

Literature on the Margins: Russian Fiction in the Nineties

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“ . . . present-day literature seems to me less literature than a variety of cottage industry that exists solely to enjoy the patronage of persons reluctant to avail themselves of its products. Even the best of these homely artifacts can’t be called noteworthy, nor can one praise them sincerely without *qualification*. The same applies to all those literary novelties that I’ve read during the last ten to fifteen years: they include nothing noteworthy, nothing that can be praised without *qualification*. It’s clever and uplifting, but lacks talent; or talented and uplifting, but not clever; or, finally, talented and clever, but not uplifting.”

—Anton Chekhov
“A Dreary Story” (1889)

“A sick man is more alive than dead.”
—Aleksai Tolstoy
Buratino (1936)

Leave for the Wounded

Russian literature of the nineties is a literature that knows no political or, indeed, any other kind of censorship. Yet, at the same

time, it is a literature dumbfounded by the loss of many millions of readers.¹ The writer has ceased to be both a threat to the political regime and a highly paid government bureaucrat. No longer a socially prestigious, and consequently, attractive sphere, canonical literature has become narrowly specialized and socially marginalized. It cannot compete with popular or mass fiction, which appeals to an incomparably larger audience and, correspondingly, yields higher royalties. Among “serious” writers, only Sergei Dovlatov has found a more or less popular readership; the three volumes of his selected prose were republished several times, with a general circulation of more than 300 thousand copies—which in current circumstances is an extraordinary run. The majority of writers are kings without a kingdom: their role in society is marginal, but they live on the memories of past social prestige.

In spite of the external disintegration of the literary process and the replacement of “left vs. right” conflicts by generational clashes, certain literary tendencies of the 1990s connect writers of various generations, whatever their antagonisms. The decade’s three dominant tendencies, with a well-defined philosophy and aesthetic rooted in an authoritative artistic tradition, are realism, postmodernism, and neosentimentalism. These tendencies by no means fully account for the literary landscape of the nineties. For instance, the decade has witnessed a revival of autobiography (the appropriately titled *Al’bom dlia marok* (*Stamp Album*) by Andrei Sergeev, *Trepanatsiia cherepa* (*Trepanation of the Skull*) by Sergei Gandlevskii, and the prose of Anatoly Naiman), as well as fiction that gravitates toward the tradition of modernist intellectualism: Vladimir Makanin, Mark Kharitonov, Aleksandr Melikhov, Fridrikh Gorenshtein, and Boris Khazanov. Moreover, some writers have opted for an eclectic or compromise artistic strategy that unites features of realism, modernism, and postmodernism. This trend is represented by such relatively young and talented authors as Andrei Dmitriev, Irina Polianskaia, Aleksandr Ivanchenko, Aleksandr Vernikov, Iurii Maletskii, Petr Aleshkovskii, Aleksandr Khurgin, and several others.² Yet it is precisely realism, postmodernism, and neosentimentalism that lend “serious” literature its distinctive features in the nineties. They determine its predominant tones and structural dynamics.

In the Last Throes: “Old” Realism in a New Age

In late-twentieth-century Russia, the relationship to realism is essentially different from that of the West. Few in the West, even in

the 1960s, would have challenged the following observation: "The major tradition of European fiction in the nineteenth century is commonly described as a tradition of 'realism,' and it is equally assumed that in the West, at any rate, this particular tradition has ended" (Williams 202). By contrast, in Russia realism survived the attack of modernism at the beginning of the century, and during the Soviet era acquired the status of a sacred entity, as opposed to the falsehood of socialist realism. A return to the tradition of nineteenth-century critical realism, as if bypassing the socialist realist mythology, was an *idée fixe* of sorts among liberal Soviet literati from the 1960s to the 1980s. In different ways, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Village Prose writers (in particular Vasilii Shukshin, Fedor Abramov, Boris Mozhaev, and Viktor Astaf'ev), members of the "front-line" generation (Konstantin Vorob'ev, Vasil' Bykov, Grigorii Baklanov, and Viacheslav Kondrat'ev), as well as Iurii Trifonov and writers of a dissident hue (Vladimir Voinovich, Georgii Vladimov, and Fridrikh Gorenshtein), all attempted to realize this approach.

The concept of "truth"—above all, as a historical and social category—was common to this approach. The repeal of ideological censorship in the first years of glasnost and the subsequent publication of forbidden and "detained" works enabled the widespread rationalization that the great tradition of nineteenth-century Russian realism had not died out during the catastrophes of the twentieth century, but had become enriched and strengthened. In short, the *expectation of a resurgence of realism* was a very important part of the literary atmosphere in the nineties, defining the position of such influential critics of the younger generation as Andrei Nemzer, Aleksandr Arkhangel'skii, and above all Pavel Basinskii.

This yearning for realism was only partly satisfied by fiction written in the seventies and published at the end of the eighties: Anatolii Rybakov's *Deti Arbata* (*Children of the Arbat*) and its sequels, Vladimir Dudintsev's *Belye odezhdy* (*White Robes*), Sergei Antonov's *Vas'ka* and *Ovragi* (*Ravines*), and Vladimir Tendriakov's *Pokushenie na mirazhi* (*Hunting Mirages*). Operating with socialist realist models, these texts articulated "truths" that merely reversed the valency of signs within the socialist realist system. The same phenomenon was perceptible in the new works of perestroika authored by the former flagmen of liberalism in literature, Chingiz Aitmatov's *Plakha* (*The Executioner's Block*, 1986) and *Tavro Kassandry*, (*Cassandra's Brand*, 1994), Vasily Aksyonov's *Moskovskaia saga* (*Moscow Saga*), Daniil Granin's *Begstvo v*

Rossiiu (*Escape to Russia*, 1994), Grigorii Baklanov's *Susliki* (*Gophers*, 1993) and "I togda prikhodiat marodery" ("And Then Come the Marauders," 1995), and Evgenii Evtushenko *Ne umirai przhde smerti* (*Don't Die Before You're Dead*, 1995). Sergei Dovlatov's sarcastic label of "socialist realism with a human face" (III, 307) proved more applicable to these works than did "simply realism."

Prolonged expectation explains the overestimation of novels by such young realists as Oleg Ermakov's *Znak zveria* (*The Mark of the Beast*, 1992) and Oleg Pavlov's *Kazennaia skazka* (*An Official Tale*, 1994). Both novels immediately entered the short-list of the Russian Booker Prize as serious contenders for best novels of the year, in spite of their slack plots, shaky composition, and absence of stylistic originality. Long-awaited realism finally found its apotheosis in Georgii Vladimov's novel *General i ego armia* (*The General and His Army*, 1994), awarded the Booker prize of 1995.³

What, however, is "simply realism," particularly in the twentieth century? Astradur Eysteinnsson, in *The Concept of Modernism* (1990), appraises a number of twentieth-century concepts of realism, and suggests that realism in the twentieth century is not dying, but, rather, plays penumbral companion to the evolution of modernism. He arrives at the following conclusion:

[R]ealism implicitly presents culture as a unified sphere and, to exaggerate slightly, reflects a fully "democratic" and egalitarian society—a society in which meaning is evenly "shared" (no matter what the actual political situation in the respective society may be). Realism is a mode of writing in which the subject "comes to terms" with the object, where the individual "makes sense" of a society in which there is a basis of common understanding. (195)

Examining contemporary Russian realism through the prism of this definition leads to interesting conclusions. First, in the literature of the "old" realism of the 1990s, "a fully 'democratic' and egalitarian society—a society in which meaning is evenly 'shared' " is, as a rule, an army, whether it be at the World War II front of Vladimov and Astaf'ev, the Afghan war of Oleg Ermakov or the "peaceful" Soviet army not only of Oleg Pavlov's *Official Tale*, but also of Sergei Kaledin's *Stroibat* (1990), and Aleksandr Terekhov's *Zema* (1988).

