Research Article

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Blurred Boundaries in Šamšad Abdullaev's Poetic Prose from Fergana: "Immobility", World Literature, and the Deconstructing Gesture of Self-Orientalization

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Abstract: In this article, I analyze the poetic prose of Šamšad Abdullaev, one of the leading voices of the so-called Fergana School of Poetry. It is my argument that Abdullaev's work features self-orientalizing images, including the depiction of the Central Asian space and its inhabitants as motionless, that deconstruct orientalist stereotypes. It does so through a difficult writing that questions the usual representation of both the East and the West, positioning itself as world literature. I also reflect on Abdullaev's distinctive use of the Russian language, which enriches standard Russian with a number of Oriental words that are crucial to describing and representing the Fergana space, thus showing the inability of the former colonizer's language to speak of Fergana without resorting to the local vocabulary. Drawing on Postcolonial, Decolonial, and World Literature Studies, I propose an interpretation of Abdullaev's work that foregrounds its emancipatory nature.

Keywords: Fergana School; Shamshad Abdullaev; Central Asian literature; world literature; postcolonial studies; Russophone literature

1 Unexplored Orientalism(s) and Self-Orientalization[1]

In the opening pages of *Orientalism*, Edward Said defines his object of study as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made

1 This article is a key output of the "Asia in the Mirror: Self-Representations, Self-Narratives and Perception of the Other" research project, conducted at the Department of Literature, Languages and

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between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'",[2] "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them)".[3] Almost fifty years after its first publication, it sounds almost superfluous to state that Said's 1978 book has had an enormous influence on the humanities, revolutionizing the way in which scholars have looked at Asian cultures, Europe, the West, and their many, and often difficult, entanglements. Said's fame has obviously engendered several waves of criticism, which have both questioned various aspects of Said's work and brought to the fore hitherto unexplored aspects of his epistemology, revitalizing it and fostering its continuous productivity.[4] Homi Bhabha's approach, with his references to Frantz Fanon's study of the colonized subject, is one of the most influential theories drawing on Said which points out the many directions that Said's work has led and still leads to. In "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism", later included in his 1994 collection of essays symbolically titled *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha first exposes his critical reading of Said with regard to what he saw as the latter's failure to identify the many historicities of colonial discourse, and then reflects on the damage to which the colonized is subjected when he or she adopts a stereotyped version of the identity of the colonizer:

> The stereotype, then, as the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of a similar fantasy and defence – the desire for an originality which is again threatened by the differences of race, colour and culture. My contention is splendidly caught in Fanon's title *Black Skin, White Masks*, where the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit – a grotesque mimicry or doubling that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego. The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because

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2 Said 1978: 2.

3 Said 1978: 43.

4 For a brief overview of various critical approaches to Said and a "defense" of his work from the point of view of Arabic studies see Hamdi, who points out that Said "was actually not only writing back to the West, deconstructing imperialism, but he was also writing forward, constructing a homeland, in fact, in all directions, oppositionally, creating textual homelands in exile, which would act as a counternarrative before liberation, the counterpoint to imperialism, could be realized" (Hamdi 2013: 146).

> it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.[5]

It is my argument that Bhabha's representation of mimicry, with the colonized subject factually destroying their psyche through clumsy attempts at assimilation, may be linked to the concept of self-orientalization, one among the many still relatively under-researched issues arising from the various critiques of Said's discussion of orientalism.[6] Although Bhabha does not use this term, one can see a connection between mimicry and self-orientalization. While mimicry is characterized by clumsy and devastating attempts at assimilation, self-orientalization foregrounds difference, or rather appears to do so, but the two attitudes are united by a common tension towards identity distortions and the subjugation of the colonized and their identity to the colonizer, with the latter imposing simplification and standardization onto other identities. As Aníbal Quijano states in his "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality", the relationship between European cultures and the others "consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated".[7] At the same time, Bhabha's rootedness in Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism – it is impossible to conceive of his approach without considering his knowledge of Derrida – brings to the fore the constantly changing, even playful nature of the colonial subject's imitation of the colonizer. With the "static system of 'synchronic essentialism' […] continually under threat from diachronic forms of history and narrative, signs of instability",[8] mimicry reveals the nuances and pitfalls of both the colonized and the colonizer. In this article, however, envisaging the possibility of a more diversified reading of mimicry, I also draw on Roanne L. Kantor's reading of Cuban novelist and theorist Severo Sarduy's writings on India. Kantor highlights that Bhabha's view of mimicry as "a posture of defense", clearly influenced by Lacan, should be complemented by a more comprehensive interpretation, one that foregrounds its being driven by "desire", its being "a type of enlightenment",[9] that is, eventually, its transgressive, liberating nature.

5 Bhabha 1994: 75.

6 On Bhabha's debt to Said and his reception of Orientalism see Byrne 2019. Byrne argues that "Bhabha shares Said's sense of complicity and interrelation between Orientalist discourses and political or administrative systems – modes of maintaining, asserting, showing, displaying and "having" power – but he argues the knowability of the colonial subject always eludes colonial discourse, and he proposes that colonial discourse produces ambivalent, fraught, psychically inflected knowledge and that such discourse says as much about the colonizer as it does about the colonized" (Byrne 2019: 155).

7 Quijano 2007: 169.

8 Bhabha 1994: 71.

9 Kantor 2025: 256, 257.

In fact, self-orientalizing attitudes are the product of a deep and unconscious interaction between the pole of the colonizing power and that of the colonized subject which reveals the many layers of their complex and ever-evolving relationship. In his 1996 article "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism", the Turkish American historian and sinologist Arif Dirlik set himself the task of tackling the question of "whether orientalism was just the autonomous creation of Europeans, or whether its emergence presupposed the complicity of 'orientals'".[10] Later in his article after a lengthy discussion of Said's approach, Dirlik examines nation-building practices in twentieth-century China. He references Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" and argues that "in this metonymic reductionism, nationalism shares much with the culturalist procedures of orientalism, now at the scale of the nation".[11] According to Dirlik, "The Euro-American assault on imperial China both provoked the emergence of Chinese nationalism and, ironically, provided it with images of the Chinese past that could be incorporated in a new national identity".[12] Dirlik also makes use of Mary Louise Pratt's highly productive concept of "contact zones" to finesse his re-elaboration of the orientalist paradigm through the prism of self-orientalization cultural and political practices. This leads him to define orientalism as "a product of those 'contact zones' in which Europeans encountered non-Europeans",[13] with self-orientalizing gestures acting as an act of resistance against European, or Euro-American, oppression. Such gestures nevertheless also led to the internalization of "the historical assumptions of orientalism"[14] by the "Eastern" subjects in their complex struggle for self-determination. In Dirlik's view, self-orientalization is thus both a reaction to Western hegemony and a surrender to the West's epistemological and political expansionism, and, just like Said, he considers the two levels as two sides of the same coin.

