Valentin Kataev’s Later Writing and “Uže napisan Verter”
Time, Memory, and a Critical Dream

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Abstract
In this article I consider the place of “Uže napisan Verter” (1980) in Valentin Kataev’s fictional writing. I discuss the traits that reveal it as a clear example of Kataev’s later writing and also examine those features that distinguish it from that later writing, and thus I account for why it probably was deemed unacceptable for publication in the collection of Kataev’s works that appeared between 1983 and 1986. I give especial attention to Kataev’s portrayals of how personal time confronts historical time (of how memory and dream confront historical reality), how his experiments in literary form emphasize these portrayals, and how characters’ choices about personal time and historical time comment on changes that the Revolution and Civil War brought to Russia.

Keywords: Valentin Kataev, “Uže napisan Verter”, time, memory, dream, Civil War, Soviet prose, literary form.

Я не держу. Иди, благотвори.
Ступай к другим. Уже написан Вертег,
А в наши дни и воздух пахнет смертью: 
Открыть окно, что жилы отворить.

Boris Pasternak, 1918

In 1980 Valentin Kataev published “Uže napisan Verter” (hereafter also UNV), a short story that was not included subsequently in the collection of his works printed between 1983 and 1986. The exclusion from Kataev’s

1 I would like to thank one of Scando-Slavica’s anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on a draft of this paper and Tatiana Patera for her support in my early work on Kataev’s writing.

2 The story was published eventually as part of a collection of Kataev’s works. See, for example, Kataev 1992, 325–382.

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collected works makes the story somewhat intriguing, especially because a story published later did appear in that collection and, moreover, because “Uže napisan Verter” is similar to other works Kataev had written since the early 1960s. The most notable similarity is the story’s concern with themes and devices associated with time: the story’s main action is set in the past, that picture of the past is a wholly personal construct, the narrative is patterned as a dream and does not relate events chronologically, memory and the ability to remember are portrayed as valuable possessions, and characters make choices that irrevocably affect their future. In close connection with these themes and devices, in “Uže napisan Verter” Kataev employs aspects of the “new” approach to literature that marks his works since the early 1960s, the approach he called mauvism. This approach gave Kataev the means to propose accounts of the historical past that, because they are portrayed as personally truthful to the author and his fictional characters, could be exempt from reproof for being inaccurate. One aspect of “Uže napisan Verter” that makes it different from Kataev’s other works (and likely caused its exclusion from his collected works) is how these themes and devices combine with a candidly critical treatment of revolutionaries in the new Soviet state. Indeed, the editors of Novyj mir, the journal in which the story first appeared, felt it necessary to preface “Uže napisan Verter” with a disclaimer that alerted readers to this treatment: references to the Cheka in the story should be associated with Trotsky, notes the editorial, and keep in mind that memory of events as they are portrayed in the story is not always clear. This treatment amplifies a key


4 “В основе этой прозы не конкретные воспоминания, но память о целой эпохе. В ней, этой памяти, причудливо соединялись увиденное, пережитое, перечувствованное, прочитанное и — домысленное, нафантазированное, увиденное. В годы военного коммунизма зловещая тень Троцкого порой нависала над революционными завоеваниями народа. Особенно это сказывалось на работе местных органов власти. Искрывления и нарушения законности надо относить в первую очередь на счет врагов ленинизма.

Выходы из левых эсеров не могли преодолеть своей мелкобуржуазной сущности в новых исторических условиях. Аванториозм, волонтеризм, истеричные метания из стороны в сторону были присущи и тем из них, кто работал в ЧК. Между тем эта работа требовала неуклонного соблюдения революционного порядка, железной самоцицеплины, беспрецедентной преданности делу — качества, которые отсутствовали у левых эсеров.

Повесть старейшего советского писателя В. Катаева, свидетеля и очевида тех времен, самым своим острием направлена против врагов революции. Сегодня в связи
aspect of Kataev’s writing since the early 1960s – his repeatedly portraying the effects of the Revolution on people’s lives – and draws attention most obviously (as the editors indicate) to a Soviet, revolutionary sense of time and more generally to how individuals interact with past time and memory. In the analysis that follows I examine “Uže napisan Verter” to discuss how Kataev explores this sense of time, how he comments on characters’ decisions to employ or ignore their past and memories, and how he draws attention to the place of personality or individuality in this decision-making and in one’s actions in the present in general. Though I propose that “Uže napisan Verter” is part of a complete cycle in Kataev’s writing, I draw attention to its particular messages, messages on the past, memory, and remembering that are meant to supplement collective history and the revolutionary understanding of time. First, though, I will place the story in the context of Kataev’s later writing.