In other words, a military environment most fully conforms to the realist vision of the world, possibly because one must have special

reasons for “evenly ‘shared’” meanings: namely, a totality of force and power, secured in full measure by the chronotope of army/war. Similarly, in Russian literature of the 1960s-1970s, the chronotope of the Zone created ideal opportunities for realizing the potential of realism. Russian culture of the nineties, however, lacks the condition essential to realist writing: “a society in which there is a basis of common understanding.” The destruction of the totalitarian “base” led not to the establishment of a single alternative concept of “truth” and a corresponding language for it, but expressed itself in a headlong fragmentation of the once-unified language into a multitude of “dialects” that resist standard “translation” more strongly the farther they fall from the former center. The very absence of a unified language or of a unified concept of “truth” has become the main problem confronting realism in the nineties. Solving this problem by locking it in “violent” contexts cannot but lead to the marginalization of realism.

Second, the position of the subject capable of “‘mak[ing] sense’ of a society” in traditional Russian realism has been perceptibly transformed: the subject does not create meaning but searches for it, proceeding from *faith* in the existence of this meaning (“pravda” ‘truth’) as an *a priori given*. Perhaps Pavel Basinskii has formulated most clearly the religious teleological variant of “classical” Russian realism, in an article polemicizing against the notion of a realist tradition transformed by the influence of modernism and postmodernism:

Realism knows the world’s intention, senses it, and takes upon itself the voluntary suffering of truthfulness. Not to mold truth according to its own will, but according to “[truth’s] own image and likeness.” The realist is doomed to bide his time until the “secret” of the world, the “heart” of the world, and the “soul” of the world come through in and of themselves in his writings, until words and combinations of them illuminate themselves with an inner light. And if this doesn’t occur, the game is lost and nothing can save it. . . . Any middle stage between realism and modernism leads to the destruction of realism. Its goals and meaning are too precise and do not tolerate relativity. If the artist succumbs to arbitrariness and “self-expression,” that means he has lost faith in the world and in its intention, and his goals now lie in an entirely other area. . . . (238)⁵

The absence of a single concept of “istina” ‘truth,’ in combination with faith in its *a priori* givenness, forms a logical oxymoron.

The quest of the literary hero who places his trust in a given *istina* fully and unproblematically coincides with the quest of the author who through his work hopes to firmly establish the general social “basis of common understanding.” More precisely, this intention inevitably entails a specific (and illegitimate) substitution: the quest of the hero and author is oriented to a model of a single, common social language and *passes itself off* as the global quest of the entire society. What such substitutions lead to may be seen in Vladimov’s *General and His Army*, which, as noted earlier, is the undisputed favorite among the ranks of “true realists.”

From the very first pages of his novel, Vladimov reveals his reliance on the tradition of epic narrative as exemplified in Lev Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, through direct quotations, characters’ detailed interior monologues (in the form of quasi-direct discourse), and the Kutuzovlike active idleness of Kobrisov.

For Vladimov, following Tolstoy, freedom in an epic situation is attained only through consciously embraced dependence. Dependence on the regime and on its political demagogy, ranks, awards, and the patronage of special service, however, is unambiguously portrayed as the servile, base way of humiliating unfreedom. As the novel’s protagonist, General Kobrisov attempts to realize his freedom through service to the fatherland and the government, but not to the regime. For him, service to the government means defense of the people: for example, he cannot come to terms with sending ten thousand “young soldiers” to their death in order to defend a town that before the war had only ten thousand potential draftees (“Should we pay for Russia with Russia?” [229]). This mode of thought constitutes his so-called “stupidity,” which so amazes the aide-de-camp and his fellow generals. His stupidity is freedom.

Kobrisov’s refusal to “pay for Russia with Russia” and to play obsequious games with the authorities encounters the totalitarian regime’s vicious games and malicious will, expressed in full measure through the figure of Marshal Zhukov. “[Zhukov] was a great military leader, who couldn’t have made it in any other army but was born for this one, precisely because he lacked a sensory organ for the word ‘pity.’ He had no idea what it was” (226). And Kobrisov’s inertia (in not giving his supervisor, Vatutin, the plan of the senseless offensive against Myriatin) is the mutiny of the reasonable “government man” against the insanity of the regime.

Yet in the novel's denouement the High Command awards Kobrisov's regiment for taking Myriatin and Kobrisov himself the title of Hero and yet another General's star—in recognition of a successful offensive he did not conduct and actually opposed. Instead of protesting, Kobrisov accepts his role of "victor" and rejoins his army. Why? Because for him this command serves as confirmation and acknowledgment of his contribution to the government, the Fatherland, and consequently, also to the people—with the role of the people here represented by touching peasant women with shovels who feel compassion for the valiant army commander. Neither a general nor anything remotely resembling one, Vladimov fails to notice the *self-betrayal* that occurs here. A General's star and advertised fame reduce words about the salvation of Russia at the cost of Russia into nothing *but* words. Unable to break the general's will through force, the regime *buys* him with praise. This turning point destroys the entire structure of the novel—that which aspired to the role of an "arch" linking the novel's various episodes collapses, degraded into a vulgar simulation of *istina*.

A battery of totalitarian discursiveness (the military order) becomes not only the engine that moves the plot, but also a representative of *a priori istina*, which ultimately is attained by the hero, the author, and society. What is "new" in this truth? Unable to find a new, single common language, Vladimov unconsciously reverts to tried and true totalitarian discourse. The absence of a clear *artistic* response to the question of how to serve the state without serving the regime (Tolstoy, after all, is no help here, for this is a twentieth-century issue) leaves only the outworn symbol of totalitarian discourse to glue into one indivisible whole the people, the government, and the regime. Moreover, the regime here always hides behind the people and the government, while controlling them. Through this primitive ruse, the discourse of totalitarian power subordinates to itself not only the general and his army, but also the artistic conception of Vladimov's entire novel.

Such a turn is highly characteristic of contemporary Russian realism. In search of "a basis of common understanding," traditional realism of the nineties wanders in confusion among the three universals People-Government-God. The last, however, may either be absent (as in Vladimov), or dissolve in the first two. Of course, both the People and the Government are toxic categories, owing to their saturation with totalitarian poisons. As the novel attests,

Vladimov failed to humanize the category of the-state-and-service-to-the-Fatherland precisely because the ideal of government service is alien to the Russian cultural tradition, which despises the state, laughs at it, and sees it as a source of evil and bondage. Yet, since the sole discourse to elevate the category of government was totalitarian discourse, it inevitably proved the trap into which the author faithful to tradition neatly fell.

