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## «There is Nothing There».Dmitrii Danilov's Travel Writing and the Lure of the Russian Provinces

Boele, O.F.

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«There is Nothing There». Dmitrii Danilov's  
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Otto Boele

University of Leiden

**Abstract** – Drawing on Michel de Certeau's seminal study *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the author argues that Dmitrii Danilov's travel writing (*Twenty Cities*, 2007-2009) reimagines Russia's symbolic geography by destabilizing the traditional opposition centre – periphery. Rather than depicting the provincial world as either an absurd and horrid world, or as a repository of 'true Russianness', Danilov provides a 'decentred' perspective on the provinces that asserts the uniqueness of each city he visits. The novel *Description of a City* (2012), however, resurrects the more traditional view of the provinces as a world of boredom and cultural lack. To analyse this development the article looks at the central figure of the sluggish traveller-narrator, the employment of 'camera-eye narration' and other, mainly linguistic, devices that reaffirm the notion of the provincial city's 'namelessness' as one of its most defining characteristics.

**Keywords** – Dmitrii Danilov, Russian Literature; Russian Provinces; Travelogue and Travel Writing; Michel de Certeau.

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# «There is Nothing There». Dmitrii Danilov's Travel Writing and the Lure of the Russian Provinces

Otto Boele  
University of Leiden

## 1. Introduction

In the winter of 2008 writer and journalist Dmitrii Danilov visited Petushki,<sup>1</sup> a sleepy town some hundred miles from his native Moscow, as part of a larger project that required extensive travel across the Slavic triangle (Russia, Ukraine and Belarus). As always when going to a new city, Danilov prepared himself for Petushki “with kindness” and “expecting not to be disappointed.” In his report, originally published in the journal *Russian Life* (*Ruskaia zhizn'*), he described his disposition as follows:

I love the Russian provinces. I love these charmingly subsiding small Russian towns. Even five-storied buildings I love. To live in them is horrible, but there is something meek and ascetically beautiful in the way they look. I am not a fan of order and regularity, of neatly mown lawns and shampoo-washed sidewalks. A shabby, grey concrete façade does not repel me, the sight of a cigarette butt thrown past a trash can or a beer can lying on the road does not give me a fit of righteous civilizational rage. I understand it all, accept it, and, as I said, I love it. (“Led i ochag”)

Even if Danilov waxes lyrical in this passage, every word in it bespeaks his position as an outsider to the world of the provinces. To objectify the Russian hinterland in such a homogenizing way is a semiotic reflex typical of any observer who closely identifies with one of Russia's cultural capitals. Just like the Orient, the Russian “provinces” are a cultural construct, a place that exists not so much in reality, as on the mental map of the capital dweller (Lounsbury). In the words of Vladimir Abashev: «the ‘provinces’ – that is the capital’s word on the peripheral regions, it’s the gaze (and a directing gesture) from the centre and above» (Abashev).

Students of Russian literature in particular will recognize the underlying binaries of Danilov's reflections and the almost martyr-like imagery with which the provinces are humanized («meek and ascetically beautiful»). Celebrating organic chaos over stifling orderliness, dustiness over gloss, and meekness over vanity, Danilov's paean to the provinces owes a considerable debt to Russian nature poetry in which the unassuming qualities of the Russian scenery are often advanced to suggest the forbearance and inner glory of the common folk (Ely 2002).<sup>2</sup> Although no such claims are made here and Danilov seems to be aware of the difference between the visual poignancy of a crumbling apartment building and its actual living conditions, the idealization of the provinces, a tendency characteristic of post-Soviet mass culture (Parts 517; Spivak), seems unmistakably at work.

In the very next paragraph, however, the tone suddenly changes and Danilov conjures up

<sup>1</sup> The town was immortalized by Venedikt Yerofeev in his cult novel *Moscow – Petuski*.

<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Tiutchev's poem *These poor villages, this meager nature...* is the first poem that comes to mind, but many more examples can be found in the work of, amongst others, Semyon Nadson, Sergei Yesenin and Nikolai Rubtsov.

