

US Research Trip - June 2013

My PhD thesis constitutes a comparative study of the theme of social paranoia as depicted in the Absurdist fiction of Cold War America and Soviet Russia. This research maintains that, despite the ideology of moral and cultural “Otherness” constructed and reinforced by both nations throughout much of twentieth century, the U.S. and the Soviet Union more often than not functioned as mirror images of paranoia and suspicion. Focusing primarily on selected works by Soviet authors Mikhail Bulgakov, Daniil Kharms and Yuli Daniel; and American authors Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, my thesis argues that the parallel conditions of anxiety and mistrust existing within these ostensibly divergent cultures led to a surprising congruity of literary responses, which transcended the ideological divide between Capitalism and Communism and, as such, underscored the homogeneity of fear which lay beneath the façade of constructed difference.

Thus far, my thesis has explored how this congruity of social and political anxieties resulted in the national literatures of both the Soviet Union and the United States developing a parallel preoccupation with themes of paranoia and conspiracy. Consequently, my research has, up until this point, focused almost exclusively on exploring how, despite the vast ideological and cultural differences demarcating the socio-political divide between these immense superpowers, deep-seated Cold-War era anxiety had led to a proliferation of paranoid states within these ostensibly divergent political behemoths, the ubiquity of which resulted in the development of parallel literary preoccupations with themes of social paranoia and political suspicion. However, while the core hypothesis underpinning my research resides in the contention that the parallel conditions of pervasive cultural anxiety that existed in both the United States and the Soviet Union for much of the twentieth century resulted in a profusion of similarly potent paranoia engulfing the literary and cultural topography of both nations, the crucial final stage of my research seeks to investigate the extent to which such literary congruities could have emerged from a transnational exchange of literary ideas and influence. Because much American Absurdist fiction of the twentieth century was produced in the years following the initial publication of Soviet Absurdism in the West, Soviet fiction was slowly assimilated into the canon of Western literary understanding, ultimately informing the development of American Absurdist fiction. Consequently, the primary goal of this research trip was to establish, through careful investigation of unpublished manuscripts, personal correspondence and early drafts of key texts, concrete evidence for the existence of Soviet literary influences informing the development of Cold-War era American texts. Spending a period of approximately three weeks in June 2013 conducting research in three separate US institutions, I sought to determine the extent to which a dynamic intertextual exchange of ideas and influence may have existed between these seemingly antithetical socio-political systems. In doing so, I hoped not only to undermine previously rigid Cold War notions of Otherness and enmity, but also to definitively establish whether the congruities existing between the representations of social paranoia that dominated both Soviet and American literature for much of the twentieth century were the product of literary influence and

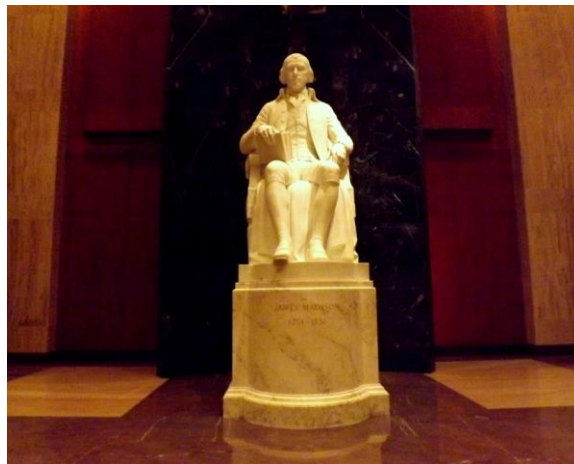
transnational cultural exchange, or simply the result of parallel socio-cultural conditions generating similar artistic responses.

Beginning my research trip amidst the majestic surroundings and incomparably vast resources of Washington DC's Library of Congress, I sought to preface my later, more in-depth research into the possible transnational influences informing the work of individual American authors with a broader survey of mid-twentieth century American and Soviet literary exchange. My period of research thus began with a comprehensive study of the records of the Am-Rus Literary Agency. Founded at a time when socio-political upheaval in both Europe and the United States had inaugurated a wave of anti-communist sentiment, the Am-Rus Literary Agency dedicated its often meagre resources to the translation, publication and promotion of Soviet authors in the United States during the Cold War period. The avowed goal of this literary organisation was to introduce Western audiences to the innovative creative forces that were transforming Soviet literature amidst the tumultuous social and cultural upheavals of the twentieth century. The agency's records, housed in the Library of Congress, detailed the struggles and triumphs of an organisation that had dedicated itself to increasing transcultural understanding and, ultimately, to the destabilisation of the rigid cultural and ideological barriers erected alongside the growing fears of the Cold War. Often overlooked, even by scholars of transnational and transatlantic studies, the records of the Am-Rus Literary Agency furnished my research with an invaluable understanding of the cultural ties that existed between the seemingly irreconcilable socio-political structures of the Soviet Union and the United States during this period.