In this way, realism constantly experiences defeat because of its principal aim—traditionalism. On the one hand, the perception of the classical (and especially Tolstoyan) tradition is inevitably mediated by socialist realism, which adapted the classics to its needs, transforming them into illustrations of class theory. For several generations of Soviets, Pushkin forever remained a champion of the Decembrists, Gogol—an exposé of the petty gentry, and Tolstoy—a “mirror of the Russian revolution” (Lenin). To surmount this barrier of interpretation is extremely difficult, requiring either unusually superior erudition or its opposite: complete ignorance. Most Russian writers of the older and middle-aged generations were semi-educated, which doomed them to a position between these two poles, hence their dependence on socialist realist stereotypes for their perception of the classics. On the other hand, placing one’s hopes in the classical tradition as a new gospel brimming with readymade answers to all of the tragic questions of the twentieth century has significant dangers. Such reliance is, above all, infantile by its very nature, inasmuch as it presupposes an incapacity for independent thought and comprehension, and reveals contemporary realists’ yearning for a suprapersonal authority to “guide and direct” them.

Secondly, treating the classics as a universal “book of home remedies” for all calamities and misfortunes unavoidably compromises and impoverishes the classics themselves. It reduces them to a kind of “Quotations of Chairman Mao,” a collection of platitudes, ostensibly explaining everything, but in fact clarifying nothing. Strictly speaking, this impermeability of the classics to dialogue manifested itself in Russian culture as early as the end of the 1960s. In fact, the phenomenon was addressed in such works of fiction as Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moskva-Petushki* (*Moscow to the End of the Line*, 1969) and Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkinski dom* (*Pushkin House*, 1971), texts that marked the beginning of postmodernism in Rus-

“In the Garden of Other Possibilities”: Postmodernism as Reality

The disintegration of a single socio-cultural language, which engendered a crisis in the “old” realism, became the very ground on which Russian postmodernism should have flourished, having amassed enough strength over years of underground existence. The destruction of the Soviet socio-cultural monolith was a gradual process, its tectonic development dating from the Thaw (1956-64). Russian postmodernism was simultaneously a product of and a catalyst in this process. With the late 1980s-early 1990s, Russian postmodernism finally attained self-awareness as an independent trend, separate from both the avant garde and dissident critical realism.

Publications of postmodernist classics from the 1960s-70s coincided with the legalization of the aesthetic “underground” of the 1970s-80s, and with the emergence in print of a new generation of authors. During glasnost, Russian postmodernism appeared as if independently of historical evolution, uniting at least three literary generations, frequently isolated from each other and exploring different creative directions.⁶ When the shock from this aesthetic volley subsided, and arguments about postmodernism began to move into a theoretical realm, the literary picture confronting readers and critics proved somewhat unexpected.

Quite unexpectedly, the authors whose oeuvre originally became identified with Russian postmodernism rather quickly exhausted their aesthetic potential, fell into silence (for instance, Tatyana Tolstaya, who, after the huge success of her stories in the late 1980s and early 1990s, stopped publishing fiction entirely), or, even worse, entered a prolific phase of self-repetition (Evgenii Popov, Viacheslav P’etsukh, Viktor Erofeev).⁷ Furthermore, the influx of new names in postmodernism turned out to be far smaller than expected.

The most interesting aspects of postmodernist prose in the 1990s derive from three dominant literary discourses of the 1970s and 1980s: official socialist realism, semi-official and unofficial historical narrative, and science fiction. The heritage of socialist realism finds its most persuasive and profound articulation in Vladimir Sorokin’s writing. The historical narrative (ranging from both Karamzin’s and Kliuchevsky’s histories—forbidden in Soviet

times—to Solzhenitsyn, Trifonov, and the historiosophic mysticism of someone like Daniil Andreev) became the inspirational material for the postmodernist chronicles of Vladimir Sharov, a writer who provoked perhaps the most heated critical discussions in the Moscow press. Finally, Viktor Pelevin, recipient of the Small Booker for his first collection of tales and stories *Sinii fonar'* (*The Blue Lantern*, 1991) with several published works that placed him in the ranks of “must-read” Russian writers, draws richly on the anti-regime, anti-utopian science fiction of the 1970s-1980s epitomized by the Strugatskii brothers and their followers.

Intriguingly, these three discourses in combination cover all temporality conceivable within culture: the past (the historical novel), the present (the socialist realist insistence on the total “reasonableness” of reality), and the future (utopia/dystopia). On the other hand, if during the notorious years of Stagnation socialist realism constituted the reading for the masses loyal to authority, then the historical novel defined the interests of readers from the dissident-oriented intelligentsia in the humanities, while science fiction was the predominant reading of the technical intelligentsia. Thus, even if Sorokin, Sharov, and Pelevin deconstruct the former cultural universe in all its temporal dimensions, consciously or unconsciously their efforts engage the most vigorous forces within this universe and, accordingly, still preserve the greatest momentum. One might say that, notwithstanding their postmodernist radicalism, Sorokin, Sharov, and Pelevin value the familiar connections established between literature and the reader, and they try to preserve them within a rapidly crumbling (or fast-changing) post-Soviet cultural environment.

These three very different writers are united by at least two related features that on first glance might seem unrelated. First, unlike the postmodernists who entered the spotlight during the first years of perestroika (Venedikt Erofeev, Tatyana Tolstaya, even Evgenii Popov), all three lack a highly individualized style. They easily change stylistic tonality, depending upon the subject; their artistic signature manifests itself not in style, but in a partiality for one plot model (or philosophical theme) or another. This lack of style allows many traditionally oriented critics to automatically deny the literary talent of each of these authors: Irina Rodnianskaia, Sergei Kostyrko and Aleksandr Arkhangel'skii express more or less this

opinion about Sharov, Pavel Basinskii about Pelevin, and Stanislav Rassadin about Sorokin. Yet this stylelessness has played an inestimable role in the evolution of Russian postmodernism, which in the literature from the late 1960s to the 1980s in many respects compensated for the forcibly disrupted development of Russian modernism. Hence the paradoxical combination, characteristic of Russian postmodernists from Venedikt Erofeev and Sasha Sokolov to Viktor Erofeev and Tatyana Tolstaya, of modernist authorial self-expression with postmodernist intertextuality, depersonalized play with others' signs, and endless dialogism. Since Sorokin, Sharov, and Pelevin are severed from the modernist tenet of self-expression, their authorial "I" is extrapersonal and consequently devoid of style. A metaphor frequently reworked by Pelevin accurately captures this "impersonality": the author is like a computer user who controls the behavior of characters in a computer game. Both the player and the virtual characters, however, submit to one and the same (admittedly, very plastic) rules, and the player not so much controls the characters, as almost completely identifies himself with them.

Second, this transformation of authorial consciousness is buttressed by a strategic precept shared by all three prosaists: to remythologize discursive structures. The goal of the first, "analytical" stage of Russian postmodernism was to demythologize the discourses of power (above all, that of socialist realism) and to reveal the simulated nature of the phenomena subjected to "serious" treatment by these discourses; these imperatives incubated Russian conceptualism, especially in its sots-art variant. Sorokin, Sharov, and Pelevin represent the second, "synthetic" phase of postmodernism, already working with the ruins of the once integral monoliths of power, of historical memory, and of utopia. However, the very incoherence of these fragments, according to the logic of their writing, is subordinated to the pull of specific mythologems and ritual complexes, the revelation of which concerns the trio in question. Accordingly, the author here is not the storyteller of myth (like the modernist writer), but an experimenter who creates a special environment in which mythological structures, as if of their own accord, unpredictably appear in combination with the processes of entropy. The author's task is to record, with maximal impartiality, this play of chaos and order. This commonality in strategy, of course, does not eliminate diversity of authorial tactics, which the following section addresses.