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a world that fails to cohere as an object of aesthetic contemplation. Once he has arrived in Petushki, he finds himself fumbling for words in an attempt to convey his bewildering impressions:

But here I shivered. Without exaggeration the town looked unsightly (*bezobrazno*). In the literal sense of that word – it offered no sight whatsoever, no complete picture (*tsel'naiu kartina*), only a selection of randomly placed objects. It's not that the picture struck me with some special wretchedness. No, it was an ordinary town, the usual houses and shops, nice cars driving in the streets [...]. Everything in itself was quite bearable, but the general picture was terribly bland and, yes, unsightly. There's no other word for it. ("Led i ochag")

The 'unsightliness' of the average provincial town is, of course, an even bigger cliché than the endearing qualities Danilov identified earlier. Here too we detect the centre's gaze conferring meaning on the Russian periphery, or rather establishing its utter meaninglessness. In this description Danilov's Petushki comes close to the horrid and absurd world described by nineteenth-century authors such as Gogol, Chekhov and Saltykov-Shchedrin (Lounsbury). Yet having pointed out the existence of these somewhat hackneyed extremes, I would like to shift the focus to a less traditional aspect of Danilov's travel writing that sets it apart from the either / or treatment we usually find in pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet accounts of the provinces. That aspect is Danilov's penchant for seemingly unremarkable places and his attempt to grasp their *genius loci*. By immersing himself in the local atmosphere and engaging in some of the activities of the local population (going to local hockey or football matches, riding the bus to a city's outskirts), in short by 'going provincial', he tries to develop a feeling for the place that allows him to confront it on its own terms and cast off the 'capital's gaze'.

This method may seem a distant echo of the self-colonizing discourse deployed by nineteenth-century intellectuals who studied the common people (*narod*) as an exotic species and tended to idealize them (Etkind), but Danilov is primarily interested in places, not people, and despite his professed love for the provinces, the tone of his writing is usually quite detached or mildly ironic. At times his preference for unremarkable, outright ugly and polluted cities borders on what is popularly known as 'dark tourism', a practice that specializes in places associated with massacre and disasters (Lennon and Foley 11-12). Yet this label too does not accurately convey Danilov's 'provincial' experience which is dominated by the mundane rather than the horrific.

Danilov's travel writing, I argue, is an idiosyncratic form of documentary prose in which Moscow as the author's obvious frame of reference gets decentred, while cities such as Bryansk, Noril'sk or Murmansk are perceived as discrete, autonomous worlds that can be explored and appropriated at will. Both the choice of the cities and Danilov's exploration of them can best be understood as 'tactics' to use Michel de Certeau's terminology, that is, as a highly individual and creative act that shuns «[taking] paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory» (98). Tactics is what we do when we are confronted with some visually or intellectually articulated power structure (a new neighbourhood designed from scratch, a novel, a recipe) that we somehow try to make our 'own' (as city dwellers, readers, or amateur cooks). To stick with the urban environment: we all engage in tactics in the sense that we 'make do', seize opportunities the environment offers (making detours, taking short-cuts) and thereby challenge the geometrical space of city planners and architects. 'Poaching' and using 'ruses' (Certeau's favourite metaphors) are inherent in everyday activities such as walking, reading and speaking by which we assert ourselves as creative individuals. Inevitably, this also applies to Danilov, but his explicitly stated preference for 'strange' cities makes his project almost carnivalesque subverting existing taxonomies of 'interesting' places and their standard scenic routes. Like Certeau's pedestrian, Danilov composes «long poem[s] of walking» (Certeau 101) that partly follow the spatial organization of the city and partly deviate from it.

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Especially by going to sites «where there is nothing to see» (the usual reaction he receives from perplexed locals), he creates his own affective route that annuls the more traditional dichotomies associated with centre and periphery. The purpose of the present paper is to demonstrate that on top of the two more or less traditional forms of representation – the provinces as hell or as a repository of true Russianness – Danilov creates a third way of showing ‘non-capital space’ by stripping it of its ‘literariness’. Even if some of the cliché’s resurface now and then, as, for instance, in the Petushki passages quoted earlier, by and large Danilov’s travel writing deconstructs the cultural myth of the Russian provinces by highlighting ‘unworthy’ sites and objects, and forcing us to look anew at non-capital space.