Self-orientalization ought to be seen as one of the most evident signs of the social and cultural disruptions engendered by what may be referred to as both modernization and colonization, which should be considered a synonymic pair.[15] As a

10 Dirlik 1996: 100.
11 Dirlik 1996: 106.
12 Dirlik 1996: 106.
13 Dirlik 1996: 112.
14 Dirlik 1996: 114.
15 See, among others, Bhambra, who views "the colonial encounter, which was less an encounter and more a conquest, domination, and enslavement of peoples and forms of life (…) as constitutive of the very disciplines that express or seek to understand modernity" (Bhambra 2007: 16), and Dube and Panerjee-Dube, who "indicat(e) the inadequacy of conflating the modern subject with the subject of modernity" (Dube and Panerjee-Dube 2019: xiii), pointing out that "there are other modern subjects besides Western ones, embodying formidable heterogeneity yet coeval-ness" (Dube and Panerjee-Dube 2019: xiv).

response to colonial modernization, self-orientalization practices are obviously not confined to Chinese culture. In her book on nation-building processes in Kazakh literature, Diana T. Kudaibergenova defines the self-orientalizing processes that she observes in Soviet Kazakh literature of the early Soviet years as "a process of objectifying Otherness in the indigenous society by the indigenous intellectuals".[16] Kudaibergenova sees the main literary device of the official culture of Soviet Kazakhstan in self-orientalization, including the classics of Kazakh literature by writers such as Saken Seifullin (1894–1938), Beimbet Mailin (1894–1938), Sabit Mukanov (1900–1973), and Gabit Musrepov (1902–1985) (Kudaibergenova 2017: 22).[17] In their writings and public activity, Soviet Kazakh writers became the mouthpieces of a discourse that portrayed tradition as a burden to be overcome with the aim of paving the way for, and embodying, Sovietization, seen as synonymous with modernization.

In his book on Soviet orientalism, Alfrid K. Bustanov has foregrounded how "In Russia, however, and even more so in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the old connection between Oriental scholarship and state policies has gone largely unnoticed, though it is still very much alive".[18] Bustanov also notes that the first Russian translation of Said was published as late as 2006 and that Orientalist Studies in contemporary Russia have never managed to conduct a critical debate on the political agenda of their scholarship tradition. This lack of a critical approach ought to be seen as part of a broader problem, one that encompasses both Russia's self-perception as the center of two former empires, the Tsarist and the Soviet Union, and the scholarly mindset of international Slavic Studies as a discipline, at least till the recent past. In 2001, David Chioni Moore noted how "how extraordinarily post-colonial the societies of the former Soviet regions are, and, second, how extraordinarily little attention is paid to this fact".[19] It is only in recent years, mostly in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale aggression of Ukraine in 2022, that the study of Russian and Soviet colonialism through the lens of postcolonial approaches has started seriously reshaping the field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.[20]

16 Kudaibergenova 2017: 22.

17 On partially different trajectories, with reference to the Uzbek context at least until the late 1920s, see Baldauf 2015, who foregrounds the genuinely activist nature of poetry as a means of enlightenment and literacy promotion.

18 Bustanov 2019: xii.

19 Moore 2001: 114. On Soviet colonialism in Central Asia see also Adams 2011, who foregrounds the active role of Central Asian cultural activists in shaping their own local cultures, stressing that "Central Asian culture was both enabled and constrained by Soviet institutions" (Adams 2011: 202).

20 On early discussions on the applicability of the postcolonial lens to the study of eastern Europe and central Asia see also Spivak, who stressed the role of language and literary studies in fostering the

2 The Fergana School: Creating a World-Class (Post-Soviet) Central Asian Culture

In this article, drawing on suggestions arising from the scarce existing contributions on Central Asian literatures and the broader field of Postcolonial Studies, I propose an interpretation of the self-orientalizing attitudes in recent Russian-language, or Russophone, literature from Uzbekistan. The discussion will thus deal with a part of the "Orient" that has considerably suffered from underrepresentation outside the narrow circles of scholars working on the former Soviet Union and the Russian Empire with an interest in Central Asia. My focus will be on Šamšad Abdullaev (1957–2024),[21] arguably the most influential voice of the so-called Fergana School, or group, of Russian-language poetry, who died prematurely in 2024 in Almaty. Abdullaev was born and spent a significant part of his life in Fergana (or Ferghana), as the city is generally referred to in Russian, or Farg'ona, in the Uzbek version, the main center of the multiethnic Fergana Valley. The valley lies within a part of former Turkestan which borders modern Kirgizstan and Tajikistan.

The so-called Fergana School is generally viewed as one of the most revered Russian-language poetry groups of the post-Soviet years. This group of writers who were active as such in the 1990s was driven by the goal of elevating Uzbek culture from the provincialism to which it had been condemned by the Soviet control over the arts and the instrumental use of culture and literature to promote the Soviet political agenda. Apart from Abdullaev, the group included Hamdam Zakirov (b. 1966), who is currently based in Finland and active in both literature and music, Aleksandr Kuprin (penname Abdulla Chajdar), and a number of other writers. One might see a contradiction in the fact that the Ferganans chose to use and indeed have kept using the Russian language, which interestingly contrasts with their explicit refusal to orient themselves towards Russia and draw inspiration from Russian literature.[22] In fact, the Fergana School can be seen as part of an archipelago of

dialogue between postcolonial thought and Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (Spivak 2006: 829).

21 In this article, I transliterate names of authors writing in Russian using the so-called scientific transliteration of Cyrillic characters.

22 Hamdam Zakirov has explicitly foregrounded the distance between the models of most of Russian literature and the Ferganans' cultural interests, orientation, and style, identifying in a handful of names (Michail Kuzmin, Andrej Platonov, Konstantin Vaginov) the few Russian writers who could be seen as relevant for their poetics (Zakirov).