Vladimir Sorokin, or the Presentness of Power

Sorokin became famous first through his novellas, then his novels *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (*Four Stout Hearts*) and *Norma* (*The Norm*), in which he artistically reveals certain bloody primordial rituals concealed within socialist realist discourse that establish not order, but nonsense, absurdity, and chaos as higher universals.⁸ Sorokin's invariable device is the translation of the symbolic into the naturalistic: the presentation of a banner or party-membership card is replaced by the devouring of fecal matter, devotion to the cause is expressed by running someone's mother through a meat grinder, and the highest approval of the authorities is expressed in the excretion of a document formalizing a project, and so forth. The symbolic power of discourse appears as crude, bloody violence, going back to the most archaic forms of power. Sorokin started with the sots-art play with socialist realist plots, but very quickly realized that the same system of devices may be applied to any other discourse endowed with authority, and consequently, with power. His sots-art quite rapidly moved beyond the limits of socialist realism, which he took as a model for any literary-mythological discourse that organically strives to confirm its absolute power over the consciousness of the reader and of culture as a whole. Thus Sorokin easily transferred the logic of the deconstruction of socialist realism to the deconstruction of the power of literature and words as a category: hence the pastiche of interpretations of dissident discourse (*Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* [*Marina's Thirtieth Love*] and "Mesiats v Dakhau" ["A Month in Dachau"]) and the discourse of Russian classics (*Roman* [*Novel*]). Sorokin is genuinely talented at fully mastering any discourse, but the more authoritative the discourse, the more assuredly and swiftly he takes it to the same absurdist or sadistic core that he originally uncovered in socialist realism. In short, Sorokin's conceptualism calls into question the most fundamental characteristics of literature: the right to create a symbolic reality, the right to construct a hierarchy of meanings.

Freedom from discursive dependence was proclaimed the overriding goal of such manipulations in Russian conceptualism.⁹ In fact, however, sots-art deconstruction proved to be a form of affirmation not of freedom, but of power. Freedom requires a language of self-expression, whereas sots-art declares every discourse a lan-

demonstrates still greater power, which in the given case obviously belongs to the writer-conceptualist who performs the deconstruction.

Sorokin's latest work to date, the film script *Moskva* (*Moscow*), co-authored with the film director Aleksandr Zel'dovich, is an interesting experiment in moving beyond the limits of intra-literary games, into the sphere of "life." Sorokin turns to the New Russians, a new social class unquestionably possessing material and political, but not yet discursive, power—a class that still lacks its own language within the culture. Sorokin, in essence, offers his services. He creates a cocktail from socialist realism, Chekhov's three sisters (three heroines called Ol'ga, Masha, and Irina—two sisters and their mother, who, however, sleeps with the very same men as her daughters),¹⁰ and the standard Sorokin naturalism, which in this instance becomes the "pravda" 'truth' of the New Russians' life, with their mafia customs, settling of scores, and other horrors.¹¹ Such an approach, in my view, has its own brand of integrity. Instead of exploiting the energy of power in the discourses of power that already exist in the culture, it is logical to try to create a new discourse of power that still awaits formation. However, such a trajectory seems to lead beyond the limits of postmodernism, somewhere into the domain of a new norm that favors force over freedom. Russian avant-gardism underwent a similar evolution in the 1920s, when it encountered the dilemma of perishing or dissolving its energy in the power of the "government as a total work of art" (Gunter). Today the Russian government has no pretensions to artistic interests, but the same dilemma looms large on account of purely economic factors.

Vladimir Sharov, or the Past as Fantasy

Sharov is the author of several historical novels *Sled v sled* (*Following in the Footsteps* 1989), *Repetitsii* (*Rehearsals*, 1991), *Do i vo vremia* (*Before and During Time*, 1993), *Mne li ne pozhalet'* (*Should I Not Feel Pity*, 1995), *Staraia Devotchka* (*The Old Girl*, 1998), written in more or less one and the same quasi-documentary style. Each one of these novels offers an utterly phantasmagorical version of Russian history, while establishing an aura of complete factual authenticity around these interpretations. The most significant is *Before and During Time*, which provoked a critical scandal.¹² The novel centers on the three lives of French writer Germaine de Staël, who at the height of her considerable fame during the early nineteenth century fled from Napoleon and visited Russia,

where she was very popular. According to Sharov, Madame de Staël magically regenerated herself (not unlike in Karel Capek's *The Macropoulos Secret*). The novel simultaneously tells the history of the Russian Revolution (and revolutions in general), in which the utopian Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, Lev Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, the composer Aleksandr Scriabin, and, of course, Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky participate. All of these figures are interconnected through their relationships with de Staël, who directly influences the course of Russian history (thus Stalin is her son, who takes her last name as a pseudonym and also becomes her lover in her next life). This whole enchanting spectacle ends with a worldwide flood, which occurs in the uncertain present of approximately the end of the 1960s. Moreover, Noah's Arc proves to be the geriatric unit of the Moscow psychiatric hospital, where Madame de Staël and Nikolai Fedorov, their sons and pupils, as well as the hero-narrator, are saved. This summary, of course, offers the bare bones of the novel's plot. However, the combination of this phantasmagorical plot with the seriousness of tone and absence of even the slightest distance between author and the hero-narrator, who likewise transmits with no distance whatever the stories of other characters, effectively pulls one *into* this postmodernist spectacle: the fantastic does not amaze, conventions lack markings and seem not to be there at all.

Sharov's novel does not accommodate the contrast of a fictitious mythological history with a certain "historical truth." The latter, as a rule, is tragic and preserved in the consciousness of eye-witnesses and participants in the events as a moral compass (the historical prose of the 1970s and 1980s rests on this postulate, above all in the person of Iurii Trifonov). This antithesis does not operate in Sharov's novel. Some historical myths in his work are in opposition to other, similar myths and not even necessarily myths, but merely the fantasies of various characters, which, nevertheless, come true in the course of Russian history. Beyond the bounds of these fictitious constructs there is no room for unambiguous "historical truth." These myths are simultaneously comical and prophetically serious, concocted by someone and as objective as eternity. All the characters in Sharov's novel essentially try to create a mythology that most corresponds to God's idea, because that, in their view, is precisely the means to acquire power. This principle guides the behavior of Fedorov, Scriabin, Lenin, and Stalin, but not of Madame

It is significant that among the heroes-mythmakers preoccupied with the problem of resurrecting the dead, only de Staël more than once revives the dead *in practice*, warming *their bodies with her own*: that is how she resurrects first Stalin, then the old men from the hospital ward. De Staël's vital energy expresses itself in sexuality. "She had, in general, an astonishing gift for love" (IV, 51), states the narrator. And the point is not even that her bosom literally appears as the source of power, both political and mythological. What is more important is that through sexuality de Staël realizes herself in history, turning the revolution into the embodiment of her gift for love: ". . . all of them—the despairing and the self-possessed, the reckless and the prudent, and those who simply wanted to show off—*she loved all of them to the point of trembling legs, convulsions, and spasms*. The point is that many, very many of them were her lovers, and *she didn't forget, didn't erase from her memory a single one of those whom she'd loved and who had loved her*" (IV, 21). This gift of love is precisely what elevates the sinful de Staël over God, who, according to the logic of the novel, is cynical, tired, and long indifferent to individual human life.