In the following discussion I draw on the prose collection *Twenty Cities (Dvadsat’ gorodov)*<sup>3</sup> which consists of nineteen sketches published in *Russian Life* between 2007 and 2009 when the journal ceased to exist. In addition I examine Danilov’s novel *Description of a City*, which dovetails with the earlier sketches, particularly with the one on Bryansk, but is arguably more traditional in that it treats its subject (‘some unknown city’) as a pars pro toto for Russia as a whole (Lounsbury 23). If the prose collection is presented as a form of ‘alternative local studies’<sup>4</sup> (*alternativnoe kraevedenie*) (*Dvadsat’ gorodov*, 8-9) an inquiry into the life of cities that tourists tend to ignore, then the novel is more like an absurdist travelogue that features an uncommon traveller-narrator, uses linguistic play to conjure up the world of the provinces and mocks the practice of the literary pilgrimage. In either case Danilov introduces the reader to a world that is both familiar and strange, stagnant and vibrant, an industrial powerhouse partly in shambles, partly resurrected, a world that patiently waits to be discovered by a first-time visitor going provincial.

## 2. *Twenty Cities*: Destabilizing Centre and Periphery

While admitting that he is not a professional *kraeved* (a historian specializing in local history), in the preface to *Twenty Cities* Danilov does use the term ‘alternative local studies’ (*alternativnoe kraevedenie*) to characterize the ‘discipline’ in which he is working. Given his own positionality this self-invented label seems peculiar. *Kraevedenie*, after all, is not just the interdisciplinary study of local history and lore, of the natural environment and economic development of a specific locality; it is most commonly practiced by individuals, both professionals and amateurs, who strongly identify with the region they study. As Emily Johnson, the author of a seminal study on the subject, reminds us: «It is highly unusual for kraevedy to write about places to which they have no clear personal connection» (4). The notion that practitioners of *kraevedenie* perceive their object of study as ‘self’ rather than as ‘other’ is also borne out by Victoria Donovan’s observation that the revival of the discipline during the Thaw, encouraged by the authorities in order to regain the population’s trust, stimulated «feelings of regional specificity» and «manifestations of local patriotism» (465). *Kraevedenie* can therefore be defined as an ‘identity discipline’ (Johnson 5) which would hardly exist without the involvement of local communities.

All of this does not apply to Danilov who has always lived in Moscow. Moreover, the point of going to Tambov or Cherepovets is exactly that he has never visited these cities before. But apart from being a complete stranger to his subject, Danilov’s ‘methods’ make him even less

<sup>3</sup> References to the individual sketches can be found in the bibliography including the link to the archive of *Russian Life. Twenty Cities*, the collected edition (with Danilov’s preface and an afterword by Oleg Kashin), can be downloaded as a PDF from Danilov’s personal site ([www.ddanilov.ru](http://www.ddanilov.ru)).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Local studies’ is my *ad hoc* translation. Like Emily Johnson (2006, 4-5), I will stick to the Russian term *kraevedenie* for lack of a proper English word.

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of a *kraeved*, so superficially does he plan his visits, so unsystematically does he explore the cities he writes about. Historical information is provided only sparingly, almost reluctantly, and those bits of local history that do get shared with the reader appear to be gathered in an almost deliberately haphazard way. Characteristically, his local informants are usually taxi drivers who simply start talking to him without Danilov having to prompt them.

Sometimes Danilov even seems to revel in his own amateurism and lack of thoroughness as, for example, when he describes his preparations for a visit to the city of Novomoskovsk:

At first, all I knew about the city was that it sported a gigantic chemical complex. Later, in addition to this single fact, another piece of information presented itself. I learned that the city was founded in 1929. [...] And then suddenly and accidentally I found out on the internet that the city's most commonly used means of transport is a local train (*elektrichka*) that runs on a single track; this track is like an island as it is completely isolated from the national railway system. ("Khimgigant s chellitsom")

Having arrived in Novomoskovsk, Danilov first has a look at the chemical plant, but only from a distance as he is not admitted on the premises, then rides the local train and ends up watching a match of the local football team. The unexpectedness of this last outing – after spotting a billboard announcing the match Danilov immediately decides to buy a ticket - fits in with the tactic of avoiding tourist traps, ignoring the obvious attractions (if there are any) and relying on chance to develop a personal relationship with the city.