A chief feature of Kataev’s later and more controversial writing of the 1960s and 70s is his portrayal of how personal time confronts historical time. The past is often the concern of the narrative of the present; recollections and dreams of historical facts, whose accuracy time must inevitably challenge, fuse with imagination to create personal stories. In such works as Svjatoj kolo-dec (1966), Trava zabven’ja (1967), and Almaznyj moj venec (1978), which are based on historical personalities and events, narrators recall and dream their stories, providing particular views on those personalities and events and expressing the processes of recalling and dreaming as the structural impetuses for the stories. Kataev depicts the passing of time as a force to be reckoned with and the events of a certain time as happenings that are never decided or fixed, but that continue to be open to interpretation and manipulation. Kataev’s later prose works express these stances consistently, yet his earlier writings anticipate this eventual obsession with time. Most famously his five-year-plan novel Vremja, vperëd! (1932) depicts the tour de force of Magnitigorsk workers who set new time records for pouring concrete. The novel’s narrative approach is intrinsically concerned with time, too. It mixes impressions and past happenings into the present-time of the story and jumps freely from

с оживлением троцкистского охвостья за рубежами нашей родины, в накале острой идеологической борьбы гневный пафос катаяевских строк несомненно будет замечен. Наше короткое вступление имеет целью привлечь внимание читателя к фактам многолетней давности, незнание или забвение которых затруднит восприятие катаяевской повести.” (UNV, 122).

5 On similarities in Kataev’s earlier writing and his later more innovative writing, see Borden 1999, 103–107.
Kataev’s 1936 novel *Beleet parus odinokij*, set thirty years earlier in Odessa during the 1905 revolution, challenges perspectives of the time’s events by relaying the action through a child’s eyes. Reactions to the uproarious time become gentle because the youthful perspective of innocent, honest senses tempers the harsh world of events. Similarly, when a personal view of the past appears in his works of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Kataev challenges accepted facts from past times, stressing the personal and, perhaps, unreliable nature of the fictional rendering of the past by employing dreams and memories as his narrative devices. In these works the distance of time allows, potentially, for an objective view of past events, while the personal rendering of those events displays a subjective understanding of them.

One way to read such works as *Svjatoj kolodec*, *Trava zabven’ja*, and *Almaznyj moj venec* is to understand these memory-based creations as responses to impersonal treatments of the past, as responses to a collective history that avoids discussing troubles, uncertainties, delights, and securities that individuals face and enjoy. A goal of such a response is not to challenge the facts of the past, but to supplement them. Kataev’s later works stress the personal nature of these responses, for he mixes these treatments with the unavoidable physical and emotional repercussions of remembering. In those works he is attentive to various truisms associated with memory and remembering. He depicts memory as a personal privacy, an individual realm of freedom that is subject to wear, deformation, and point of view, but also that subjects its keeper to glimpses of stinging and cheerful times past. Characters summon from their memories, yet memories also appear as if of their own volition or in reply to a rousing call. Kataev emphasizes that there is not a standard memory of every event; memories jumble, lose bits, and take on others as time passes. He expects his readers to know these facts and appreciate that the characters that remember and dream in his stories can be subject to memories and difficulties of remembering. To underscore these facts Kataev makes the depiction of dreaming and remembering as important to the works as the topic of the dreams and remembrances. He draws atten-

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6 Kataev admitted that *Vremja, vperëd!* “is a free cinema-style montage, which you find also in *The Holy Well* [Svjatoj kolodec] and subsequent books” (Kataev 1984a, 97). Geoffrey Hosking described the approach as one “which used newsreel techniques to swoop from one scene to another, conveying an overall impression of great bustle and variety, but never really focusing on any single personality or incident” (Hosking 1983, 438–439).

7 On the personal nature of Kataev’s later writing, see Russell 1982, 177–179.
tion to this aspect of his formal approach by discussing its impulse in his later works.

In *Svjatoj kolodec* Kataev defines his “new” approach to literary creation, which he began in the early 1960s, as *mauvism*,

суть которой заключается в том, что так как в настоящее время все пишут очень хорошо, то нужно писать плохо, как можно хуже, и тогда на вас обратят внимание; конечно, научиться писать плохо не так-то легко, потому что приходится выдерживать адскую конкурентцию, но игра стоит свеч, и если вы действительно научитесь писать паршиво, хуже всех, то мировая популярность вам обеспечена.8 (Kataev 1983–1986:6, 220)

In its broadest understanding, for Kataev, *writing badly* (писать плохо) means writing in a manner other than that dictated by convention.9 This