Russophone cultural islands that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union and that are united by the Russian language as a medium of literary expression.[23]

In Russian culture, orientalizing practices have been crucial to the imperial project underlying Russia's internal and foreign policy since the second half of the eighteenth century. The Russian writer par excellence, Aleksandr S. Puškin (1799–1837), included several orientalizing gestures in his poetry.[24] In her studies of imperial ideology in Russian literature on the conquest of the Caucasus, Susan Layton notes how "total complicity in imperialism was the mode of ephemeral orientalia, especially prominent in the 1830s".[25] Albeit with different nuances and changing attitudes according to evolving political agendas and cultural trends, explicit or implicit orientalist moods have shaped much of modern Russian culture since its debut in the eighteenth century to the twentieth century.[26] However, the writers of the Fergana School did not and do not conceive of themselves and their work as pertaining to the Russian literary tradition. In spite of their choice of the Russian language as their preferred, or even sole medium of expression, the Ferganans saw their work as a contribution to the dialogue between the local, Fergana and Uzbek culture, and the West, with its combination of Mediterranean and Northern inspirations and traditions, whose models are central for Abdullaev's poetry and prose. In the early 1990s, Abdullaev and his colleagues took on the editorial guide of *Zvezda Vostoka* [The Eastern Star], the main literary journal in Uzbekistan, envisioning a renewal of Uzbek culture through its emancipation from the stereotypes of Soviet culture and the promotion of translations from several languages. The goal of this enterprise was the integration of Uzbek culture into international literary conversations.

One should also note that the very definition of Abdullaev's and the Ferganans' writings as pertaining to Uzbek literature is problematic, although not incorrect.

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23 On the many Russophone literary islands as part of a diffused archipelago see Maria Rubins, who sees the archipelago "as a trope for extraterritorial Russian culture [that] suggests exchange, multiplicity, and fluidity" (Rubins 2019: 24). Rubins problematically uses the term "Russian" instead of the better fitting Russophone, with the former stressing a connection with Russia that is not always as central as the word "Russian" might lead one to think. The term Russophonia has been introduced by Naomi Caffee with reference to "the widespread and variegated uses of the Russian language outside of the customary boundaries of ethnicity and nation" (Caffee 2013, ii). On the extraterritoriality of Russian(-language) writing abroad see also Platt 2021. In Russian, see Kukulin 2002.

24 See among others his untitled 1829 poem known by its first line "Ne poj, krasavica, pri mne" [Don't sing, my beauty, in front of me], in which the lyrical subject invites a young Georgian woman not to sing the songs of her homeland, which had just been incorporated into the Russian empire, thus forcing her to remain silent.

25 Layton 1994: 9.

26 On Russian Orientalism see van der Oye, who notes how "Russian efforts to explore, study, and understand the East often have been directly linked to imperial aims" (van der Oye 2010: 9).

While Fergana is part of Uzbekistan and the beginnings of the literary activity of the Fergana school in the early 1990s were conceived as a contribution to the revitalization and modernization of Uzbek literature, Uzbekistan as such is not the predominant "imagined community" that shapes the works of its members. This is because these works are at the same time local but also global, linked to, and conceived as part of, a culture that transcends (Soviet-imposed) geographical borders[27] and style boundaries, combining high modernism with elements of popular culture.

3 Šamšad Abdullaev: World Literature from Fergana

As Kirill Korčagin put it in one of the few available critical studies on Šamšad Abdullaev, "the Fergana School focused on the largely utopian task of creating a new literature designed to bring the region's young states – Uzbekistan first and foremost – closer to the European world. The space that unified this literature was supposed to become a sort of new Greco-Bactrian kingdom, a middle ground bringing together the Mediterranean world and the Orient".[28] Although, after Said, the use of the word "Orient" to refer to Abdullaev in the English translation of Korčagin's Russian-language essay, might sound untenable, the reference is actually quite appropriate and underlines a distinctive feature of Abdullaev's work: the self-orientalizing attitude of his lyrical subject in poetry and his first-person narrator in prose, a quality of his writing that captures the attention of anyone who reads his texts, and one that Korčagin explicitly thematizes in his essay.

A master of both versified and prose poetry, Abdullaev was the author of a kind of writing that aimed at blurring established boundaries at the level of both genre and representation. In the context of the discussions on post- and decoloniality in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies that have been reinitiated in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022,[29] Abdullaev has been defined as "a leading voice in decolonial Russian-language poetry".[30] Abdullaev published several poetry collections, which earned him the high

27 On the "creation" of the Uzbek and Kazakh national history in the Soviet context see Ubiria 2015.

28 Korchagin 2017: 206.

29 See Krapfl 2023 and Byford / Doak / Hutchings 2024.

30 See Abdullaev 2022. On Abdullaev's fame, see the following article among the vast amount of material published online by the Uigur-Kazakh poet of the younger generation Ramil' Nijazov-Adyldžjan, who writes mostly in Russian and regards himself as a disciple of Abdullaev: "Во-первых, я знаю по себе, что человек, осёдлывающий червей русского языка, находящийся в

esteem he enjoys among Russian-language poetry readers, as well as several poetic prose texts. These have received less attention than Abdullaev's poems and will be the focus of this article. Abdullaev's prose can be defined as poetic in the sense that it tends to eschew easily detectable narrative structures; it abounds in repetitions, dwells on apparently insignificant details – apparently insignificant from the point of view of the plot – , and foregrounds language and the use of the signifier, thus showing proximity to what Roman Jakobson called the poetic function of language. It is my argument that Abdullaev's prose texts, or text – if one agrees to consider his many prose pieces as part of a single work – , can be regarded as an example of literature that challenges boundaries on several levels, from genre to literary orientation and (cultural) identity. As such, they propose a representation of Asia by an Asian subject who plays with self-orientalizing stereotypes, mixing them with estranging images of the West and its culture in a kind of writing that sets deconstruction as its main literary device.

In exploring Abdullaev's refined, ironic, although possibly unconscious, deconstruction of self-orientalist attitudes, it is my contention that his writings can also be approached through the use of some of the exegetical tools provided by the field of World Literature,[31] and namely following, and adapting, two of the three definitions of World Literature that David Damrosch provided in the conclusion of his seminal monograph from 2003. I am referring to his definitions of world

Центральной Азии, сейчас сначала оказывается в непременно проигрышном положении, по сравнению со своими коллегами из России. Лишь потом он учится различать разницу между Юрием Рытхэу и Фазилем Искандером, как между Маркесом и Пабло Неруда, и уж тем более разницу между Маркесом и Нерудой, и Лоркой. Лишь потом он научится присматриваться к местности и вслушиваться в иную, недоступную северным варварам, фонетику, что окружает его. (…) Так вот, когда этот человек, осёдлывающий червей русского языка, будет осматриваться по сторонам, мне бы хотелось, чтобы слова Шамшада-ака были ему подспорьем, ведь он придумал, кажется, всю грядущую центрально-азиатскую поэзию, иногда даже без вербализации этих путей напрямую, намёками и экивоками. Қазір biz башка адабиёт, или сейчас мы другая литература (Nijazov-Adyldžjan 2024) [First of all, I know from my own experience that a person who saddles the worms of the Russian language in Central Asia now finds himself in an inevitably losing position compared to his colleagues from Russia. Only later will he learn to notice the difference between Jurij Rytcheu and Fazil' Iskander, like that between Márquez and Pablo Neruda, and even more so between Márquez and Neruda and Lorca. Only later will he learn to look around and listen to the different phonetics that surrounds him, inaccessible to the northern barbarians. (…) So, when this man who is saddling the worms of the Russian language looks around, I would like Šamšad-aka's words to be of help to him, for he seems to have come up with the whole of the future Central Asian poetry, sometimes without even verbalizing these paths directly, by hints and equivocations. Kazir biz bashka adabiyot, or now we are a different literature].