On his way back to Moscow, Danilov realizes that he has missed a few opportunities to see more of Novomoskovsk. He has not been to the source of the river Don (one of the city's most important attractions), nor has he bothered to pay a visit to another must-see: a park with a miniature railway for children. He admits: «In the final analysis I haven't really seen the place». (ibid.) He also pleads guilty to not having mentioned any of the social problems that a poor city like Novomoskovsk is likely to experience. And yet the overall impression of the city is quite favourable, despite the pouring rain which kept him grounded in the hotel for most of the time. «Even if competent people will tell me a lot of terrible things about this city, to me it will remain an attractive, not a strange or alien place, but a chemical giant with a human face». (ibid.)

As an illustration of Danilov's 'method', the visit to Novomoskovsk demonstrates that by not seeing things (or seeing the 'wrong' things, going to the 'wrong' places) he asserts his autonomy as a traveller and an observer of provincial reality. While this heightens the personal dimension of the visit and adds to the uniqueness of the experience, it can also create an ironic effect laying bare the conventions of the travelogue. This is precisely what happens when on another occasion Danilov decides to take a taxi to *Dvorianoe*, a hamlet just outside of Murmansk. The ensuing dialogue with the driver is rendered very curtly, almost as a form of reported speech (free indirect discourse), repeating what other locals have been telling Danilov about this place:

There is nothing there, said the taxi driver. How do you mean, 'nothing'? Well, it's only a hamlet, a jetty, that's all. Let's go anyway. Of course, no problem. You pay, I drive. Ha-ha. Let's go. ("Dva dnia poliarnoi nochi")

In *Dvorianoe* Danilov spends no more than a few minutes, enough to establish that it consists of three five-stored apartment buildings, «yet another building» and «some sort of a club». He notices two men in leather jackets smoking and drinking beer. One of the apartment buildings houses a modest grocery store which sells mainly canned food and drinks. A poster advertising Tuborg beer adorns the entrance. Danilov renders this scene almost as a snapshot, naming people and objects, but without using any evaluative qualifiers or figurative language.

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Because the brevity of the visit to *Dvorianoe* seems to validate the general opinion of the locals («there's nothing to see»), Danilov's description of it creates the effect of what Yurii Lotman has called a 'minus device' (*minus priyom*) (154). Contrary to what we would expect in more traditional travel writing (the surprise discovery of a local gem), Danilov 'disappoints' us: there is not much to see indeed.

At times Danilov begins to despair suspecting that he is wasting his time, as, for example, when he walks down Kalinin Street in Bryansk. Except for the factory Arsenal, the buildings on Kalinin Street are non-descript and unappealing (mostly offices and storages), and little seems to be happening. Gypsies drive by in a carriage and wave at Danilov (he waves back), a young man notices his camera, orders him «in an unpleasant voice» to take a picture of him, but then simply walks on. Another carriage with gypsies passes by and again Danilov exchanges waves with them. After lunch he takes a taxi to explore the rest of the city which lies stretched out over a distance of 25 kilometres. At this point the tone of narration becomes slightly more animated conveying the apparent conviviality of the taxi driver who agrees to take the «Moscow journalist» on an «excursion», but Danilov's own fleeting impressions of the city continue to dominate the story and when the driver points in the direction of Polpino, a suburb with a high number of «Russified gypsies», Danilov does not follow up on this information: «I was too lazy to find out what Russified gypsies are» («Neob"iatnyi malen'kii Briansk»).