The contrast between the power of God, which confers power, to de Staël's powerlessness is highly significant. If God is the manifestation of the traditional mythological hierarchy, which applies to history, then de Staël's mythological life force, embodied in feminine sexuality, is fundamentally *not hierarchical*. If all the heroes of the novel try to divine whom God *has chosen*, then de Staël loves without choosing (handsome young men, decrepit old men, etc.), but each time she gives the divine gift of the life force to those she loves. From the beginning of the novel to the end, Sharov openly mythologizes feminine sexuality, while reducing masculinity to a minimum.¹³

De Staël's sexuality embodies a power over life that is non-teleological and hierarchically unstructured. It is she who becomes the basis of the author's myth of Russian history, which Sharov creates as if competing with his characters. The very attempt to create a myth of history that comprehends the conventionality and fictionality of such structures is highly significant. While deconstructing the mythology of history, Sharov becomes convinced that the creation of such mythologies, however absurd and fantastic, is the only way for the individual to exist in history. History is, in fact, a complex interweaving of mythologies of history, which

engender, and argue with, one another. Strange as it seems, such an artistic structure assumes a *return of the subject to the center*: according to the logic of Sharov's novel, not only impersonal discourses but individuals—as author-creators and characters of mythlike discourses—turn out to be essential for the formation of history.

This tendency in fiction cannot be fully realized on the textual level without the synthesis of postmodernist aesthetics and the experience of the old realism, with its technique of “the dialectics of the soul” and its play of “character and circumstance.” No wonder, then, that Sharov does not consider himself a postmodernist, insisting on his attachment to classical realism.¹⁴

Viktor Pelevin or On the Other Side of the Simulacrum

Starting with his early stories and novellas in the collection *Sinii fonar* (*Blue Lantern*, winner of the Small Booker Prize in 1992), Pelevin clearly revealed his central theme, to which he has adhered in all subsequent works without, however, fundamentally repeating himself. His characters unremittingly struggle with the question of what constitutes reality. If classical postmodernism from the late 1960s to the late 1980s (in the works of Venedikt Erofeev, Sasha Sokolov, Andrei Bitov, and Dmitrii Prigov) focused on pinpointing the simulacra that passed for reality, then for Pelevin (the youngest of the most recent Russian postmodernists), the realization that all one's surroundings are simulacra marks only the starting point for reflection. In his fiction, life is most likely a dream (*The Blue Lantern*), a computer game “Prints Gosplana” (“Prince of the Gosplan”), the movement of broiler chicks in an incubator “Zatvornik i shestipalyi” (“The Hermit and the Six-Toed”), and even the meaningless hum of insects (*Zhizn' nasekomykh* [*The Life of Insects*]). With impressive virtuosity Pelevin inscribes the imperceptible metamorphoses of a prominent executive into a computer tank-driver, and a beach prostitute into a dragonfly, but his motives in doing so are not satiric. In mixing human passions with the instincts of an insect, he tries to see beyond the surface of the disparaging comparison between the senselessness of human existence and the blindness of moths flying toward the light. Pelevin is interested not in the transformation of reality into a simulacrum, but in the reverse process—the birth of reality from the simulacrum. His intention

As a character from "Prince of Gosplan" says: even if the goal of the quest that occupies one's whole life turns out to be hollow, a lie, or a cardboard fiction, "when man spends so much time and energy getting there and finally arrives, he can no longer see everything as it actually is. Though this also isn't quite right. Ultimately there is no 'actually' in actuality. Let's say that he can't allow himself to see" (*Buben* 233). This vision explains why Omon Ra, protagonist of the eponymous novella, upon discovering that a cosmic flight that cost him his tremendous suffering and the lives of his friends is nothing but a secret dramatization performed somewhere in an underground Moscow metro, does not cease being a cosmic hero, like the Egyptian god Ra, who overcame death. How real the flight is does not matter; for Omon Ra it is the accomplishment of a transition, equivalent to an archaic rite of passage, through a zone of terrible ordeals, and in fact, of temporary death. And in *The Life of Insects* the scarabs for whom the entire universe is concentrated in their manure-sphere are decidedly not a mockery of human quests for the meaning of life. On the contrary, the Pelevin dung beetle imparts to these quests a grotesque seriousness: even manure, if linked with dramas of consciousness, pain, hope, despair, and perseverance, ceases to be simply manure.

In his latest and best novel to date, *Chapaev i Pustota* (*Chapayev and Pustota/Void*, 1996), Pelevin definitively erases the border between dream and reality. The heroes of phantasmagorias that weave in and out of each other themselves cannot distinguish which of the plots in which they participate represent dream, and which constitute reality. The latest in the venerable Russian tradition of boys as truth-seekers, Petr Pustota (Void), under the direction of his Red commander-mentor, Vasilii Chapaev, gradually realizes that the question of where illusion ends and reality begins makes no sense, for everything is a void and the product of void. But if "any form is a void," then "a void is any form" (367). Consequently, in grasping his freedom from the power of both simulacra and "reality," Pustota acquires the strength to create the world anew, expanding into eternity the limits of his "I," his "inner Mongolia."

Chapaev and Pustota/Void is a paradoxical educational novel about the transformations of simulacra and illusions into a reality immutable solely for the individual, a reality that easily reveals its simulacral nature and has no significance for anyone else. Strictly speaking, Pelevin's hero calls utopia to account, thereby revealing

his ties with the Russian tradition of science fiction, but soberly recognizes the unrealizability and danger of an attained utopian unity.

As even these brief comments on the most interesting authors of Russian postmodernism of the nineties show, that postmodernism in these authors' praxis strives to overcome its own philosophical and aesthetic boundaries, and so in principle is not equal to itself. The reason for this nonequivalence is that in all three authors one senses a distinct *nostalgia for reality*, whether it be the reality of power, myth, or even void. Such nostalgia, obviously, may be expressed, but not relieved, through postmodernist means.

In general, this nostalgia dictates many of the distinctive features of contemporary Russian literature, from the popularity of memoirs as a genre (two of the five Russian Booker-winners, Bulat Okudzhava's *Uprazdnennyi teatr* (*The Emptied Theater*, 1994) and Andrei Sergeev's *Al'bom dlia marok* (*Stamp Album*, 1996), were judged not novels but memoirs, contrary to the rules of this prize) to the ever-increasing stylizations in imitation of nineteenth-century novels (Mikhail Shishkin's *Vsekh ozhidaet odna noch'* [*The Same Night Awaits Everyone*, 1993] and Anton Utkin's *Khorovod* [*Round Dance*, 1996] and *Svad'ba za Bugom* [*Wedding Across the Bug River*, 1997]). The most recent and "systemic" response to this nostalgia for reality is the neosentimentalism of the 1990s.

"I Dedicated My Lyre to a Lisp . . .": Sentimentalism? Sensualism? Sadomasochism?

