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Cult Classic Yury Mamleyev Translated for the First Time

By Gus Peters

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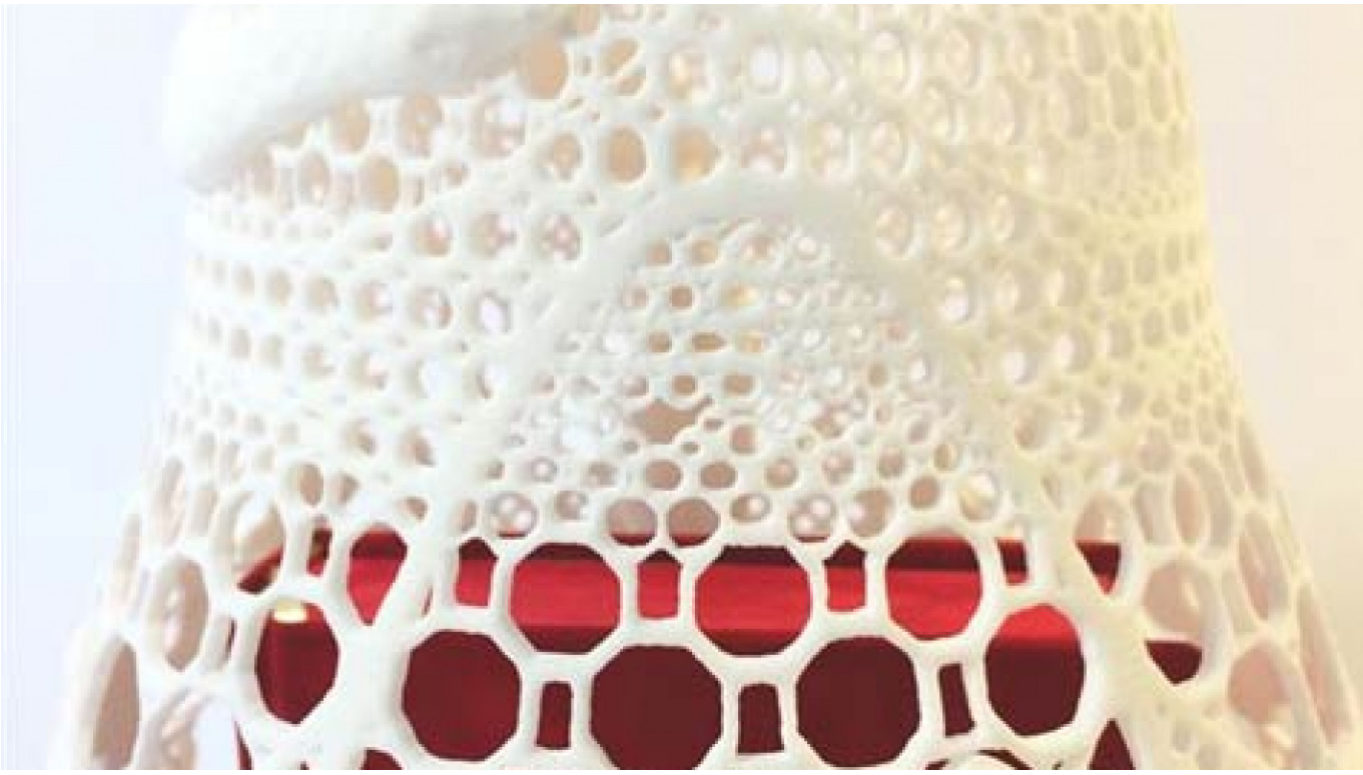

The Mamleyev translation will be sold inside its own sculpted matryoshka.

Dostoevsky. Gogol. Mamleyev?

While better known in Russia than in the Western world for his metaphysical realism, dissident author Yury Mamleyev's most famous novel is about to be published in English for the first time by Haute Culture Books.

Mamleyev first began writing in the 1960s while teaching mathematics in Moscow, where he gained an underground following. He hosted meetings with other intellectuals to discuss philosophy and psychoanalysis, and the group began to refer to themselves as "sexual mystics."

Outside of this immediate circle of fans, his literature started to garner attention through samizdat, the secret circulation and publication of banned literature in the Soviet Union. It

was during this period of time that he wrote his most famous work, "Shatuny," or "The Sublimes," as it is translated in Marian Schwartz's English version.

It was a novel that stunned the underground literary world of the Soviet Union. Part philosophy, part esoterica and laced with humor, the book quickly became a cult classic and excerpts slowly leaked through the cracks of the Iron Curtain.

Mamleyev emigrated to the U.S. in 1974 and taught Russian literature at Cornell University in New York before returning to Russia in 1993, now splitting his time between Moscow and Paris.

The book's impact on Russian literature is clear: Vladimir Sorokin and Victor Pelevin both credit Mamleyev as an inspiration and Grigory Ryzhakov called the book "literature in its boldest, art in its pure sense — uncompromising and limitless." While not only bringing a relatively unknown author the credit deserved in the English-speaking world, the new translation hopes to inspire a generation of English writers.

The novel revolves around an assassin waiting for death but other characters include an intellectual group seeking immortality and a professor hoping for salvation through more traditional methods. Many of Mamleyev's characters are characterized as feeble-minded men who often contemplate the incomprehensible.

"On the one hand, the novel may be read as reflecting modern hell," wrote professor James McConkey of Cornell University. "However, very deep down, this book offers, in fact, a religious vision, and its comedy is earnestly lethal. Yet, in view of its ironic estrangement and dynamic lure — another remainder of Dostoevsky — ['The Sublimes'] can be read as a sort of 'metaphysical detective story.'"

"His prose is devoid of actual events ... but it holds something else instead: an eternal thing that has forever that has forever been part of man, but which nobody likes to be confronted with," wrote Vladimir Spakov in The Petersburg Book Journal. "The mirror he holds up to us has turned black, reflecting our dark side. To do so, it needed a writer capable of standing at the abyss without falling or of telling the more frightful among us who pretend to be 'civilized': there are monsters hiding inside of you!"

Haute Culture offers handmade, uniquely designed and bilingual copies of Mamleyev's classic made of suede or leather and housed in a 3D-printed matryoshka. Part of the profits will go toward donating e-books to schools and universities around the world.

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