Danilov's unsystematic approach, his willingness to let himself get distracted, change plans and seize unexpected opportunities, or, on the contrary, ignore them, illustrates the relevance of Michel de Certeau's ideas discussed in the introduction. Even if he frequently moves about by taxi or public transport, it is the randomness and unpredictability of these movements (completed, interrupted or delayed, sometimes by *force majeure*, sometimes by his own impulsive decision), that challenge the spatial organization of the city and the functions that its various parts perform (tourists coming to Murmansk are not supposed to go see a purely residential area such as *Dvorianoe*). Yet Danilov's disorderly explorations also shed light on how he understands the 'alternative' (*alternativnoe*) part of his undertaking. Using 'strangeness' as his main selection criterion, Danilov not only prefers 'strange cities' over Moscow's Golden Ring (the more obvious destination for tourists), but also has a penchant for 'strange objects' and 'strange people' whose clumsy or absurd conversations he happens to overhear: «A city's true image, not its official portrait, is made up of precisely this kind of dialogues and little scenes, rather than of architectural ensembles and bronze monuments» (*Dvadtsat' gorodov*, 9).

At this point the notion of 'strangeness' begins to shade into the more ambiguous category of 'typicality'. I take Danilov's words to mean that by paying close attention to talk in the streets and funny encounters one gets a more accurate, that is a more representative picture of the city than by confining oneself to its 'official' highlights. No matter how elusive, it is a city's often overlooked 'strange' features that allow one to experience its *genius loci*, its uniqueness, and this is exactly what *Twenty Cities* claims to be about. Instead of emphasizing the supposed homogeneity of the *provintsiia* and its otherness with respect to the capital, Danilov tries to grasp the one-of-a-kindness of each city, even if technically he remains an outsider and easily gives in to his laziness. I therefore do not agree with journalist Oleg Kashin who credits Danilov for «trying to solve the puzzle of the Russian city», but misjudges, in my opinion, the innovative character of *Twenty Cities*. Kashin writes: «A city in the Russian (or rather Soviet) sense of the word is not a European story of a town hall, a market, and a cathedral, but a shapeless composition of five-storied buildings, industrial zones, and a monument to Lenin spread out over an infinite space» (268).

By presenting a remarkable feature (in this case 'shapelessness') as a defining attribute of Russian cities, Kashin implicitly relies on the double meaning of the word 'typical' creating an *effet de typique* which conflates the salient and the representative, the noteworthy and the

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characteristic (Leerssen 284). Rather than looking for the uniqueness of each and every city (its uniquely 'strange' features), as does Danilov, Kashin casts a capital-centric gaze on the provinces ignoring local differences and irregularities. Ironically, then, in the afterword to *Twenty Cities* he restores the cultural myth of the provinces that Danilov is deconstructing.

Returning to Danilov's ill-defined discipline of 'alternative *kraevedenie*', we can conclude that it is based on a 'decentred' way of looking at non-capital space which allows to discover 'noteworthy' ('strange') features anywhere, but without understanding them as typical or representative of the provinces. Even if Danilov occasionally assumes a Moscow-centric perspective and refers to the periphery in more generalizing terms, this is more of a rhetorical device intended to forge a bond with his Moscow-based readers. The fact that the separate book edition of Danilov's travel writing included two chapters on Moscow and was published under the title *Twenty Cities*, is suggestive of those cities' semiotic equality and further destabilizes the traditional opposition centre – periphery. This decentred perspective is even sustained in the last chapter which describes the centrifugal path of Danilov's housing career. A former resident of down-town Moscow, Danilov now lives in newly built Kozhukhovo, a *mikroraion* beyond the Moscow Ring Road with an underdeveloped infrastructure more befitting of a provincial city, than of a megapolis such as Moscow ("Moi okrainy").

### 3. *Description of a City: The Myth of the Russian Provinces Restored*

Contrary to what the title suggests, *Twenty Cities* is not a particularly coherent and balanced collection. As the sketches were originally written to fit in with the themed issues of Russian Life, it is not always the city that takes centre stage, but some museum, a writer's house or the last remaining barrack homes in Moscow. The chapter on Ulianovsk, for example, is completely devoted to the local Lenin museum, more precisely to the nauseating tedium Danilov experiences as he wanders through the exhibition ("Toshnota"). Similarly, the city of Oryol is represented only through its literary museums (one on Turgenev, the other on Andreev) ("Angel moi, Golubchik") and their underpaid, but dedicated staff. Chapters that do deal with the city as a whole (Noril'sk, Cherepovets, Bryansk) are stylistically very different offering mostly unimpassioned and concisely formulated observations in which, as in the

Murmansk example given earlier, there is practically no intrusion by the narrator.

