

2012

## Colonizing Chaos: Russian Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century

Alexander Genis

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian\\_culture](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian_culture)



Part of the [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Genis, A. (2012). Colonizing Chaos: Russian Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century. In Dmitri N. Shalin, 1-32.

Available at: [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian\\_culture/17](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/russian_culture/17)

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Article in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Culture by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@unlv.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@unlv.edu).

# **Colonizing Chaos: Russian Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century**

## **Alexander Genis**

Culture sets the parameters of our reality, defines its boundaries, gives each of us a system of values and reference points and, most important, provides our subconscious with the materials necessary for an awareness of chaos and the universe, space and time, cause and effect. Beginning my essay with these broadest categories, I will attempt to sketch the coordinates of that landscape in which the stormy drama of post-Soviet literature is played out. This will be followed by an analysis of the literary situation in the period directly preceding our own. Coming next will be some brief sketches of nine prose-writers: Andrei Siniavsky, Andrei Bitov, Vladimir Makanin, Venedikt Erofeev, Sergei Dovlatov, Sasha Sokolov, Tatiana Tolstaya, Vladimir Sorokin, and Viktor Pelevin. The poetics of each of these points out, in my view, the liveliest and most promising directions in contemporary literature. I will explore in greater detail those works which have the potential to become a certain kind of "bud" in a new and diverse post-Soviet literature. This survey will conclude with a summary characterization of the contemporary period in Russian literature.

## **The Cosmos and Chaos**

The most significant achievement of post-Soviet Russia is that the country has changed less than its citizens. Having come unstuck, they lead more and more independent lives. The perverse symbiosis of the people and the state ends with the liquidation of its component parts. Both state and people scattered like beads -- the myriad contradictory private interests altered the most monumental categories of Russian history.

The reason for all of this should be sought out in spheres higher than the Kremlin offices, spheres in which the warm, familiar cosmos has given way to cold, indifferent chaos. The Soviet world, home to three generations, has been replaced by nothingness -- an ideologically empty universe, lacking motivations and goals, meaning and justification.

The previous government never let one down -- it was reliably dim-witted, hostile, blundering, and tending toward terror. Even the most negative kind of stability made life bearable. The coordinates of this hermetically isolated world were familiar to everyone precisely because of this

isolation.

Communism constantly strove to block off an island of "organized" life in an ocean of wild elements. The old government used all its force to resist the pressure of chaos, guarding the last frontier of simple-minded positivism. In this preserve of linear equations, planning was not only political and economical, but also the theology of the regime. It was the state's magic charm to ward off the unpredictability of life, which always threatened to overflow its prescribed boundaries. To this day many see the tragedy of Soviet history in either its failure to fulfill, or its overfulfillment of its plan. Actually, its trouble and temptation was the plan in and of itself. A plan is an ontological insurance policy, securing the future and safeguarding the mindless race forward. A plan is the apotheosis of logic, confident in its ability to bring forth the future from the present. A plan is a symbol of faith in a universe stripped of its secrets, defenseless before a clever integral. The Soviet world was the last realm of pure reason, which is why it so resembled a madhouse.

The state's most dangerous enemy was not the dissident, as it turns out, but chance, which ate away at the determinism of steady socialist construction. Entrusting its hopes to various sciences, the state always venerated the simple, readily understood connection of cause and effect. That is precisely what betrayed it. Life does not follow proportions, and once it became utterly apparent that no one was any happier for the country's increased production of machines, tanks, and Communists, life toppled catastrophically into unpredictability. It turned out that the emperor was naked all along -- the cosmos was chaos.

No one is to blame -- the world simply works in such a way that order (as Chaos Theory, now in its second decade, insists) is a random chance amid anarchy, harmony is a random chance amid cacophany, the predictable is a random chance amid the unpredictable, and the necessary is simply one part of the accidental. "This is not a labyrinth, it is a house," Roland Barthes liked to say.

The collapse of the cosmos built by Soviet positivism elicited a mute cataclysm which changed the very "physics" of the former world. Thus the central conflict in post-Soviet literature is the struggle among categories, a duel between worldviews, a war of metaphors which describe, and hence create the new reality.

## **Space and Time**

A specific quality of Soviet space is its dull uniformity. Semantically neutral, equal in all its parts, it was the same everywhere. The space copied from a school-book problem stretched between points A and B, which could be replaced so easily that the exercise itself was not worth doing. This space, indistinguishable, abstract, two-dimensional, fatally tied to the political map, was considered primordial raw material, a reservoir of fallow land intended for further cultivation. Thus it was not hoarded, at least while it was securely walled off by sacred barriers.