31 I refer to World Literature as a dynamic field of research and to world literature as its study object, that is the wide and diverse range of texts with which the discipline of World Literature is concerned.

literature as "an elliptical refraction of national literatures" and "not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time".[32] The critical reflection on World Literature following the publication of Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* has advanced several proposals and correctives, including those on the relationship between World Literature and Postcolonial Studies. As suggested by Galin Tihanov in a discussion of the Soviet engagement with world literature, "*there is no world literature per se, but rather different world literatures*".[33] In his *Forget English!*, Aamir R. Mufti has offered a rethinking of world literature from the point of view of postcolonial thought that focuses on the political role of texts in colonial contexts:

> The ongoing discussion about world literature has thus been both hugely encompassing and strangely timid: it seems unaware of the enormous role played by literature as institution in the emergence of the hierarchies that structure relations between societies in the modern world. The integration of widely dispersed, varied, and heterogeneous sociocultural formations into a global ensemble has taken place, especially at the most decisive periods in this historical process, disproportionately on and through this terrain.[34]

As noted by Gesine Müller and Marian Siskind, in the context of World Literature studies, writers and scholars from "marginalized literatures" have suffered from "a tokenist logic according to which supposedly stereotypical texts established a metonymic relation with the totality of the culture they were supposed to express".[35] One could see in Abdullaev's texts a literary embodiment of this tension: by playing with Oriental stereotypes, they deconstruct them and foreground the hidden lively and cosmopolitan nature of the local reality with which they engage and from which they originate.

3.1 Playing with Stasis: Abdullaev's Poetry in Verse and Prose

Although my focus will be on Abdullaev's poetic prose, I will begin my analysis of his representation of the Asian space from the initial lines of a longer poetic text in verse titled "Letnjaja tjažest'" [Summer Heaviness], in which Abdullaev's lyrical subject

32 Damrosch 2003: 281. On the tensions between postcolonial and world literature see Battacharya, who interestingly suggests that a way out of the prevailing mistrust between Postcolonial Studies and World Literature should "lie in expanding the horizon of postcoloniality beyond its overwhelming Anglophony and into a larger world of languages, literatures, and imperial histories" (Battacharya 2023: 172).

33 Tihanov 2023: 1. Italics in the original.

34 Mufti 2016: 97.

35 Müller and Siskind 2019: 2.

describes a natural and human landscape marked by immobility and a sense of stuffiness:

Поезд медленно взбирается на холм, медленно,
заставляя думать об этом, и неизвестно,
что более медлительно, сама эта медлительность или же
мысль о ней. Страшные, сухие колеса мучительно давят
на маслянистые рельсы, словно поезд стоит на месте,
а вершина холма, поддавшись его инертности, спускается,
подползает к нему, раздвигаясь вширь; и виды пейзажа
в окнах вагонов однолико повторяют друг друга –
точно фальшивые картинки, грубо приклеенные
к вертящемуся барабану, который к тому же
вращается с большей, удвоенной, медлительностью,
чем он может. В удушливом купе глохнут голоса мужчин
(пассажиры), и воздух тяжелеет, как расхлябанная дверь.
Только щелочка в открытых мужских губах не задета
крупинками пота, только она противится постыдной слабости.
Лица под летней пыткой – когда-то упрямые и уверенные,
теперь невнятные и влажные – ничего не выражают
или выражают некую подлинность, которую
черты лица доносят неправильно. Мужская рука
тянется к стакану, чьи стенки накалены
от темно-красного чая, и вдруг замирает
невесомо над ним, точно
в стоп-кадре, но волокнистый пар клубится сквозь прорези
недвижных пальцев. И пепельная занавеска, утратив
естественный цвет, горит целиком от пышного солнца,
ослепляющего холмы. Вдоль этих холмов
теснится скрюченная зноем растительность:
белесоватая поросль, уже узловатая, кое-где выжженная,
измученная вялостью, но совсем не той, что зовется вялостью,
лишенная достоинств, кроме этой недостойной зримости. И все же
она клубится, похожая на пар, который вздымается рядом
с протянутой рукой, – струится вверх, чтобы казалось, будто
рука оседает и падает мимо еще не остывшего стакана.

The train slowly climbs the hill, slowly,
forcing one to think about this, and it's hard to say
what is more sluggish, this very sluggishness or
the thought about it. Frightful dry wheels, in torment, press down
on the oily tracks, as if the train were standing in one place,
and the top of the hill, yielding to this inertia, descends,
crawls towards it, spreading out to the sides; and the landscape views
in the train car windows repeat each other, as if they all had the same face –
as if these were counterfeit pictures crudely glued

onto a rotating drum that on top of everything rotated twice as slowly
as it normally can. In the suffocating compartment men's voices fade away
(the passengers), and the air grows heavier like the loosely hanging door.
Only the crack of open male lips isn't touched
by droplets of sweat, it alone resists the shameful weakness.
Faces under summer torture – once defiant and self-confident,
now inarticulate and moist – don't express anything
or express a certain authenticity that
the facial features render incorrectly. A man's hand
stretches out toward a glass whose walls are incandescent
from the bright-red tea, and suddenly freezes
weightlessly above it, as if
in a freeze frame, but the fibrous steam swirls through the slits
between the immobile fingers. And the ashy window curtain, having lost
its natural color, is all enflamed from the luxuriant sun
that blinds the hills. Along these hills
stretches tightly growing vegetation, curled up from the heat:
whitish sprouts, already knotty, sometimes scorched,
tormented by limpness, but not at all the limpness that is known as such,
devoid of merit except for this unworthy visibility. And still
it swirls, resembling the steam that rises next
to the stretched out hand – it flows upward, so that it would seem that
the hand sinks, and falls right by the glass that still has not cooled down.
(Abdullaev 2022)