All in all we learn very little about these cities and the 'strange' objects which they sport. Danilov usually confines himself to describing the urban landscape and its atmosphere, but without adducing historical 'facts' or local anecdotes that enliven traditional travel writing. In Cherepovets, home of steel giant Severstal, he goes to see the foundries, but only from a distance to «enjoy the industriality» (*naslazhdai'sia industrial'nost'iu*) ("Cherepovets"). Genuine curiosity, an essential characteristic of any observant traveller, is not what propels him. Whenever Danilov feels that the «program is exhausted», he will stop sightseeing even if there is plenty of time to see more. Whether or not he does any sightseeing at all in Minsk, remains unclear; the chapter in question describes Danilov channel zapping in his hotel room as he watches mind-numbing game shows and endlessly repeated news items on Aleksandr Lukashenko ("Po-tikhomu").

Both devices – Danilov's self-stylization as a not particularly inquisitive traveller and his self-effacing form of narration – are applied more drastically in *Description of a City*.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the entire novel the personal pronoun 'I' (*Ja*) is used 31 times, but only in quotes reproducing other characters' words, never by the narrator to indicate his own agency.

<sup>5</sup> From now on I will refer to *Description of a City* by using the first letters of the Russian title (OG) and the exact page number of the edition that I have used (Danilov, *Opisanie goroda*).

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Seemingly absent he performs the function of an invisible medium that moves through urban space, dutifully registers people and objects, and shares its observations in a misleadingly flat tone. I say ‘misleadingly flat’ because behind the surface of the non-inquisitive traveller we suspect a more profound apathy, but the reporting is done in a detached and matter-of-fact-like way. Such ‘camera-eye narration’ (Stanzel) is not new, of course, but by employing it so consistently in combination with an ‘unremarkable’ provincial city (the anonymous city of the title), Danilov creates a new type of traveller-narrator who strikes us as passive and lazy, rather than as active and curious. Madlen Shul’gun aptly characterizes *Description of a City* as an ‘anti-journey’ that subverts the genre of the travelogue by its extensive use of estrangement and ironic self-reflection. More important than the city itself, is the meditative mood it can evoke in the narrator (624).

*Description of a City* consists of twelve chapters describing an equal number of visits to a not specified city made by the narrator in the course of one year. In the first of two ultra-short chapters preceding the actual ‘description’ we learn that he is about to conduct an experiment: to engage with some unknown city so intensively that it will begin to feel like ‘home’ (OG 7-8). The next chapter specifies the criteria on the basis of which the city is selected, but does not reveal its name or its geographical location. We are only told that it is not too far away from where the narrator lives (six hours by train), has no ‘touristic objects’, is highly industrialized and boasts an ice-hockey and a football club playing in the national league (OG 9-10).

The exploration of the new city follows roughly the same pattern as that in *Twenty Cities*: the narrator wanders through remote areas, goes to sport matches, reads the local press, spends quite some time in his hotel room watching television and experiences zen-like moments as the only passenger in a local train or when he visits the city’s old and now defunct airport. Although he notices that the experiment is paying off and the city begins to grow on him, he cannot always muster the energy to leave the hotel and make the most of his visit. On a Sunday afternoon in March he decides to watch the opening match of the football season (the outcome of which – a defeat of ‘Dynamo’ – upsets him) and then stays in his room to read the local newspapers, despite of the fact that «it is still light outside» and he could «continue studying the city» (OG 51).

A lacklustre attitude also accompanies the narrator when he finally goes out to explore the city. To emphasize his sluggishness, Danilov favours nouns derived from verbs over finite forms and confronts his hero with little mishaps to which he easily succumbs. In the following passage we see the narrator boarding a bus, but the mud-covered windows and the unfortunate position of the conductor prevent him from seeing anything of the surroundings.

