“The Sovereign of the River and the Sovereign of All Nature—in the Same Trap”

The River in Viktor Astafiev’s Queen Fish

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Abstract

Russia is a country of great rivers whose population is largely concentrated on river banks. These invaluable sources of fresh water have always directed life in Russia, where huge modernization projects occurred during the Soviet era. Attempts to control nature had a great effect on the Russian countryside; awareness of negative environmental impacts from modernization efforts increased in the 1960s. Russian literature of the 1970s raised these ecological issues, helping to spread them in national consciousness. This chapter examines one of the key prose texts of this movement, Viktor Astafiev’s Queen Fish (1976), concentrating on the meanings of the river in the novel. The active and trans-corporeal river, which connects human space to non-human space in the Siberian countryside and is a source of both life and death, is central in considering the work’s characteristics as an environmental text.

Then why, oh, why had their paths crossed? The sovereign of the river and the sovereign of all nature—in the same trap. One and the same painful death awaited them.

Astafiev, Queen Fish 180

Introduction

This chapter examines the river in Viktor Astafiev’s Queen Fish, a thirteen-episode novel that was published in the Soviet Union in 1976. It is a collection of interconnected stories set on and around the Yenisei River in Krasnoyarsk Krai, Siberia. The work’s depiction of humankind’s responsibility for its abuse of nature has earned the book the reputation of being the author’s natural philosophical manifesto (Smirnova, “Russkaia naturfilosofskaia proza” 38–39).
and one of the central ecologically identified statements on Soviet modernization (P.A. Goncharov 180; Petushkova 66, Razuvalova 288, Shneidman 21). However, Astafiev’s river has not been studied from an ecocritical point of view. I will argue that the river in *Queen Fish* connects human space to the more-than-human world, not only physically but also mentally. The river’s active agency manifests itself in the motifs of the “River of Life” and the “River of Death,” and the river’s trans-corporeality\(^1\) reflects its role as the medium between nature and culture: Astafiev’s river is part of both nature and culture.

T. Scott McMillin has considered the motivation for researching the cultural meaning of rivers. He argues that studying the cultural meaning of rivers helps us to improve our understanding of the characteristics of rivers and human interactions with them (McMillin xviii). Rivers have great cultural meaning in Krasnoyarsk Krai, as exemplified by a fountain called “Siberian Rivers” (see fig. 8.1). It is located in the central square of the city of Krasnoyarsk and it depicts eight local rivers as statues. Six female statues on the sides of the fountain represent some of the area’s minor rivers. The central female statue represents the Angara, the second largest river in the area. At the bottom of the fountain, a sole male figure represents the Yenisei, the major river—the “Father-Yenisei” as it is known. All the other rivers depicted on the fountain flow into it.

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\(^1\) See Alaimo.