In a lyrical scene that combines movement and stasis, whose opposition is softened by the mention of the train and the adverb *medlenno* [slowly] as the opening words of the poem, Abdullaev's subject draws on the topos of immobility that has traditionally characterized the Western perception of Asia. In his study of the anthropology of the Enlightenment, Anthony Pagden has shown that in the eighteenth century the representation of China as a state and a culture mostly defined by immobility actually traversed Asian borders, with immobility perceived as a feature that characterized Asia *tout court*.[36] Although the presumably Central Asian landscape[37] and the

36 See Pagden 2007: 60: "This immobility linked the Chinese to the peoples beyond the Himalayas. India, as Voltaire said, had remained unchanged since the time of Alexander. In the lands of the Turks, Persians, and Arabs, culture, the arts, and the sciences had made almost no progress since the great flowering of the Middle Ages, a flowering that had also been built very largely upon Greek sources. Similarly in China, wrote Voltaire, the sciences had become 'fixed at the same point of mediocrity where they were amongst us in the Middle Ages'".

37 See from Kevin Platt's brief piece on Abdullaev's poetry: "It often is difficult to pin down the precise era and location in question because his works continuously toggle between experience of the poet's near-at-hand physical location and a superordinate plane of culturally transmitted elsewheres" (Platt 2018: 461).

humans that inhabit it are depicted as moving, they are actually unable to progress.[38] Their voices, silenced by the heat, cannot be heard, and their weakness is a source of shame. However, the men's inability to speak is compensated by "a certain authenticity" that such signs as facial features cannot fully render, making it invisible. Likewise, the vegetation that dominates the final part of the poem is characterized by its "unworthy visibility", which is firstly posited as a surrogate of actual beauty or value, before being linked to the closing image of the steam soaring towards the sky, probably indicating vitality and resilience. While the initial and the central parts of the poem stress the general inertia of the landscape, the final lines foreground nature's ability to overcome the constraints of heat, underlining the fact that there is every likelihood that nature will survive and thrive in spite of the risks posed by immobility and the lack of fresh air. The poem, which could be described as a parable of durability and resistance, thus closes looking towards the future. However, the picture that readers are confronted with may also be said to be far more complex and marked by uncertainty. Its presumably Central Asian setting may only be inferred from the context of Abdullaev's work and the Fergana School, and the ascending plot of the regeneration of nature that I have identified might also be said to be less relevant than the overwhelming images of dryness and inertness that dominate most of the poem. As shown by its two concluding lines, the piece plays with its own object of representation, highlighting what the Russian formalists called the artifice of art, hence desacralizing its own communicative role and freeing itself from the burden of conveying a clearly recognizable message. In doing so, the text may be viewed as playing with the (self-)orientalizing stereotypical images of immobility and inertia that it – perhaps deceivingly – accentuates.

Both Abdullaev's poetic prose and his poems share an attention to landscapes, urban scenes, and the interaction of people with the space that they inhabit, but with an even increased penchant for difficulty. His prose pieces combine lengthy descriptions of Fergana and other Central Asian suburban locations with the narrator's musings on art and literature and images of cities and landscapes in the West. In most cases, Abdullaev's prose texts consist of extremely long sentences that require their committed readers to be willing to overcome the numerous obstacles posed by hypotaxis, abrupt changes of scenery, and the several words in a number of European and Asian languages that constitute a typical feature of Abdullaev's Russian.

"Nepodvižnaja mestnost'", the very title of the 1994 piece that opens Abdullaev's prose collection *Drugoj jug* [Another South], published in Moscow in 2020, harks back to the idea of the Orient as a place that is "static, frozen, fixed eternally", to quote

38 On the cultural creation of the Central Asian subject as backward and in need of colonial enlightenment in the Russian imperial context see Peshkova 2024.

Said.[39] In "Nepodvižnaja mestnost'", readers first get to know Abdullaev's Orient through the account of a funeral. Readers might also get the impression that the gloomy mood of the event is somewhat consistent with the atmosphere of the setting in which the funeral takes place:

> Да; десять-пятнадцать несчастных, подогнанных под зреющую тризну и бездонный обряд, в парализующем их мрачном усердии замерли у ворот, и казалось, иная замедленность, иное выражение лица и дрогнувшие брови сумели бы тотчас разбить уклад лелеемой жизни. Получалось, мой дорогой, что только в однообразии полных поз они пеклись о бренной четкости, и городок, словно по жребию, везде прельщала неподвижность: белый автобус, машинальный жест или ветвь.[40]

> Yes; ten or fifteen unfortunates, put together for the funeral feast and the endless rite, in their paralyzing gloomy eagerness stopped at the gate, and it seemed that a different slowness, a different facial expression and trembling eyebrows would have been able to immediately shatter the cherished lifestyle. It seemed, my dear, that it was only in the monotony of their full poses that they cared for the perishable clarity, and the whole of the town, as if by lot, was attracted by immobility: a white bus, a mechanical gesture, or a branch.[41]

Abdullaev's space, both Oriental – or Eastern – and southern, is stuck in the burdensome immobility of its resistance to change, the same immobility that pervades the human and natural landscape of "Letnjaja tjažest'". In his article on Abdullaev, Korčagin provides an account of the activity of Abdullaev and his colleague Sabit Madaliev during their tenure as head of the poetry section and editor in chief, respectively, of *Zvezda vostoka* between 1991 and 1996.[42] Abdullaev and Madaliev were keen to improve the quality and the international visibility of Uzbek literary conversations after the fall of the Soviet Union. In other words, they were committed to fighting the cultural immobilism that late Soviet culture had imposed on Uzbek literature. Switching back from Uzbek cultural history to Abdullaev's text(s), one can easily notice that the immobility of the Fergana space with which Abdullaev's narrator engages may happen to be, or at least be perceived as, other, different (*inaja zamedlennost'*). The invoked otherness that would be able to bring new energy to this motionless place can however only be imagined in the conditional mood. The envisaged otherness of the oriental space in the already mentioned *Drugoj jug*, which is also the title of one of the short stories included in the book that I will discuss later, finds some explicit models in Abdullaev's writings. While focusing on the mythicized space of Fergana, Abdullaev's cultural texts overflow with references to Western modernist art, with a special inclination for Italian film and literature, and English-language

39 Said 1979: 208.

40 Abdullaev 2020: 10–11.

41 Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

42 Korčagin 2017: 207–209.

poetry and music. Abdullaev's hero sees his own actions and his surroundings through the prism of Western culture, which provides him with the intellectual tools that should enable him to get to grips with understanding his own world and his place therein. The space he inhabits and describes is simultaneously his own and a foreign one, unable to emancipate itself from its provincialism and an intrinsic part of world culture, whose paradigms are what allows the narrator to look at himself and his roots.