This trend arose as if on the periphery of postmodernism's struggle with realism. Without fine-sounding declarations, "neosentimentalists" demonstrate the possibility of a "third way" that avoids both social concerns and intellectual complications, favoring family drama over intertextual play. Interestingly, both realists and postmodernists seek to appropriate whatever striking achievements this "third way" vouchsafes. Symptomatic in this regard is Viktor Erofeev's inclusion under the rubric of postmodernists in his *Fleurs du Mal* such a prosaist as Viktor Astaf'ev (Erofeyev ix-xxx). At the same time, such authors as Liudmila Petrushevskaja and Marina Palei figure in critics' lists of realists, despite the obvious postmodernist accents in their poetics.

Critics with widely dissimilar aesthetic orientations noted the

neo-Freudian Mikhail Zolotonosov (26), the sociologically-inclined Natal'ia Ivanova (211-23), and the theorist and ideologue of Russian postmodernism, Mikhail Epshtein.¹⁵ Each interpreted the trend in his own way, that interpretation determining the choice of writer presumably representative of the phenomenon: Ulitskaia (Zolotonosov), Tolstaya and Petrushevskaiia (Ivanova), Kibirov, and even Prigov (Epshtein). The potentially disconcerting breadth of the range is indicative of the status of neosentimentalism in contemporary Russian culture. For it is precisely on the terrain of neosentimentalism that one encounters the marginal figures of postmodernism, such as Timur Kibirov, Anatolii Korolev, Aleksandr Kabakov, Aleksei Slapovskii (especially in novellas from the cycle *Obshchedostupnyi pesennik* [*Popular Songbook*]), and Evgenii Kharitonov, on the one hand, and the marginal figures of realism and socialist realism, such as Liudmila Ulitskaia, Marina Palei, Galina Shcherbakova, Marina Vishnevetskaia, and the playwright Nikolai Koliada (the most frequently staged author of the decade), on the other. This type of writing undoubtedly is represented in purest form by Liudmila Petrushevskaiia.

The designation "neosentimentalist" is contingent, for the nineties have witnessed a serious reaccentuation of the sentimentalist tradition proper. One of the key sources of neosentimentalism was the naturalism of early perestroika, or "chernukha" (analogous to American "dirty realism") in the prose of Sergei Kaledin, Svetlana Vasilenko, Larisa Vaneeva, Leonid Gabyshev, Vladimir Ianitskii, and several other authors. In her thorough analysis of the "feminine" branch of this prose, Helena Goscilo cautions, "To dismiss this phenomenon—what Russians call "chernukha" 'grime and slime'—as merely the vulgar flaunting of newly acquired freedom in the interests of *épatage* is to underestimate the profound metamorphosis in psychology and aesthetics that women writers have sustained and written into their texts" (*Dehexing* 96). In Goscilo's view, this prose "spotlights the grotesque body, the uncensored, disruptive body of apertures and appetites—Bakhtin's bodily lower stratum. It opens the female body to 'unsanitary' activity" (89). This observation may be extended to all naturalistic prose at the end of the eighties. Female authors merely intensified the corporeality characteristic of this whole tendency, which became the ground on which the neosentimentalist trend of the nineties developed.

The suffering body or, conversely, the body seeking pleasure became the central character of this literature. In this sense there is an obvious relationship between such seemingly unrelated works as the poems of Timur Kibirov, "Sortiry" ("Toilets") and "Eleonor" ("Elinor"), in which the unrealized sexuality of the Soviet adolescent or enlisted soldier is identified with the only significant, although perverted and suppressed, sense of unfree existence; Marina Palei's *Kabiriia s Obvodnogo kanala* (*Cabiria from the By-pass Canal*, 1991) in which Mon'ka Rybnaia's body unselfishly loves the male sex in its near-entirety, ultimately expanding into a tragicomic symbol of nature, inexhaustible vitality, and eternally renewed life; Anatolii Korolev's novel *Eron* (1994), in which the body's chase after pleasure is presented as the main "plot" of the whole epoch; and Aleksandr Kabakov's novel *Poslednii geroi* (*Last Hero*, 1995), where the copulation of the protagonists, who for the sake of this joining have endured a protracted torment of unrelieved mutual lust, puts the government disinformation computer network out of operation, and brings a new revolution in its wake.

Corporeality has become foregrounded as a result of global disappointment in reason and the fruit of reason—utopias, grand ideas, ideologies. Rationality is interpreted as the source of fictions and simulacra, the body as unassailable authenticity, and the feelings surrounding the life of the body as uniquely devoid of simulation. Among these feelings, pity occupies the place of honor as a synonym for humaneness. This most elementary humane reaction corresponds to the representation of the individual by the body, and of spiritual unity by physical and physiological integration. In short, the new sentimentalism seeks a language in which bodily functions can acquire a spiritual meaning. With corporeality understood as self-identity, sexuality becomes a search for dialogue: our only salvation turns out to be the ability to give our bodies to others.

Corporeality traditionally belonged to unsentimental naturalism, and sentimentalism was incorporeal. These formerly contrasting categories have become inextricably bound. Of course, not every instance of corporeality in contemporary Russian literature begets sentimentalism. Vladimir Sorokin, for example, is insistently corporeal, but radically unsentimental in his prose. His brand of corporeality is an abstract category, not a suffering, concrete body in texts where protagonists are merely functions of a language of

Corporeality in Liudmia Petrushevskaja's prose is an entirely different matter. As Goswami accurately observes, "[Petrushevskaja employs] reverse discursive traditions by tabooing the emotional-spiritual dimension of experience privileged in nineteenth-century prose and replacing it with a lexicon of physiological processes as the sole permissible (unadulterated) mode of discourse" (*Dehexing* 91). This substitution results in psychological collisions that acquire a distinctly sadomasochistic dimension: love demands bodily torment or suffering.

Vremia—noch' (*The Time: Night*), one of Petrushevskaja's best texts, tells of a passionate and devastating maternal love that has distinctly sadistic features. According to Havelock Ellis's definition, "the sadist desires to inflict pain, but in some cases if not in most, he desires that it should be felt as love" (Ellis 34). The perception of pain as a manifestation of love is precisely what in Petrushevskaja defines the relationship between mother and child, and, above all, mother and daughter. A constant self-proclaimed proponent of love, Anna Andrianovna insists on its indivisibility from pain and suffering: "Love them and they'll tear you to pieces" (Petrushevskaja 51,453).¹⁶ When her daughter is taken to the maternity ward, Anna Andrianovna immediately concludes, "he [Alyona's husband, ML] has killed her," before realizing that "she's started giving birth" (48,452). The assumption of something fatal likewise surfaces at novella's end, when Anna Andrianovna returns to an empty apartment.