[Descending] down (*spusk*) a street named after a local Bolshevik figure, the descent [is] very steep, ice, sliding (*skol’zhenie*), almost falling (*padenie*), and almost falling again, and again. A street named after a Bolshevik. Trolleybus 2 to the terminus of the ‘So-and-so factory’ [...]. Settling (*usazhivanie*) into the vacant front seat for the purpose of contemplating views through the window of the driver’s booth, arrival (*prikhod*) of conductor, payment (*oplata*) of fare (10 rubles), the conductor stands near the driver’s booth, completely blocking the view. The conductor is talking to the driver, viewing (*rassmotrenie*) the sights passing by becomes impossible. (OG, 46)

In comparison with *Twenty Cities*, the novel makes even less of an attempt to enlighten the reader about the history of the city. Only during his fourth visit, in April, does the narrator go to the local *kraevedcheskii* museum, one of the city’s very few official attractions whose historical diorama’s and other exhibits he describes in entirely generic terms so as to convey his bored bewilderment: «Post-war section, languid and boring. Production, science, sport. Developed socialism. And a little more post-Soviet stuff, even more languid and boring» (OG 92). Described in this way the exhibition seems deprived of any local specificity so that the museum

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becomes an empty signifier denoting a particular museum genre instead of a very real museum devoted to local history and the region's material culture.

Danilov's play with toponyms and street names further enhances the city's non-distinctive character. Following the literary convention of anonymizing provincial towns ('the town of N') (Belousov), the narrator never discloses the name of the city he visits simply referring to it as the «city being described» (*opisyvaemyi gorod*). He goes further, however, by paraphrasing the names of streets, squares, hotels and even railway stations in what seems to be a ludicrous gesture of respect for the city's reputation. The result is an absurd clustering of synonyms, euphemisms and verbose descriptions which, significantly enough, cannot prevent the real names from shining through. Here are two examples, the first one describing the immediate surroundings of the narrator's hotel, and the second one detailing the layout of another part of town:

A square named after members of unofficial military formations, turning into a street named after the official military formations – not to the left, as on the last visit, not towards the river, but to the right, in the other direction. (OG 67)

A broad avenue named after some city, from there a boulevard-shaped street named after a prominent villain. The boulevard-shaped street named after a villain ends in a large square with beautiful flowerbeds, with an even more beautiful House of Culture of people belonging to a certain professional community, and with a monument to a local Bolshevik figure who died in his prime of typhoid fever. (OG 117)

The irony is, of course, that the moment we start reconstructing the names which the narrator is so anxiously hiding, the result will be equally abstract and bland (Partisan Square, Red Army Street etc.). While a monument for a local revolutionary may enjoy a more 'organic' status, most people will perceive it as a 'suspended sign' (Oushakine 3), a reminder of a bygone era, without remembering the historical person it represents. The ubiquity of these Soviet names and signs, their perceived meaninglessness and lack of '*couleur locale*' have a similar 'anonymizing' effect as the laborious paraphrasing by the narrator.

The narrator's explorations may strike us as capricious and planless, but each of the twelve visits he pays to the city being described is punctuated by a ritual that contradicts its image of a completely interchangeable place. The ritual consists in going to a «street named after a month» and spend some time staring at the last remains of what used to be house no. 47, once the home of a «great Russian writer». Although the narrator sticks to this label throughout the novel, the reader can easily establish that this 'great writer' is Leonid Dobychin and the address is 47 October Street, Bryansk where he used to live from 1927 until 1934.<sup>6</sup> Dobychin was a modernist writer who committed suicide shortly after Soviet criticisms had lambasted his only novel, *The Town of N*. (1935). For a long time his oeuvre was completely unknown in the Soviet Union until on the wings of *glasnost*' and *perestroika* it was 'returned' to the Russian reader in the late 1980s.