In his essay on Abdullaev and his views on the new Uzbek literature of the 1990s, Korčagin claims that

> [t]he project of creating this new literature was only partially inspired by foreign modernist authors: another important source of inspiration was the particular visuality associated with the magical colonial "East" envisioned by European literature beginning in the early nineteenth century, a phenomenon explored by Edward Said in his influential 1978 book. A sort of "self-exoticization" took place as a result of which the Fergana poets themselves – not just their subject matter – wound up inhabiting the magical East that Soviet writers had discovered through the translations of foreign classics".[43]

3.2 Which South(s)?

The other south that Abdullaev's narrator envisages, and that the reader knows from "Nepodvižnaja mestnost'," is however no less stereotypical than Fergana. In "V doline" [In the valley], a text that opens with a mention of the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" and a discussion of the "Turkic softness" of the name of one its characters, the many souths of the world – including Italy, Maghreb, and Fergana – seem to merge into a single space, although they also, paradoxically, retain their own distinctiveness. The text is intricately structured, combining insights into Kimsan's inner world with excerpts from the diaries of his Tunisian friend Ius and the narrator's point of view, with the aim of misleading the reader. With his thirst for larger horizons, Kimsan, a name that symbolically means "Who are you?" in Uzbek, is constantly drawn to places that are at the same time different from and similar to his own:

> Думаю, пишет Кимсан, эту уверенность, эти мимолетные свидетельства рая мне посылает не ферганская глушь, но смутный прообраз итальянских селений в ней, и вот более пятнадцати лет я тщусь туда забрести, вернуть себе край, в котором таятся клочья моих желаний жить – изогнутые решетки, площадь перед глазами, соединяющая каменные в трепещущих буграх и золотистых щелях береговые дома, пишет он, море за колокольней, крестьянки в черных наголовьях, идущие мимо виноградной плантации на рынок или в церковь.[44]

43 Korčagin 2017: 211–212.

44 Abdullaev 2020: 64–65.

> I think, writes Kimsan, that this confidence, this fleeting evidence of paradise is sent to me not by the Fergana wilderness, but by the vague prototype of the Italian villages therein, and for more than fifteen years I have been vainly trying to wander there, to regain the land where the shreds of my desire to live lurk – the curved bars, the square in front of you that connects the stone coastal houses in fluttering hillocks and golden crevices, he writes, the sea behind the bell tower, the peasant women in black headscarves walking past the vineyard to the market or to church.

The other South that the character known by the very *Oriental* name of Kimsan dreams of is more of a collection of literary and film moods than an attempt at a somewhat realistic portrait of Italy, something openly recognized by Kimsan himself and the narrator with their reference to a vague mythical image (*smutnyj proobraz*). Kimsan's Italian dream is simultaneously certainty (*uverennost'*) and a series of fleeting images, whose lack of connection with the present is stressed by the female peasants with their black head coverings. In "Drugoj jug", the piece that gave Abdullaev's 2020 collection its title, the European and the Asian South(s) are apparently poles apart but their respective importance for the narrator shows that they are actually more similar than they seem at first glance:

> Себастьян пишет: я перевел для тебя несколько страниц из «Диалогов с Леуко» и «Дзибальдоне», – под вечер он спешит мимо аркад, мимо палаццо дель Подеста в библиотеку Высшей технической школы с томиком Винченцо Кардарелли в правой руке, в то время как я иду вдоль Ватного завода и пустырей в Беш-Болу, где царит изумительная инертность, словно деревья и дома, скамейки и собаки застыли не сами по себе, но от ослепительного сезона в середине года. Кладбищенский дувал около ветхих водокачек и запасных путей, глиняный храм, поднятый с земли на уровень женского роста. В окнах отражаются окна других домов. Я пишу Себастьяну: все мои усилья уходят на то, чтобы вырваться из здешних пут, а не открывать неведомые территории, как я бы хотел, – мне легче понять Хочанга Алахияри, его хаос против террора, или Омара Кавура, не желающих впредь обслуживать выдроченные до бытовых действий восточные императивы, мне легче понять их, чем некоторых европейцев, идущих иные тропы к оболганным сегодня корням. Кто-то печется о стиле, естественном для режиссеров пятидесятых годов, кто-то дает интервью, умирающий фильм-мейкер, последние слова: «Такие дела, старик», и оба переплетаются в тебе, теряя тотчас блеск прежних различий.[45]

> Sebastian writes: I translated a few pages from *Dialogues with Leuco* and *Zibaldone* for you – in the late afternoon he hurries past the arcades and the Palazzo del Podestà to the library of the Higher Technical School with a volume by Vincenzo Cardarelli in his right hand, while I walk past the cotton factory and the wastelands in Beš-Bolu, where an astonishing inertness dominates, as if the trees and the houses, the benches and the dogs were frozen, not of their own accord, but because of the dazzling mid-year season. A cemetery *duval*[46] near the dilapidated

45 Abdullaev 2020: 81.

46 The glossary at the end of Abdullaev's 2020 volume explains this term as follows: "садовая или дворовая глинобитная стена" [a garden or courtyard earthen wall].

> water pumps and spare tracks, an earthen temple arising from the ground to reach a woman's height. The windows reflect the windows of other houses. I write to Sebastian: all my efforts are spent on breaking free from the local fetters, not on opening up unknown territories as I would like to do – it is easier for me to understand Houchang Allahyari, his chaos against terror, or Ömer Kavur, with their refusal to cater to Oriental imperatives that have been pampered to the level of mundane actions, it is easier for me to understand them than some Europeans who follow a different path to the roots that nowadays are denigrated. Some of them cherish a style that is natural for directors from the fifties, others give an interview, a dying moviemaker, his last words: "That's the way it is, buddy", and both intertwine within you, immediately losing the sparkle of their former differences.

The similarity between the narrator and his Western European counterpart and interlocutor is more ostensible than it might appear on the basis of the narrator's passion for, and familiarity with, Western culture, here represented by Cesare Pavese and Giacomo Leopardi, two leading voices of modern Italian literature. In spite of those resemblances that enable the narrator to draw a comparison between the Western and the Eastern "Souths", they are hardly comparable. Both are characterized by the predominance of ancient, or simply old, sites within their space but the Eastern south shows a typical combination of traditional landmarks and traces of the recent Soviet past, a feature that distinguishes the history of the city of Fergana.[47] The inertia that so prominently identifies the East, or Eastern South, does not spare the narrator, who is unable to free himself from the tethers of his roots. At the same time, motionlessness is one of the causes of the narrator's alleged inability to conquer new intellectual spaces and a consequence of his being part of Fergana's space. Moreover, the first-person narrator eventually identifies with the cultural space of the East, here represented by an Iranian and a Turkish director, and not with the European one. As a result, the image of a pan-Asian cultural identity is recreated that seems to overcome the boundaries of language and recent history, possibly reproducing the Western- and Central Asia koine that predated the Russian colonization of Turkestan.