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8 The reference is to Matisse’s *fauvism*. On *mauvism*, see especially Borden 1999 and Russell 1975. It is agreed, generally, that the appearance of Kataev’s *Svjatoj kolodec* (and of *mauvism*) marked the emergence of a “new” Kataev in Soviet literature. Russell illustrates how themes and devices that distinguished *Svjatoj kolodec* as a turning-point were already present in the earlier work *Malen’kaja železnaja dver v stene* (1964). See Russell 1981, 109–113. Borden underscores that, “[w]hile first unveiled in *The Holy Well*, the term ‘mauvism’ itself was coined by Kataev somewhat earlier, in reference not to his own, but to others’ art” (Borden 1999, 21). By “others’ art” Borden has in mind the work of such younger writers as Aksënov and Gladilin, whom Kataev was publishing in the journal *Junost*. Reactions to his *mauvist* writing were positive and negative, but there was consensus that this literature was separate from his previous work. This being said, consistencies, such as the lyrical language of his works and the use of the past as their setting, remained in Kataev’s writing. Russell distinguishes the “new” Kataev in Russell 1975 and Russell 1981, 109–110; Dodoyna Kiziria gives passing mention to the transition in Kiziria 1985, 647n2; N.N. Shneidman describes aspects of the “new” Kataev in Shneidman 1989, 62–74; and Ireneusz Szarycz notes the change by proposing links and the unity of the works of this transitional period in Szarycz 1989, 64. In Russian criticism, to name just a few studies, Z. Vatnikova-Prizel, in her work on Russian memoir literature refers to “some new, innovative varieties of autobiographical epopees”, when she speaks of Kataev’s works, as well as those of V. Solouchin, A. Kuznecov, and Ju. Oleśa (Vatnikova-Prizel 1978, 23); N. Krymova, although writing particularly on Kataev’s *Almaznyj moj venec*, explains that the appearance of *Svjatoj kolodec* “forced many to believe that a best known author can experience unexpected, unforeseen self-renewal” (Krymova 1979, 232); and Aleksandr Gladkov, referring to *Svjatoj kolodec* and *Trava zabvenja*, suggests that “[t]he world in which we live [...] had still nowhere in our literature been described as freshly and with such talent as in the last books of Kataev” (Gladkov 1986, 326).

9 See Borden 1999, especially 24–26 and 44–51, and Russell 1975, 367–369. “Writing badly” was not a new concern for Soviet writing. Russell notes that at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 Isaac Babel stated that, with the suggestion of “socialist realist”
point is made in other works in which words assigned to revered Russian writers suggest how a narrative should be presented. The thrust of these other writers’ comments – echoes of Kataev’s statements on mauvism – is that set or accepted forms should be ignored, that an effort should be made to avoid convention. In the short story “Kubik” (1969) the statement “Мне хочется писать без всякой формы, не согласуясь ни с какими литературными приемами. Но какая муха, какое невероятное страдание — литературное искусство!” (Kataev 1983–1986:6, 451–452) is attributed to Bunin. And, borrowing from Tolstoy’s diary, Kataev offers the following quote as part of a letter to his granddaughter in the collection of reminiscences Razbitaja žizn’ ili volšebnyj rog Oberona (1972):

«...Если будет время и силы по вечерам, то воспоминания без порядка, и как придет... [...] Это дневники 1904 года. Ты их, несомненно, когда-нибудь прочтешь. Очень советую. А вот из дневников 1893 года — еще более поразительно и бесстрашно:...

... «Искусство, говорят, не терпит посредственности. Оно еще не терпит сознательности». 
Это очень отвечает моим теперешним мыслям. Попробую заняться воспоминаниями именно так, как советует Толстой: без порядка, а как придет, как вспомнится, не забывая при этом, что искусство не терпит сознательности.» (Kataev 1983–1986:8, 15–16)

Guidelines for art, the Party and government had “taken away only one right – the right to write badly” (Russell 1981, 115). Kataev’s tone shared much with Babel’s. Babel completed his speech (according to transcripts) as follows:

Вслед за Горьким мне хочется сказать, что на нашем знамени должны быть написаны слова Соболева, что все нам дано партией и правительством и отнять только одно право — плохо писать.

Товарищи, не будем скрывать. Это было очень важное право, и отнимают у нас не мало (cmex). Это была привилегия, которой мы широко пользовались.

Так вот, товарищи, давайте на писательском съезде отдалим эту привилегию, и да поможет нам бог! Впрочем бога нет, сами себе поможем (аплодисменты). (Первый всесоюзный съезд, 280)

For a non-Soviet view on writing badly, see Northrop Frye’s interpretation of how Dickens would often write badly to bring a character completely to life (Frye 1983, 37).

See also Richard Borden’s examination of how Kataev similarly explored time in Svjatoj kolodec, Trava zabven’ja, and Almaznyj moj venec (Borden 1987, 258–261). Kataev voiced...
Bunin’s “не согласуюсь” and Kataev’s “не забывая” imply the writers’ desires not to write conventionally. They are convinced of the need not to abide to usual forms, which, as Kataev’s narrator acknowledges, means not with an eye to chronological order. Thus, writing badly – not writing conventionally – is closely connected with efforts to overcome historical and linear time, signs of which Kataev noticed also in Dostoevskij’s writing.