Madison Building, Library of Congress, Washington DC

The materials held within this expansive archive proved an invaluable asset to the development of my research. The records preserved in the Library of Congress provided me with a detailed overview of the Soviet authors and literary works published in the United States during the Cold War period, allowing me to establish a tentative list of twentieth-century Russian authors whose influence may have permeated the creative sphere of mid-century American literature. Furthermore, items of correspondence between the Am-Rus Agency and a number of their Soviet counterparts, which I translated, provide detailed lists of popular American authors published in the Soviet Union. These documents served to further underscore my contention that there existed, even at the height of the Cold War, a concordance of socio-political conditions that allowed Soviet readers to recognise familiar renderings of cultural paranoia in the works of American Absurdist authors such as Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, both of whom were, according to the records of the Am-Rus Literary Agency, extremely popular amongst Soviet readers. In this way, working with the records of the Am-Rus Literary Agency in the awe-inspiring surroundings of the Library of Congress proved to be an extremely enlightening experience, one which further elucidated the subtle nuances which informed the complex relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War period and, in this way, bolstered the central hypothesis underpinning my research by illuminating the manner in which the publication and dissemination of Soviet texts in the US may have exerted some degree of influence upon the development of American literature during the Cold War era. Moreover, by providing a detailed record of how Soviet literature was disseminated and received in the US, these documents served to highlight the porous nature of ostensibly rigid Cold War barriers. Finally, my visit to the Library of Congress also allowed me to further develop my own research skills, as it provided me with the opportunity to attend a research orientation session organised and chaired by LOC librarians. Taking place on June 3rd, my first evening in Washington DC, this orientation session proved to be a comprehensive learning experience which not only familiarised me with research practices within the Library of Congress itself, but also deepened my understanding of broader research methodologies related to both print media and electronic databases.



Interior of the Madison Building

Furnished with a broader contextual understanding of the dynamic, and often fluid, movement of literary artefacts between America and the Soviet Union even at the apex of Cold War tensions, I concluded my period of research in the Library of Congress in order to begin work with more specialised archival materials in hopes of seeing how this fluidity of literary influence might manifest in the works of the individual American writers whose texts form the analytic nucleus of my PhD thesis. This phase of my research necessitated a journey south to the balmy, palmetto-filled city of Columbia, South Carolina in order to spend a week working closely with the extensive Joseph Heller Collection housed in the University of South Carolina's Rare Book and Special Collections Division.



The Thomas Cooper Library at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina

Arriving in the early hours of June 10th, I checked into my motel and immediately set off for USC's Thomas Cooper Library in order to begin work with the immense collection of literary manuscripts, personal correspondence and assorted ephemera contained within the Heller Archive. An imposing and comprehensive collection, the library staff in the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections were exceptionally helpful in assisting me with the daunting process of locating and obtaining relevant material, as well as displaying extraordinary kindness by extending both the archive and reading room opening hours over the weekend in order to allow me extra time to explore the collection's vast resources.

As this stage, my research was primarily focused on tracing evidence of transnational literary exchange and intertextual influence in the works of post-war American authors whose thematic preoccupation with issues of paranoia, surveillance and bureaucracy may have been informed by the prevalence of similar themes in then recently-published Western translations of Soviet texts. As such, the most valuable resource contained in the Joseph Heller Archive was, from my perspective, the wealth of unpublished early drafts of some of Heller's most iconic novels. In particular the numerous unpublished drafts of Heller's 1974 novel

Something Happened expose the intense creative process that resulted in the formation of this incisive evisceration of mid-century bureaucracy. A key component of the textual analysis at the centre of my research, *Something Happened* is, in my estimation, the American novel most closely aligned with the Soviet Absurdist literary aesthetic and the perennial Russian fascination with issues of bureaucratic corruption and convolution. As such, the ability to read and analyse successive drafts of this novel, tracing its development from its embryonic early incarnations, where it constituted little more than a series of key scenes scribbled on index cards, to a fully-realised novel submitted for editorial approval, provided me with a unique opportunity to trace the creative forces informing the novel's development and to document the myriad intertextual influences which are absent from the published version of the novel. Indeed, although constituting a uniquely American vision of the ridiculousness at the heart of large-scale bureaucratic mechanisms, my earlier research had long led me to suspect the influence of Russian or Soviet literature in the construction of Heller's portrayal of bureaucracy. Indeed, from working closely with these early drafts of *Something Happened*, it is clear that a strong intertextual relationship existed between Heller's vision of bureaucratic absurdity and the enduring Russian preoccupation with the inanity of such organisational structures. However, while I was unable to uncover any direct references to specific Soviet texts, the influence of a distinctly Russian conception of bureaucracy pervades the earliest drafts of the novel. Most notably, a number of abandoned epigraphs and discarded chapter titles attest to the subtle influence of Russian literature, particularly nineteenth-century Russian literature, whose thematic preoccupations with familial corrosion and bureaucratic absurdity mirror those found in Heller's novel.