With the notable exception of Gilles Deleuze,¹⁷ scholars have contended that sadism in principle is not distinguishable (or, at least, separable) from masochism, for both entail sexual reaction to pain. In Anna Andrianovna we find very obvious masochistic reactions, in particular in her relationship with her son, Andrei, from whom she joyfully accepts any kind of indignity, including out-and-out pillage. The syndrome expresses itself in a naturalistic metaphor of vampirism ("he devoured my mind and sucked my blood" [73,465]). "The mental representation of pain acts as a powerful sexual stimulant . . . pain acts as a sexual stimulant because it is the most powerful of all methods for arousing emotion" (35), asserts Ellis, and Anna Andrianovna's confessions provide rich confirmation of this diagnosis. Whereas pain is present as a rhetorical figure in Sorokin's prose, in Petrushevskaja's, pain is maximally revealed and given as if outside traditional rhetoric. The language of the emotional/

psychological tradition, having lost its expressivity, has become effaced. Pain is the only strong feeling still able to stimulate an immediate emotional reaction. Accordingly, sadomasochistic corporeality offers a means of reanimating emotionality in literature and culture as a whole. This explains why corporeality appears as a condition of sentimentalism, and, more precisely, of sadomasochistic sensualism.

It is characteristic that in *The Time: Night*, as in numerous other Petrushevskian texts, sadomasochism finds a profoundly sentimental solution. Throughout the text, the generic archetype of the idyll rhythmically peers through the picture of family disintegration and permanent scandal. As Bakhtin notes, the idyll shows the "age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable" (225). In *The Time: Night* the idyllic cycle and integrity of life find embodiment in the chronotope of the typical two-room apartment. Here the "age-old rooting of the life of generations" has a negative cast, expressed in claustrophobia, complete absence of privacy, and rituals of repetition materialized in the "worn spots on the couch" (495).

As noted by other critics, the generations are caught in a cycle of destructive repetition.¹⁸ Not one of the characters, however, learns any lesson from mistakes made earlier. Everything repeats itself all over again, without any attempt whatsoever to go beyond the limits of the circle of torment. Such a rhythm derives from the logic of the idyllic archetype: "The unity of place in the life of generations weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between the various phases of one and the same life. The unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave (the same little corner, the same lime trees, the same house)" (Bakhtin 225). This logic collapses three characters into one, at various stages of growth from the cradle to the grave. Extrapolating from experience here is impossible because distance between characters is impossible: they flow smoothly into one another, belonging not to themselves but to the cyclical flow of time, which for them carries only losses, destruction, and waste. Moreover, Petrushevskia emphasizes the corporeal nature of this unity of generations: the cradle is the "sweet smell of soap and phlox and freshly laundered diapers" (151,507); the grave is "the stench of excrement, the urine-sodden clothes" (151,507). Bakhtin emphasizes: "Strictly speaking, the idyll does not know the trivial details

of everyday life . . . Thus sexuality is almost always incorporated in the idyll only in sublimated form" (226). Petrushevskaja recasts the idyll as an anti-idyll, which nevertheless preserves the structural carcass and semantics of the old genre.¹⁹

The signals of repetition in the life of generations taking shape in this carcass form an internal rhythm in the novella as a whole. What is self-destructive for the family turns out to be the repetitious, cyclical form of its *stable* existence, an order of sorts. It is an alogical, "maimed" order (note Alena's comment about their "maimed [krivaia] family" [496]), but the only order they know. Petrushevskaja consciously erases the markers of time, history, and social structure—for this order is essentially timeless, eternal.

For the neosentimentalism of the 1990s, postmodernism, obviously, is a source no less important than naturalism. Postmodernists like Timur Kibirov or Anatolii Korolev, or even Mikhail Epshtein, who, wholly in the spirit of the "new sincerity," wrote the touching novel-essay *Otsovstvo* (*Paternity*), come to corporeality and the sentimentalist and sexual themes associated with it as if to something that definitively replaces deconstructed ideologies and utopias. The approach recalls grass growing amidst the ruins of once authoritative totalities; grass here is a "post"-language that does not refer to any abstract meaning and does not require the category of "truth" ("istina"). In the terminology of chaos theory, as elaborated by Ilya Prigogine, corporeality is realized not as a Higher Law, but as plural "dissipative orders"—that is, transitory structures with a high degree of orderliness that arise within states of imbalance and fluctuation and acquire a new significance amidst the chaos of government, social, and cultural disintegration (Prigogine and Stengers, *passim*).

Under such conditions, quests for "truth" are senseless, inasmuch as the corporeal experience of one individual is inapplicable to another, except perhaps in a profoundly medical sense (and in this sense the boom in publications of all sorts on sexology that have flooded the Russian book market are the fruit of this tendency). Sentimentality in this interpretation cannot express any kind of extra-individual meanings; it embodies a fundamental singleness of meaning. As Timur Kibirov writes in "Twenty Sonnets to Sasha Zapoeva" (1995), demonstratively addressed not to a figure of universal significance (in contrast to Brodsky's "Twenty Sonnets to Maria Stuart"), but to his own two- or three-year-old daughter:

I dedicated my lyre to a lisp. It
seems to me the sole possible
and adequate (although insanely complicated)
creative method. And let Khayyam sing of wine,

let Sorokin sing of sperm and shit
zealously and heart-rendingly,
I'll nonetheless sing in hopeless pride
only of tears of emotion. (5)

The contrast of one's own "insanely complicated" method to conceptualism (in the person of Sorokin), with that trend to which the majority of critics still belonged until recently, says a great deal. Mikhail Epstein has interpreted this phenomenon as "soft conceptualism": "If 'hard' conceptualism [Prigov, Sorokin (M.L.)] demonstrates the stereotypical character of emotion, then 'soft' conceptualism, which transcends the postmodernist paradigm, consciously reveals the emotional power and authenticity of stereotypes (*After* 371).²⁰ Epstein offers another explanation, however, in his sui generis philosophical diary, *Paternity*, which, as a book about the first year of his daughter's life, in its fervor strikingly coincides with Kibirov's cycle. Describing the inexpressible joy that a father experiences when he carries his newborn child in his arms, presses her to himself, and nurtures her, the author confesses:

You enjoy the clean smell of the little head, kissing the tiny but already rounded little hands, the smooth whiteness of the skin, and you experience primordially the satisfaction that in adult relationships is achieved only after a passionate frenzy. There is no point in searching for union, in struggling for intimacy—we are primordially united with each other as one being. Pressing her to myself, I don't strive for some non-existent, longed-for closeness, but am completely filled with the closeness that already exists. (43)

In essence, here the sentimental experience of corporeal intimacy guarantees the *integrity of the "I"*—neither abstract nor metaphysical, but maximally concrete and sensual. Moreover, this integrity is not self-sufficient, but is open to the world and even to God. This shift is extremely significant: if the goal of postmodernism is the destruction of *totalities*, the disintegration of wholeness into fragments of "other" languages and consciousnesses, which quite logically led to the "death of the author" (Roland Barthes) and the

“dispersion of the subject” (Michel Foucault), then neosentimentalism returns anew to *integrity as a value*, as to an immediate experience of bliss. Metaphysics, which the full power of deconstructionist analysis seemed to have turned to dust, bursts in here through the back door, not as an intellectual, but as a sensual/emotional fact.