In Almaznyj moj venec the narrator attributes a statement on time to Dostoevskij: “Время не имеет надо мной власти хотя бы потому, что его не существует, как утверждал «архивный» Достоевский” (Kataev 1983–1986:7, 12). In a 1984 Pravda article Kataev seems to be building on the words attributed to Dostoevskij when he offers a similar remark: “Впрочем, воспоминания одолевают меня довольно часто, воспоминания — это вид путешествия во времени, а я считаю себя опытным путешественником. Время не имеет надо мной власти” (Kataev 1984b, 3). There may be a few ways to interpret this last statement. The one I want to consider here is that Kataev exhibits control over time by writing about the past, blending fact with fiction and subsequently recalling and creating something personal and original. By determining the direction of time and explaining the minimal importance of such movement, Kataev imposes some control over its depiction and does not leave the fictional reality open to criticism for being factually inaccurate. He emphasizes the equivalent relevance that personal creation has with historical fact in Svjatoj kolodec, when the narrator raises the point that distinctions between a dispassionate factual account of the past and a subjec-

these feelings in an interview published in the literary journal Voprosy literature the year before Razbitaja žizn’ was published.
tive personal interpretation of events, between reality and dream, and even between memory and dream – between a triggered conscious reaction and an unconscious recovery to an imaginary world – are often blurred:

Собственно говоря, все это мне вовсе не снялось, а было на самом деле, но так мучительно давно, что теперь предстало передо мной в форме давнего, время от времени повторяющегося сновидения, которое увлекло меня вместе с розовым винным паром (и, разумеется, под месяцем поджарым) в ту самую легендарную ковровую столицу, любимую провинцию тетарха. И то, что раньше не было вполне сном, а скорее воспоминанием, теперь уже превратилось в подлинный сон, удивительный своим сходством с действительностью. (Kataev 1983–1986:6, 159)

To sum up briefly, the effort to offer something formally “new” equips Kataev with the means to provide a “truthful”, personal treatment of the past. For Kataev, “writing badly” – ignoring set or accepted forms, particularly the need to write according to chronological order – is a way to overcome historical time. By the late 1970s Kataev had availed himself of these means repeatedly, but he was still to use them to portray a sense of closed time, one that denies the past, dictates the present, and organizes for the future without regard for individual perspectives. He did this in “Uže napisan Verter”, couching among dreams the clash of Soviet revolutionaries with non-revolutionaries.

“Uže napisan Verter” is set during the Civil War in Odessa. The dream of the narrator (who seems to be Kataev) along with his few waking moments on a “нормальное, солнечное переделкинское утро” (UNV, 156) create the principal narration. It relates the life of a young man Dima, who is caught up in the revolutionary fervor of the Civil War. Curiosity draws him to the activities and by chance to a meeting of counter-revolutionaries. He entrusts his friendship and affection to a young revolutionary, Inga, who, thinking he is opposed to the spirit of the Revolution, spies on him and reports him to the Cheka. One day at lunch two men arrive and take Dima away, while Inga and Dima’s colleagues sit idly to the side.

Dima’s father fled from Odessa to the east, but his mother, Larisa Germanovna, is still nearby. By chance she learns of Dima’s arrest. She approaches an old friend, Los, who is in position of authority, to arrange Dima’s release. He is able to have Dima freed. The execution is arranged so that the
firing squad misfires and Dima flees. His return to Inga is met by her surprise, because, she reasons, if he is free, there is a counter-revolutionary among them. Unsettled by Inga’s priorities, Dima returns to his mother’s home. He finds that she has taken her life. In the newspapers posted through the city Dima’s name had been placed on the list of those executed. Assuming her son had been killed, Larisa Germanovna felt no reason to live. Uncertain of his future, Dima leaves the country with a neighboring doctor, who, in preparation for the worst, had planned an escape from the new Soviet state. Inga and three others are accused of conspiracy and, because Dima was allowed to go free, are sentenced to death. In the west Dima paints stage sets. During the Second World War he returns to the Soviet Union, is captured as the enemy, and is sent to a northern camp. It is from the camp that the older Dima dreams back to his earlier life, creating a narrative of two dreams: the older Dima dreams from within the dream of the narrator, who is at Peredelkino.

The immediate reference for this story, the title, is taken from Pasternak’s verse. The phrase “Уже написан Вертеп” is from the final quatrain of the ninth part of the “Разрыв” cycle in the collection Temy i variacii, which Pasternak completed in 1918.

Рояль дрожащий пену с губ оближет.  
Тебя сорвет, подкосит этот бред.  
Ты скажешь: милый! — Нет, — вскричу я, — нет!  
При музыке?! — Но можно ли быть ближе,  

Чем в полуцаре, аккорды, как дневник,  
Меч в камины комплектами, погадно?  
О, пониманье дивное, кивни,  
Кивни, и изумишься! — ты свободна.  

Я не держу. Иди, благотвори.  
Ступай к другим. Уже написан Вертеп,  
А в наши дни и воздух пахнет смертью:  
Открыть окно, что жилы отворить. (Pasternak 1961, 82)

Completed approximately at the same time in which Kataev’s story is set, the poem recalls the terror of that time. Simultaneously, Pasternak creates a picture of thwarted love, which includes the lyric voice’s claim that this thwarting
will not lead him to suicide, as it did Goethe’s hero (“Уже написан Вертер”), and thus Pasternak brings together public history and personal history.\footnote{Foremost Pasternak scholar, Christopher Barnes, referring to the “Razryv” cycle particularly but also to other works by Pasternak that were published in 1918, explains that “the motifs of death and suicide in Pasternak’s evocation of frustrated love were a partly objective reflection of current realities. These included not just the afflictions of cold, hunger and disease, but also those of political terror and coercion” (Barnes 1989, 250).}

