure 2: Ivan Bilibin, Vasilisa the Fair, 1899.
Figure 3: Portrait of Pavel Bazhov (1879-1950)
Figure 4: Front cover, *The Malachite Casket*. 
Figure 5: Vyacheslav Nazaruk, ‘The Malachite Casket’, 1970.
Figure 6: A malachite casket shaped like a book.
Figure 7: Aleksey Stakhanov, Soviet era postage stamp.
Figure 8: Title page, *The Malachite Casket*. 

![Image of the title page of "The Malachite Casket" book](image-url)