This tendency has several parallels in the cultural history of the twentieth century: first and foremost, Vasily Rozanov, who conceived of the sexual sphere as an antithesis to catastrophic social horrors and conflicts. Subsequently that trend surfaces in the neosentimentalism of the post-revolutionary generation, about which Nabokov’s contemporary, the émigré writer Boris Poplavskii, wrote in the article “O smerti i zhalosti v *Chislakh*” (“On Death and Pity in *Chisla*” 1931):

Mystical pity for humanity is a new note. And doesn’t it sound inseparably in “Vecher u Kler” (“Evening at Clare’s” [Gaito Gazdanov]), in the description of the death of the Wunderkind Luzhin (in Nabokov), and in Boldyrev’s confused “Mal’chiki i devochki” (“Boys and Girls”). But why is this pity mystical?—you’ll ask. *Because it is absolute*. And it is the only feeling that the young émigré harbors in opposition to Bolshevik cruelty. (263; emphasis in the original)

As a rule, such a tendency to a greater or lesser degree finds expression after a period of “storm and stress”—such as the revolutionary/avantgardist/postmodernist attacks on universals, authoritativeness, hierarchies: in short, on totalities. The more powerful the attack, the more prolonged the neosentimentalist recoil.

What is most fascinating about the current literary situation in Russia is that realism, postmodernism, and neosentimentalism all lay claims to the role of mainstream, but not one of them is capable of managing this role. Why? More than likely, because the most interesting works within each of these trends, as noted above, purposefully undermine the foundations of their own aesthetics. They exist on the edge of the given trend and strive to go beyond its limits, either somewhere into the unknown, or, conversely, into the all too well-known (the case of realism, drawn into the embrace of totalitarian aesthetics).

A literature without a “mainstream” is a strange and unpredictable phenomenon. It has considerable potential and many possibilities, and the degree to which these may be realized depends on

a great number of often random factors. In chaos theory such a condition is called a "bifurcation cascade." Once a system has undergone a bifurcation cascade, the changes in it become irreversible and the system acquires a high level of stability. Russian literature of the 1990s continues to go through a bifurcation cascade, which at first was ideological and political, then social and economic, and now is above all artistic. It has not yet achieved stability. Whether literature actually *needs* stability is an endlessly debatable issue.

As the 1990s draw to a close, Russian literature evidences a shift from its earlier state of "leave for the wounded" (which responded to a loss of priorities and authority) to a hard-won self-confidence in its new social role. In any event, the energetic activities of younger writers, the keen competition for literary prizes, and the passion of critical debates and polemics confirm the diagnosis offered in Tolstoy's tale, that "a sick man is more alive than dead." For the time being, Russian literature's new socio-cultural role may be reduced to the functions of a "cottage industry," as summed up in the epigraph from Chekhov. Perhaps becoming a cottage industry befits literature more than becoming a Soviet factory with a party organizer, a local trade union committee, hard drinking, rush jobs, and payment on a sliding scale for an overfulfilled plan. A cottage industry has a chance to metamorphose into art. The Soviet factory lacks that chance.

Translated by Karen McDowell
 and Helena Goscilo

Notes

1. For a particularized account of "literature's" battle with pulp fiction, see Goscilo, "Big Buck Books: Pulp Fiction in Postsoviet Russia."
2. For a discussion of the historico-literary perspectives of compromise among modernism, realism, and postmodernism, see Leiderman, "Zhizn' posle smerti. . ."
3. This triumph was not marred, but only enhanced by the verbal attacks of the front-line writer Vladimir Bogomolov (*Knizhnoe obozrenie*, May 9, 1995), in full accordance with the realist paradigm. He accused Vladimov, who had not seen military action, of "distorting of historical truth," and thereby provoked a new wave of discussion about the novel. See, for ex-

ample: Kardin V. "Passion and Predilection: the Controversy over G. Vladimov's Novel *The General and His Army*. Nekhoroshev, M. "The Retinue Plays the General." *Znamia* 9 (1995): 199-219.

4. For the role of the chronotope of the Zone (incarceration of criminals) in twentieth-century Russian literature, see Lipovetskii, "Uchites'."

5. Basinskii here specifically takes issue with the article coauthored by Lipovetskii and Leiderman, "Zhizn' posle smerti. . . ."

6. For the historical poetics of Russian postmodernist prose, see Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*.

7. For details about the crisis of the "new wave," see Lipovetsky, Mark. "Thanks for the Holiday!"

8. For a more detailed survey of Sorokin's poetics, see Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, 197-219.

9. For example, the opinion of the leader of Russian postmodernism, the poet Dmitrii Prigov, is significant: "I understood that, in general, art has a fundamental task. Its purpose in this world is to show a kind of freedom, absolute freedom, from all danger. In the case of art, man sees that there is absolute freedom, which is not necessarily capable of being realized completely in life. I took the Soviet language as the most functional then, the most obvious and intelligible, which was the representative of ideology and which posed as an absolute truth [*istina*], descended from the heavens. Man was stifled by this language, not from the outside, but from inside himself. Any ideology that makes wholesale claims on you and any language have totalitarian ambitions to seize the whole world, to cover it with its terms and to show that it is absolute truth [*istina*]. I wanted to show that there is freedom. Language is only language, not absolute truth. Once we understand this, we attain freedom." (Sergei Gandlevskii – Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov. "Mezhdu imenem i imidzhem." *Literaturnaia gazeta* 19 (1993): 5.)

10. An observation made by Mikhail Epshtein in an oral discussion.

11. For a detailed analysis of Sorokin and Zel'dovich's film script, see Lipovetskii, "Novyi 'moskovskii' stil.' . . ."

12. After the novel's publication in *Novyi mir* (1993, Nos. 3 and 4), Irina Rodnianskaia and Sergei Kostyrko, from the journal's section on criticism, published their internal review in a subsequent issue. They deplored the publication of Sharov's novel, which they characterized as perverted history, verging on pornography in its pandering to vile taste. See "Sor iz izby," *Novyi mir* 6 (1993).

13. Scriabin is the sole exception among de Staël's men. Only he manages to subordinate her to himself, but his sexual power over her, paradoxically,

cally, stems from his *femininity*: "At times he actually behaved like a woman, like a female cross-dresser, and she'd expose herself in front of him as if in front of a female companion. It was just like in the bathhouse: everyone equal, everyone knowing everyone, and there wasn't any bashfulness—and he'd take her" (IV, 33).

14. See Sharov, "Est' obraz mira. . . ."

15. See Epshtein, Mikhail, "Proto-, ili Konets Postmodernizma." *Znamia* 3 (1996): 196-209, the section titled "O novoi sentimental'nosti," 201-05). See also Epshtein, *After the Future* 336, 370-71; Epstein et al. 456-63.

16. Citations from Petrushevskiaia are identified first by pages referring to the English translation, then to pages in the original Russian.

17. The kind of detailed polemic that Deleuze's "Coldness and Cruelty" deserves, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this essay.

18. See Goscilo, "Mother as Mothra" 102-13, and *Dehexing* 40-42.

19. For a Bakhtinian reading of Petrushevskiaia's stories pertinent to my commentary, see Ivanova.

20. In another work, Epstein characterizes "trans-sentimentalism" (his term) as the fruit of late conceptualism. "While the polysemy of modernism consisted of a multiplicity of levels of reflection, play, and representation, of quotation marks being superimposed on quotation marks, the polysemy of the era of 'trans' is of a higher order. It represents the movement of meaning in two directions at once: both the application and removal of quotation marks. The same word may sound like """"I love"""" and also like I love!! Like """"Kingdom of Heaven"" and Kingdom of Heaven! The two dimensions of the text are inseparable: the *disquotation* issues from the depth of quotation marks, just as resurrection issues from the depths of death" (Epstein, Genis, and Vladiv-Glover 463).

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