Indeed, the mixing of the public and private might allow us to read the lines “Иди, благотвори, / Ступай к другим” as the lyric voice’s sincere wish that his lover feel free to move on to another political camp or to other lovers. Read thus, Pasternak’s verse offers an image of clear-headed perseverance in a time of personal and political upheaval. Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a more readily recognizable connection to Kataev’s story, provides a narration often spaced by silence. Like “Уже написан Вертер”, it lacks unity of locale and, despite the unidirectional, epistolary form provided by Werther’s writing, it is directed by an omniscient narrator. In addition, as Robert Borden notes, Goethe’s Werther shares traits with Kataev’s Dima: they are “dilettantish painters from well-to-do families”, “incurable romantics”, sons to “anxious” mothers, and sons who abandon their mothers for another woman’s love, an abandonment which leads the mothers to death (Borden 1999, 87). Moreover, Goethe’s and Kataev’s works portray characters that are overcome by events in the present moment to such an extent that they do not appreciate the potential resources and clarity that their past might provide them in the present. Clearly, these references, topics, and devices in Pasternak’s and Goethe’s works are present in “Уже написан Вертер”, and in choosing his title Kataev underscores these points of connection and the collective nature of these points for artists and individuals.

The opening of “Уже написан Вертер” introduces the narrator and the sleeper and suggests the movement of the sleeper from a familiar place to an uncertain and isolating one. It raises such topics as control of one’s actions, security and happiness that familiarity can provide, and one’s sense of awareness in sleep and wakefulness, and it leads the reader into the subconscious thought process of the dreamer.

Убегают рельсы назад и поезд увозит его в обратном направлении, не туда, куда бы ему хотелось, а туда, где его ждет неизвестность, одиночество, уничтожение, — всё дальше, и дальше, и дальше.
Thus Kataev initiates the dream, bringing the reader into direct contact with the sleeping man. The process is like a spiral (UNV, 123), an image of independent spinning that unpredictably picks up fragments of time from every rotation through Dima’s past and that creates the free association narrative. Although likeness of detail hints at the probable location of fragments, only as the last few are joined is the full picture clear. Unlike in other Kataev stories with sleeper narrators, such as *Svjatoj kolodec* or “Spjaščij”, in which hints to the links of the construction of the past exist, in “Uže napisan Verter” the location of fragments of time only becomes clear as the reader’s time progresses and the entire picture fits together. This device reveals a shift more generally in the lyric nature of Kataev’s later writing, where, Ireneusz Szarycz proposes, association, mood, and feelings tend to motivate the narrative.12 “Uže napisan Verter” lacks that motivation; rather, there is a scattered presentation of varied pieces of time.

Kataev arrests irrational, unmeditated, incongruous actions of the dreamers and dreams and presents them so the reader can also feel the dream patterns. This focusing has two obvious results: each detached segment draws closer scrutiny from the reader than if every event was a continuation of a previous scene; and, the reader senses that the dream captures the main characters – that the dream of the past controls the story. The story’s action not only speaks of what it is to have a past, but comments on the active efforts of characters to acknowledge this previous time and interact with memory.

12 Up to the publication of *Almaznyj moj venec* in 1978, the lyric nature of Kataev’s prose, Ireneusz Szarycz points out, projects a “foreground [...] taken over by association, mood, feelings, lack of continuity in the development of thought, fantasy, and imagination” (Szarycz 1989, 110).
Indeed, the scenario of a character interacting with memory occurs repeatedly in the story, defining the character as well as his political attitude.

If we define the characters of “Uže napisan Verter” according to how they rely on the past, we can divide them into three groups: those who acknowledge the past, those who try to deny its influence on their lives, and a third, ambivalent central group of characters who do not hesitate to share the convictions of either more directed group. The hero Dima belongs in the third group. He does not deny his personal past to influence his actions, but also he is not averse to partaking in the excitement and romanticism of the revolution. That present removes him from his past life: “Это было так ново, что он и сам почувствовал себя не только обновленным, но как бы вторично рожденным. [...] Он не подумал, что оставляет мать одну” (UNV, 144).

Yet when no longer simply an onlooker to the turmoil, but faced with the reality of events around him, he finds that his proximity to death instigates a need in him to find sanctuary in a familiar life, and he thinks of the past. As in the famous Proustian, madeleine-induced flashback, in Kataev’s story the smell from a pillow case reveals Dima’s mother to his consciousness: the pillow case awakens a memory and reveals a past, as if lifting a blindfold from Dima’s eyes.