As however can be seen in the last sentence of this excerpt, the differences are actually not as striking as one might assume. It is rather in the different approaches to one's own roots that one should recognize the main dissimilarity between the East and the West, and it is this which makes the narrator allegedly unable to fully understand the West, or Western South, that he is so passionate about. If one looks at Abdullaev's prose from the point of view of literary history, one may conclude that in syntony with the aesthetic program of the Fergana school and the *Zvezda vostoka* project, it is art that has the potential to facilitate the fusion of cultures, with texts performatively staging the encounter between West and East by using modernist techniques such as difficulty and semantic indeterminacy to depict the East.

47 On the history of Fergana and the Fergana Valley see Starr 2011.

Furthermore, one can see in the two examples of *Eastern art* mentioned by Adbullaev's narrator an embodiment of that blending of East and West that is so crucial for Abdullaev himself, with Allahyari having embraced an Iranian-Austrian identity and Kavur being closely linked to France.

With its performative embodiment of vagueness, which also makes it impossible to understand whether it is similarities or differences that prevail in the narrator's comparison of the Eastern and the Western South, Abdullaev's prose offers a fascinating example of world literature in the meaning of the term identified by Galin Tihanov as one of the four elements he believes can "assist in this effort of locating world literature as a construct. This grid is essentially chronotopic and consists of several vectors. One needs to be aware of at least four major reference points: time, space, language, and, crucially, what one could term self-reflexivity – how literature itself reflects on, and creates images of, 'world literature'".[48] The point at stake here is what Tihanov calls self-reflectivity. Moreover, this kind of approach raises the question of the relationship between the West and the East as imagined from the perspective of a Post-Soviet text from Central Asia that can be read as embodying the intrinsic self-reflexivity of world literature. In this context, the Fergana-Mediterranean-Atlantic connection that Abdullaev's texts both embody and thematize may also be seen as a strategy to obliterate Russia and Russian culture by creating a bridge between the East and the West, or the Eastern South and the Western South. This is linked to the question of Russophonia and the peculiarities of Russian-languages cultures outside of Russia. By going West – bringing Western culture to the East and exploring the Eastern self through the lens of Western literary culture – Abdullaev's writings show the search for a complex identity that is coherent with the postcolonial porous self. If we accept this approach, the self-orientalizing tropes of Abdullaev's narrator noted by Korčagin, which any reader can easily detect, will reveal their deep ironic undertones and shed any suspicion of an interiorized colonial attitude on the part of Abdullaev and his literary persona.

The performative and ironic self-exploration of a subject deeply invested in the reflection on the global entanglements of culture is a constant in Abdullaev's writing. In *Putevoditel'* [Travel Guide], a mythical *he* pursues the traces of a Central Asian Dante:

> К тому же за моей спиной, думает *он*, в Шахимардане, на сланцевом уступе памирской террасы, нашел свою Равенну певец другого ренессанса, алой денницы, побитый камнями, хамза, по причине экспроприации, а не медитации – поведенческий шифр абсурдного мученичества, настигающий праведных упрямцев из недр одной и той же обшей Истории, из арсенала одного и того же монотонного двойничества, одной и той же драматургической константы.[49]

48 Tihanov 2017: 468.

49 Abdullaev 2020: 190.

> Besides, behind my back, *he* thinks, in Shohimardon, on a slate ledge in the Pamir plateau, the singer of another renaissance, of the scarlet morning star, *stoned*, hamza, he found his Ravenna, because of expropriation, and not meditation – a behavioral cipher of absurd martyrdom that catches up with the righteous stubborn from the bowels of the same shared History, from the arsenal of the same monotonous duality, the same dramaturgical constant.

With Ravenna substituted, or represented, by the Fergana-Valley town of Shohimardon, the passage focuses on Hamza Hakimzade Niyazi (1889–1929), one of the leading names of early-twentieth-century Uzbek culture, who embraced the Bolshevik revolution as an opportunity for modernization. In 1929, he was stoned to death, allegedly by religious activists. With language itself dictating the tragic irony of History through a figure of sound – it is because of *expropriation* and not *meditation* that the Central Asian Dante has been killed[50] – , Abdullaev's character becomes aware of the constant repetition of patterns and schemes in the cultural history of both the East and the West, with the differences between the two significantly reduced. At the same time, Dante's recontextualization in Central Asia might also be viewed as a demythologization of his sacred figure in the West, with an internationally unrecognized Central Asian writer unexpectedly posited as a peer to a giant of European and world literature. Moreover, the dual character of Niyazi's legacy, torn between his commitment to the secularization of his land and its path towards autonomy, on the one hand, and his embrace of Soviet power, on the other, is in line with Abdullaev's pursuit of ambiguity as a strategy to relativize stereotyped images of identity. His writings question cultural hierarchies, foreground complexity, and subtly promote the integration of the culture of the Fergana Valley into global conversations.

4 Conclusions

Revolving around the idea that one cannot describe the self without drawing on texts and cultural paradigms from worlds that are both different from and similar to one's own, Abdullaev's prose texts ironically deconstruct the many Othernesses that they discuss. They do so by embodying the idea of world literature as filtered through a postcolonial reflection on identity. They foreground the need for, and the right to, an identity and the impossibility of this being well-defined. An identity that is as

50 As confirmed by Ingeborg Baldauf, who reports that "Hamza had just recently been killed by outraged followers of expropriated local landowners, whose complaints Cheka and Party officials had failed to respond to (…) At its time, a myth of Hamza having fallen victim to a religious mob was promoted in the press (…) and Hamza was subsequently styled the 'founder of Uzbek modern theatre'" (Baldauf 2015: 209).

"difficult to place" as the dislocated postcolonial identity in Bhabha's foreword to the English translation of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*,[51] but arguably without the latter's tragic worldview. Abdullaev's narrator's insistence on the immobility of the landscape and the culture in which he at times feels entrapped is coherent with a discourse that rejects identity construction as the affirmation of one's own versus the Other. The search for a universal language of culture paradoxically obliterates the problem of Otherness that it playfully thematizes.