Furthermore, close readings of these early drafts of *Something Happened* also yielded a wealth of additional material which will be relevant to the future development of my research, as these drafts illustrate the centrality of paranoid themes to Heller's vision of mid-century bureaucratic structures. In particular, references to paranoid mental states, the primary topic of my research, appear far more frequently in the earliest versions of the novel. In this way, the period spent in the University of South Carolina's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections was an extremely rewarding and enriching experience which ultimately served to deepen my understanding of both the thematic and creative development of Heller's work, as well as bolstering my initial assertions concerning the importance of a wide array intertextual influences in the composition of *Something Happened*.

Having thus far explored both the broader issue of American-Soviet cultural exchange and the minutia of intertextual influences within an individual literary work, the final stage of my research necessitated a trip into the vast plains of the American heartland, as I journeyed to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Arriving in the city on June 23rd, I spent the final week of my research period working closely with the Vonnegut Archive housed in the University of Tulsa's McFarlin Library. Although smaller and less well-known than the Vonnegut Archive held by the Indiana University, the materials contained in the Special Collections Division of the McFarlin Library contains a wealth of valuable documents which have been largely overlooked by academics and researchers, and, as such, the University of Tulsa's Vonnegut Archive provides an abundance of untapped resources. Of particular relevance to my research

was a rare, unpublished manuscript of Vonnegut's 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions* which not only features a variety of textual deviations from the published version, but also an alternate ending. Like the vast body of archival material housed in the University of South Carolina's Heller Archive, gaining access to an unpublished, early version of a novel so central to the analytical structure of my PhD thesis allowed me to view the novel in its nascent form and, in doing so, I was enabled to trace the novel's thematic and aesthetic development through various stages of its composition. This process revealed many new thematic dimensions within the novel itself and allowed me to view more clearly the myriad intertextual literary influences permeating the novel's textual space. Furthermore, the archive also contained a wealth of material relating to a court case concerning the banning of Vonnegut's earlier novel *Slaughterhouse Five* from schools in Pontiac, Michigan. As much of my research is, in the context of both American and Soviet literature, focused on the manner in which my chosen texts both engage with and are informed by the multitudinous complex forces of social upheaval, the opportunity to view contemporary accounts of how such texts were received within their respective social milieus and how the ideological structures of these social systems responded to the content of these novels has, I believe, broadened the scope of my comparative analysis of the effects of such social strictures on the primary texts explored in my thesis. Once again, the library staff provided invaluable assistance by helping me to locate relevant materials and retrieving items housed in offsite locations on my behalf.



The McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Spanning a range of time periods, geographical locations and literary styles, the archival material I was able to access over the course of my research trip has greatly enhanced my understanding of both the cultural context surrounding the composition of some of the key primary texts analysed in my research and of the more specific details of their thematic and

aesthetic development. As such, the ability to access this material has proved an invaluable asset to the further development of my PhD thesis. The opportunity to view key works by authors such as Vonnegut and Heller in their nascent stages has equipped me with a new level of insight into the process of their composition and furnished me with a greater understanding of the myriad cross-cultural influences from which these authors drew in the course of their work. Moreover, the material gleaned from this period of archival research has bolstered the central hypothesis of my late-stage research by elucidating the manner in which much of the work produced by these authors was shaped not only by the unique social conditions of Cold War era America, but also by a web of intertextual influences which, although not explicitly drawn from the work of their Soviet counterparts, are clearly informed by an in-depth understanding of international literary trends. Furthermore, the research I was enabled to carry out in the Library of Congress and the opportunity to access the records of the Am-Rus Literary Agency allowed me to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship that existed between America and the USSR during the Cold War period and the important role of cultural exchange in undermining rigid conceptions of Otherness and radical alterity. Ultimately, this research trip equipped me with a wealth of previously unpublished primary material that will allow me to further develop the core argumentative structure of my thesis, thereby greatly enriching my research and lending further depth to my primary hypothesis. As such, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the EAAS for providing me with the financial support necessary to carry out this vital component of my research and for allowing me to enhance my PhD thesis in such a meaningful manner.