От подушки, которую он прижимал к себе, от ее наволочки еще пахло колдкрюмом, которым Лазарева смазывала себе на ночь лицо. Он увидел вышитую гладью семейную метку и только тогда вспомнил, что у него есть мать, которая, наверное, беспокоится. Он очень ее любил, но она выпала из его памяти. (UNV, 149)

13 In other works Kataev also created three “types” of characters. Often a character with a vague or all-accepting position, undefined because of a lack of commitment, is surrounded by characters with a particular devotion to ideals. This is a theme that Kataev brought to the fore in Trava zabven’ja. There, one reads of the choice of Bunin, who clings to pre-Revolutionary Russia, to leave the Soviet state, the decision of Majakovskij, who accepts and works for the Revolution, to take his own life, and the preference of Kataev, who felt for both men, to stay in the Soviet Union. The relevance of the theme of “choices” in Trava zabven’ja is discussed by Dodona Kiziria (Kiziria 1985). For similar character divisions, see also the distinctions between the three older brothers – the uncles and fathers of the main characters – in “Suchoj liman” (1986). Nikolaj devoutly lives by traditional beliefs, extolling these feelings passively through his own example. Jakov, with similar heartfelt devotion, must take action to be satisfied with his life (and dies because of his efforts). Nikanor accepts all that is available to him from both the material and the spiritual world without providing commitment to one over the other.

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This awakened realization leads Dima from the revolutionary activities back to his mother, to his personal life and personal past.

Kataev makes clear, though, that memory is an indiscriminate provider and exploiter. It brings pleasure and pain and taxes the emotional and spiritual defences one tries to keep raised in the face of pangs from the past and the present. Memory allows the older Dima the luxury of still being able to picture his family, but causes sadness in reaffirming their suffering. He enjoys an escape from the present, but also must endure the anguish of the past. His remembrances are not only an example of what memory can tolerate, but his past is what opens a second life for him. It permits him to paint the sets, to arrange plays in the camp, and, to some extent, to recapture parts of his being. In many ways his past is the foundation for his life because it enables him to escape the present or to alter the present to a more endurable state. He is able to reach inside his self to seek refuge. Differently from his mother, who was unable to endure the demands of the time solely with memories, remembrances provide Dima with what he needs to survive the formidable present.

Not only Dima receives such signals. Memory delivers indiscriminately. A noteworthy example of the strength of the link between event and provoking agent appears when the stalwart revolutionary Inga succumbs, albeit slightly, to the unanticipated force of memory. After Dima had been taken away by the Cheka agents, Inga is walking along a street, preoccupied with her assumption that Dima is most likely dead and occasionally reminded of what they did together, when she hears a sound:

Где-то с шумом проехал грузовик, заставляя дрожать стекла окон. Она представила, что это везут за город мертвые тела, покрытые брезентом, из-под которого торчит белое колено, может быть даже его колено.

Она прислонилась к черствому стволу акации и укусила потрескавшуюся кору.

Она оплакивала свою погибшую любовь, оплакивала своего Митю, еще не зная, что он жив, и ее сознание мутилось, угасло. (UNV, 153)

That this brutal image of a truck hauling bodies appears in her mind without causing any immediate response defines further her character: she knows what such trucks are doing in this revolutionary time. Despite this initial awareness, she seems sympathetic toward Dima. However, this feeling appears only to
evolve from her loss, not from Dima’s or from that of any other individual who may care for him. Hers is a personal sadness. Combining her present state with the chain of sounds, the awareness of a once enjoyed sensation comes rushing into her memory and jolts her body, awakening a section of her soul, so far concealed to the reader and, perhaps, to herself. A feeling enters Inga’s consciousness without voluntary effort. Until stirred by the right impetus it rests in her mind untapped. The memory is not appalling to her. She accepts it and mourns her loss as something natural. There is a suggestion here that deep in her memory are many experiences, perhaps wonderful and terrible, that can be obtained by the proper combination of observation (by any of the senses) and association, and that will appear regardless of her active efforts to call or quash them. Not only unpredictable or independent, memory is applicable and available. Kataev’s characters not only are visited by involuntary memory, but also make conscious efforts to retrieve or to deny the past. Characters are defined not simply by their individual past, but by how they employ or ignore their past. Their actions reveal how characters utilize memory to evaluate situations, and how memory stimulates other feelings and recollections. Thus, memory acts to create each personality in the story.

Travazabven’ja had openly compared the choices of Bunin, Majakovskij, and Kataev and, thus, their different feelings concerning the changes brought about in Russia. “Uže napisan Verter” makes a subtler issue out of whether an individual should guard the “old” Russia and stay with his family or support the new state by joining the revolutionary activities and forgetting the past. Kataev emphasizes this image by revealing Dima as being pulled between two women, between his mother and Inga. In “Uže napisan Verter” situations in which characters are free to use memory or to exhibit their personality are contrasted with settings in which such expression is denied or is isolated. Depictions of revolutionary change and war in the story suggest that part of the process of revolution involves taking away an individual’s past to weaken his spirit. Kataev states the options bluntly in “Uže napisan Verter”: if a personal part of a character’s being, his past, is not negated in favor of