Visiting no. 47 each month, the narrator develops his own cult of the 'great writer' and anxiously looks for any signs of construction activity that would seal the fate of the empty plot. The gaping emptiness forms a painful contrast with the monuments to other poets and writers in the city (cf. the 'official' bronze monuments in *Twenty Cities*) suggesting a continuing lack of recognition for the great writer. Yet building a new house on this very spot and closing the gap between its neighbouring buildings would feel like sacrilege and destroy the point of the narrator's visits. As long as nothing changes he is determined to continue his ritual of

<sup>6</sup> Three times the narrator quotes the line «Beyond the meadows trains passed and sprinkled sparks», which is directly taken from Dobychin's short story *Yerygin*.

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coming to no. 47 and staring at the desolate plot.

The narrator's short, but regular visits to no. 47 add a personal touch to the experiment the narrator is conducting. This makes the city less abstract and anonymous, especially if we consider the clues in the text that enable the reader to establish the city's true identity. At the same time, the narrator's ritual seems to mock the practice of the literary pilgrimage precisely because a crumbling brick wall is all that reminds of the great writer who, as we can read in the penultimate chapter, «did not like the city-being-described» and considered the years spent there «wasted» (OG 212). In addition to Madlen Shul'gun's observation that Danilov's novel subverts the genre of the travelogue through the central figure of the 'lazy' traveller-narrator, I would argue that the author achieves this also by linguistic means such as paraphrasing and the narrator's self-effacing form of telling. Lastly, the narrator's dutiful, but essentially pointless visits to an empty plot on a «street named after a month» looks almost like a travesty of the literary pilgrimage. If a «holy place never remains empty», as the saying goes, then what does this tell us about the plot on no. 47?

### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that of the two texts examined here *Twenty Cities* is the least compatible with the traditional semiotics of centre and periphery. For all its unevenness and the geographical concreteness of its sketches, the collection resists the homogenizing tendency of the capital's gaze by presenting itself as an attempt at 'alternative *kraevedenie*'. While this 'discipline' is different from traditional *kraevedenie* in that Danilov has no clear personal connection with the cities he studies, it nonetheless assumes these cities' uniqueness, their inalienable one-of-a-kindness. Reading through these sketches, we feel that the capital's gaze become less important and existing hierarchies of 'interesting' places lose their validity. In this way the narrator asserts his autonomy, his freedom to 'poach' (Certeau), visiting places where he is not supposed to go 'as a visitor'. At the same time, we can already detect the contours of the 'lazy' and 'non-inquisitive' traveller-narrator of *Description of a City* who would rather stay in his hotel room, go to a local football match or dream away in some zen-inducing location. This no-good guide-narrator often frustrates his readers' expectations by going to 'uninteresting' places where, as it turns out, there is nothing to see indeed.

At first glance Danilov's novel seems more radical in its decentring of the 'capital' point-of-view. We only know that the narrator is from 'somewhere else' and supports a football club by the name of 'Dynamo' (a quite generic name for a Russian football club), but Moscow itself is never mentioned. To identify the narrator as a Muscovite, we would have to know that the biographical author is born in Moscow and supports the local Dynamo team (Danilov 2006, 23-26). Finally, when, at the end of the novel, the narrator declares that his experiment has succeeded (to 'soak in' the city and make it feel like 'home') (OG, 251-253), the centre- and-periphery dichotomy seems to have dissolved completely.

On closer inspection, however, the stylistically playful and more imaginative *Description of a City* gravitates towards confirming the *cliché* image of the provinces. Ultimately, the city being-described becomes indistinguishable from other provincial cities where we would find the same 'meaningless' street names, the inevitable *kraevedcheskii* museum with its diorama's showing hunting Neanderthals, and a statue of some long-forgotten local Bolshevik. Namelessness is a defining feature of the provincial city which deprives it of its individuality (Belousov 2004, 457). Featuring a sluggish traveller-narrator who pursues 'moods' rather than historical facts and performs a literary pilgrimage by stubbornly visiting an empty plot, Danilov's novel not only subverts the genre of the travelogue; it also restores the myth of the Russian provinces that *Twenty Cities* attempted to deconstruct.

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