Moreover, what emerges from a reading of Abdullaev's prose is the profound ambiguity of the identities that he depicts. In "V doline", two of the world's many Souths, the Eastern and the African, suffer from that tendency to self-deprecation that Said sees as a typical mark of orientalism: "Мы идеализировали нашу местность, чтобы вырваться из нее. Что сохранилось? Отвращение к себе и неприязнь к тому, что есть"[52] [We idealized our place to get out of it. What remains? Self-loathing and a dislike for what is there]. At the same time, Abdullaev's subject has nothing of the subaltern, although the paradox at the core of Spivak's Derridean deconstruction of the essentialisms of postcolonial identity constructions may help explain Abdullaev's ambiguous identities. His art is both a literary celebration of the potential of Ferganan (and Uzbek, Central Asian) literature, of its being part of world culture, and a rethinking of Uzbek culture under the double shield of literary devices inspired by European Modernism and the Russian language, with the latter remaining one of the most debatable issues of his literary biography.[53] The Otherness foregrounded by the title of his last prose collection, *Drugoj jug* [Another South], is simultaneously the multiple, ambiguous Otherness of the East and the West in their cultural and personal entanglements and that of Abdullaev's Russian-language Uzbek culture.

The Russian language, or at least its standard vocabulary, falls short of providing an adequate literary depiction of the Fergana geographical and cultural space. *Drugoj jug* includes a glossary of "Central-Asian", "Oriental" words at the end of the book that the average – although in the case of Abdullaev's work doubtlessly a cultivated and motivated – reader would not understand without a translation into "standard Russian" or an explanation. Beyond helping readers make their way through Abdullaev's demanding prose, the glossary could be read as an indication of the impossibility for the Russian language to fully express the complex reality of a part of the world that the Russian Empire first, and the Soviet Union later, claimed as theirs. The Russian language is thus presented as both an instrument of international communication – one that certainly functions much better than Uzbek in promoting

51 Bhabha 1986: xxii.

52 Abdullaev 2020: 62.

53 In addition to writing in Russian, Abdullaev also published most of his works in Russia.

the dialogue between Uzbek, or Fergana, or Central Asian, culture with the West – and a medium that needs *Asian* words to be able to express the complexity of Eastern Otherness, although such an exotic, *oriental* flair will likely be read as ambiguous. The boundaries between what is one's own and what is foreign, literally embodied in a Russophone poetic prose unable to function without foreign, oriental words, could not be more blurred. At the same time, Abdullaev's and the Ferganans' use of the Russian language to produce works that are conceived as embodying the new Central Asian subject's emancipation from colonial subjugation to Russian culture and its embrace of the liberating space of world literature can be viewed as akin to the several practices of "writing back at the empire" in "the language of these 'peripheries' shaped by an oppressive discourse of power" described by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin with reference to English-language postcolonial literatures in their seminal *The Empire Writes Back*.[54]

Playing with languages, genres, and identities, Abdullaev puts forward a new cosmopolitanism rooted in Fergana that feeds itself on world literature. His writings embody the definition of Central Asian literatures as world literature that Rebecca Gould and Amier Saidula have proposed as an alternative to the borders artificially imposed on its communities by the Soviet modernization project.[55] With his decentered writing and his ironic deconstruction of self-orientalization, Abdullaev's *other South* may be read as a Bhabhan "Third Space"[56] that is alternative to the homogenizing images of both the Orient and the Occident, and which in the context of post-Soviet Uzbekistan is also posited as an alternative to the North of Russia and its colonial culture. Abdullaev's search for identity is one based on continuous questioning, a never-ending process linguistically embodied in the figure of his character Kimsan, with his quest ontologically sealed in his symbolic name. The nation plays virtually no role in Abdullaev's imagination, at least in his writings and in his idealistic view of literature and poetry, as he often repeated in his interviews. While the nexus between postcoloniality and the use of literature for nation-building is a well-established notion of Postcolonial Studies,[57] Abdullaev's poetic world clearly favors an identity that is simultaneously local and global over a national one. In an

54 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002 [1989]: 8.

55 Gould and Saidula 2022: 655.

56 See Bhabha 1994: 37: "The intervention of a Third Space of Enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation, in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanded code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People".

57 See Imre Szeman's book on postcolonialism and the nation. Szeman notices how "formerly colonized regions grapple with the consequences and effects of modernity while attempting

overview of the history of Uzbek literature published in *World Literature Today* in the 1990s, Tahir Qahhar wrote that "just as the division of Turkistan in the 1920s and the wooing of nationalist writers to the Soviet cause was a complicated affair, I am of the opinion that it is equally difficult to get the public as well as writers who were brought up in the Soviet system to think, write, and live in the new nationalistic mood".[58] To be sure, Abdullaev – and his colleagues – believed in the need for a high-quality Uzbek culture,[59] but the transnational nature of literary conversations seems to have been his priority.

Finally, one should consider the "decolonial option" suggested by Vitaly Chernetsky with regards to Abdullaev's poetry[60] and proposed by Madina Tlostanova for the Post-Soviet space as a bridge between Postcolonial and Post-communist Studies, with decolonial thinking working against the teleology of modernity and "including the local histories which do not fit the black-and-white schemes of west versus east or north versus south today".[61] With their refusal of that "absolute demarcation between East and West" that Said identified as the key element of Orientalism,[62] but without falling into the trap of mimicry – at least in its tragic version as intended by Said – , Abdullaev's work *provincializes* not only Europe,[63] but also Russia(n),[64] and proposes *provincial* Fergana as a melting pot for a truly inclusive world literature.

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simultaneously to fashion nations" (Szeman 2004: 4), with literature "seen as laying the cultural groundwork that allows the nation to become a reality" (Szeman 2004: 2).

58 Qahhar 1996: 618. The place of Abdullaev in Uzbek culture and the meaning of Uzbek-ness in his literary biography are a still under-researched issue that should, and doubtlessly will, be the subject of other contributions in the future.

59 On popular culture from Uzbekistan – or the Soviet "East" – between late Soviet times and the fall of the Union, see instead Roosien 2024.

60 Abdullaev 2022.

61 Tlostanova 2012: 134.

62 Said 1979: 38.

63 Engaging with Dipesh Chakrabarty, who noticed that the European imperial thought and "third-world nationalisms" are united in their "universalization of the nation-state as the most desirable form of political community" (Chakrabarty 2000: 41), one could argue that Abdullaev provincializes both Europe and the postcolonial world by thinking beyond the nation.

64 I borrow the idea of "provincializing Russian" from Tamara Hundorova, who has used it with regards to language decolonization in contemporary Ukraine. See Hundorova 2023.

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