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15 “Involuntary memory” is the description given to unanticipated recollections or memories that appear without conscious effort to retrieve them. When using this term, I follow the lead of Esther Salaman, who applies it widely in Salaman 1970.
the general attitude of the present and the future, or more simply, in favor of the Revolution, the character is executed. The punishment for maintaining a memory is death. Outside the execution garage hang braids of hair from the shaven heads of the accused. A guard exclaims with pointed accuracy: “Отрезанные косы — это урожай реформы” (UNV, 124). Unable to convert the inner being, the revolutionaries claim the external shell. Attempts are made to change individuals by removing personal views of the past, and, in addition, by altering the surroundings. Dima notices that the city has changed: “Его поразила вид торгового города, лишенного своей торговой души: вывесок, витрин, банков, меняющихся контор, оголенного, без фланкирующей публики на тенистых улицах и бульварах. В своей целомудренной обнаженности город показался ему новым и прекрасным” (UNV, 143). The environment is made to conform, to be sterile, and to lack creativity. There is not room for innovation, personality, or past influences.

Characters who represent the extremes that surround Dima – on one hand, those devoted to the Revolution and, therefore, who rid themselves of the past or treat it as negative, and, on the other, those who acknowledge the past as being vital for the present – die as a result of their efforts to fulfill their ambitions. An example of this parallel appears when Kataev compares the separate manners in which two characters apply a common moment of the past. Kataev provides the link for the reader by having the recollections of both characters include a painting, “The Feast in the Gardens of Gamil’kar” (“Pir v sadach Gamil’kara”). Both Los and the Cheka agent who interrogates Dima had been to Dima’s home years before, perhaps on the same day, and saw the painting hanging in the home of Dima’s parents. At that time Los was a writer and the agent was a painter working on the family’s terrace to earn money to continue art school. These memories produce opposite results in Los and the young agent when the characters are confronted with Dima or his mother in the present – that is, when they revive the past to determine their actions in the present.

To the interrogator the past is negative. In his ideologically conditioned view, the Revolution places hope in the present and the future. But there is more to the agent’s dissatisfaction with the past. The agent thinks back to when he and Dima were studying at the art school. In the agent’s opinion, Dima had less talent and desire than he did, yet was able to continue his efforts at art school because he had a rich father (UNV, 133), a fact the eventual agent learned while working for the man. The agent, trying to fulfill a dream,
was denied this opportunity because he lacked financial means. The agent cannot see past these “injustices” and, regardless of Dima’s past or present innocence, he decides Dima’s fate based on the seeming “guilt” of the past. In contrast to this reaction, Los’s memory of the same place provides incentive for him to assist Dima. He was friends with Dima’s parents. If not for the connection, Larisa Germanovna would not have been able to free Dima. For Los, physical existence is in the present, but real life is in the past. His freedom to write and to act in a manner that would reflect his self has been removed in the present, and, as it is for the older Dima in the camp, life is fuller when he is reliving the past. His past attachment is sufficient reason for him to act for Dima. A common place in the past, viewed differently through personal understandings of that time, settles Dima’s fate and defines two separate beings. Yet both men are executed by the end of the story and the character who remains alive is the middle man, Dima.

Kataev is careful not to make excessive claims for the power of memory. A different appreciation of memory emerges from the actions of Larisa Germanovna. For her, memory is not the special part of her existence that creates a life worth living. The power to remember is not enough to overcome life’s difficulties. She lives only in the present. When opportunity for serving is no more – when she believes her son to be dead – her life force is removed, and she destroys the remaining physical shell.

These considerations of memory seem to have become significant for Kataev in the 1980s. Kataev employs similar perspectives on time in “Spjaščij”, a short story with an inner tie to “Uže napisan Verter”. Unlike “Uže napisan

16 Such a suggestion may have spawned the disclaimer at the beginning of the story. One questions whether Kataev is not also suggesting that the xenophobic state had given too much flexibility to the Cheka and those working for it by allowing the organization, to borrow from Richard Pipes, to “deal with whomever it chose to define as ‘counter-revolutionaries’” (Pipes 1977, 317).

17 For brief comments on the relationship between the intelligentsia and the Revolution in Kataev’s work, see Russell 1982, 188.

18 This connection is made most obviously in a quote near the end of “Uže napisan Verter” where the narrator brings the reader into his deliberation over a title for the story. He appraises the title “Spjaščij”: Но что же это, Боже мой? Как назвать? Гараж? Не годится. Рельсы? Не годится. Роман сновидения? Нет, нет, что-то другое. Спящий? Но ведь есть же какое-то название. Оно где-то рядом, как слово, выпавшее из разрушающейся памяти. Чем ближе к нему подходишь, тем неотрываемее оно удерживается ... «Уже написан Вертеп ...». (UNV, 153; my emphasis – M.C.)

For more on Kataev’s use of an “open authorial position”, see Russell 1982, 186–187.
Verter”, “Spjaščij” does not piece together a past time with various glimpses; this story is more a single section of time. “Spjaščij” is about habitual and spontaneous actions, and in it there is nothing that resembles a premeditated directive based on past experience. It is set during World War I while Odessa was occupied by the Austrian army. The story focuses on a group of young people who spend their days together on a yacht, sailing without direction or intent. Apart from this blissful time, an intrigue takes place when the yacht has docked. Two characters, transient workers on the boat, try to rob a jewelry store. They are killed during the effort. That they do not return does not concern the others. Life continues as before.

By comparing the young people on the boat with each other, in light of problems affecting the people of Odessa, Kataev presents a picture of passive acceptance of the present time. Characters share space happily until they attempt to reach outside their entitlement. In this case the commodity is that specific time in which they all live. Trying to satisfy their desires with the robbery, the two characters seem bound to fail. Their attempt to go beyond the timelessness of the boating crowd and to control time is not conducive to the environment that surrounds them. They forgo their option to live for the present while the other characters eschew previous and future times. However, Kataev’s aim with regard to this happiness is not to stress the past or its exclusion in the lives at this time. Rather, it is to show a carefree stage of personal development and to note a method of self-preservation or simple existence, whether adopted consciously or not, during a difficult historical time. This message informs Dima’s characterization, too. In “Uže napisan Verter” a chief message is that acknowledging the past and relying on memory, rather than denying its influence, is positive, even in uncertain times. Yet the survival of Dima (and the contentment of the young people in “Spjaščij”) confirms that Kataev appreciated the possible need to shelve personality to survive the present.

In the beginning of this paper I suggested that “Uže napisan Verter” cannot be seen as a pivotal break from Kataev’s earlier writing because it shares themes and devices with many earlier works. However, it might be read as a stage in the final cycle of Kataev’s writing that started in the early 1960s. Kataev was eighty-three when writing “Uže napisan Verter”, and I do not

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19 Russell suggests that, “[t]aken as a cycle, his [Kataev’s] works since 1966 can be seen as a Proustian search for time past – the recreation in fragments, by means of memory and imagination, of the author’s unique life” (Russell 1982, 178).
think it outrageous to suggest that, consciously, he was completing a large image with his later writing.\footnote{Shneidman proposes that Kataev’s last story, “Suchoj liman”, “could also be read as a premonition of his own impending death” (Shneidman 1989, 73). Richard Borden submits that this awareness may have been present in Kataev at an earlier date: “When his career made its dramatic shift to Mauvism in the mid 1960s, Valentin Kataev at age sixty-seven was in poor health and considered himself an old man facing a not distant death. He had begun an early stock-taking and had turned his focus exclusively on the past” (Borden 1987, 258).}

Already in \textit{Trava zabven\’ ja} that novel’s narrator appears to hint at the future protagonist of “Uže napisan Verter”, a young amateur painter whose name is close to “Dima”, and in this way to suggest a bigger plan or common goal of Kataev’s later works. The narrator recounts:


That Kataev had a big project in mind receives support from the claim of Boris Galanov, Kataev’s most recent biographer. Kataev, Galanov registers, liked to say: “Было бы время, нашли бы силы, прожил бы до ста пятидесяти и еще чуточку — собрал бы все, что написал, и объединил в одну большую книгу” (Galanov 1989, 3). In addition, if we consider \textit{Svjatoj kolodec} (\textit{The Holy Well}) as marking the commencement of this new period and “Suchoj liman” (“The Dry Reservoir”), Kataev’s last story, published in 1986, as denoting its conclusion, the titles of the works adequately support the likelihood of this being an opened and closed cycle. The latest stories, maybe because of a conscious plan, represent the concluding notes to a larger work that considers time, memory, and the past. In particular, that larger work regards how characters interact with the past as a force, and their responses portray stances on the importance of the past, memory, and remembering. “Uže napisan Verter” is a noteworthy, obvious example of this change in Kataev’s work. Within the collection of his fiction that follows from \textit{Svjatoj kolodec} it might be argued that the mask of a dreaming narrator had been a medium for Kataev’s more venturesome experimentation: \textit{Svjatoj kolodec} required rewriting in light of
“cryptic references” to Stalin and “Уže нapisan Verter” was prefaced and, seemingly, blocked by its editors. This noticed push of Kataev’s efforts seems to mark breaks in his work, but, in the latter case, not a break that initiates a completely new direction in Kataev’s writing.

When we look at the sleeper story “Уže нapisan Verter” from its simplest levels – the authorial, the narrative, and the action of the characters – we see that Kataev takes his control and uses it to muddle the narrative and to challenge the characters to choose between following their personal times or listening to others who propose to control time. There is a restless texture to the work, accentuated by a dream narration that independently creates its own path rather than follow one dictated by time or inspired reflection. This effect is highlighted, and even preoccupied, by character indecision within the dream, indecision between being independent and battling time or travelling with time and accommodating the enforced spirit of the moment. Yet it was not formal or ideological aspects of the story that drew immediate attention to it. Rather, the choice to play out these ideas critically among revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries seemed to earn the story attention most readily.

References

21 Robert Russell explains that the manuscript of Святоj колодец was first forwarded to the journal Moskva. Publication was stopped at the last minute due to “many cryptic references to Stalin and to the servility of writers and others in the Stalin era”. Following modification the novel appeared in Novyj mir in 1966. See Russell 1981, 117–118.