The state's boundary in the USSR was the only one; thus it contained the full range and depth of meanings -- political, ideological, metaphysical. Today there are so many boundaries and border-lines that we are no longer simply concerned with what happens on this side or that; we become concerned with the boundary itself.

The more borders there are, the more border-zones, where mixed existence does not eradicate, but intensifies distinctions between native and alien. The border breeds a specific kind of connection, where differences, including irreconcilable antagonism, serve as bonding material. Enmity strengthens friendships. The prisoner is closest to his guard.

The fragmentation of a space crisscrossed by countless boundary lines leads not so much to isolation as to the intensification of contacts. The world becomes simultaneously more crowded and more diverse. And if before this diversity was seen as an obstacle to smoothing and evening out space, now these differences allow the space to structure itself, swell, and break up into smaller and smaller parts. Instead of the smooth expanse of a bedsheet, we have a quilt. Everything interesting now takes place in the territory between fences instead of the broad stretch from sea to sea.

As these quilt-patches are fenced off and rendered habitable, the concept of space changes from the imperial to one which might be ascribed to the owners of real estate. These versions of space are as incompatible as microcosm and macrocosm. Some would measure and divide it into hundredth-parts, while others go by continents, even hemispheres. Characteristically, V. Zhirinovskiy titled his book *The Final Spurt to the South*.

The debate among different perceptions of space is tied to the century's shift in priorities--the choice between inward and outward development. The latter, more familiar method is constantly impeded by those very

same ever-multiplying boundaries. They impede movement: it is simpler to walk through a *kolkhoz* field than through the orchards of a country-house. The subjugation of structured space reflects not so much physical transference as a "chemical" metamorphosis, more along the lines of Lamarck than Darwin. A boundary is a challenge to the middle ground, a provocation, forcing us to become different -- emigrés, say, or Estonians, or New Russians.

This type of development likens us to flora rather than fauna. We change while staying in place; we cease to compete with our rivals and rise above them instead. This organic metamorphosis is an apt response to politics' inability to resolve every urgent problem. That inability comes as no surprise, for politics is not the art of solving problems but the art of living with them. On the other hand, there are no insoluble problems in the psychological realm. When the mind encounters them, it simply grows over them as a tree would grow over a weed.

Uniform space corresponded to an equally indistinguishable concept of time, mechanically cleaved into zones at the whim of the State. Armed with a faith in the inevitability of evolution, Communism knew that time was on its side. But because this model of history had a beginning and an end, Communism hastened to eliminate time, to render it obsolete. After all, time was seen as finite. It could be used up like sand in an hourglass: the less there is left on top, the sooner history will conclude and eternity can set in.

This eternal haste (let us recall the title of Kataev's novel: *Time -- Full Speed Ahead!*) was explained by the conviction that any delay -- from stoppage to standstill -- betrayed the future. Everyone hurried time along -- from Mayakovsky, who promised to "flog that old nag, history" to Gorbachev, who began *perestroika* with a call to "speed up." To make it pass more quickly, time was compressed, boxed off into five-year plans which would then be completed in four years, ahead of schedule, thus subtracting another year from the progression toward eternity.

However, a new conception of space demands a different, organic sort of time. Metamorphosis does not occur through a steady progression, but in quantum leaps. When pent-up energy reaches its threshold, it creates illumination and change. A second here is worth a year. Time passes from a macrocosm in which it was measured in historical epochs and economic formations to a microcosm, where every moment counts because each is

different from the others. Metamorphosis occurs with an individual, unpredictable, and uncontrollable rhythm. Like space, time ceases to be the same for everyone. Instead of slipping from the future to the past in a graphic, clearly visible manner, like sand in an hourglass, time swings in a pendulum of tiny steps to slice a history which is disproportionate to man into discrete biographical allotments.

### **Causes and Effects**

The promotional materials of all the candidates, broadcast on television during Russia 's pre-election campaign of 1996, called to mind Chekhov's plays: nothing ever happened. For all that, it must be noted that Chekhov's plays do not lack for action; they simply do not change anything in the characters' lives.

As in any game with the subconscious, propaganda is interesting not for what it says but for what it lets slip. The latent meaning of all the pre-election agitation reveals that, instead of a bright future, the voter is promised a tolerable present made up of randomly chosen debris from the past. Wary of scaring the people away with progress, politics tries to change life in such a way that it never changes. Such a promise can only be fulfilled by doing nothing. Today any government leans toward this position without ever acknowledging it, intuitively feeling out the only safe line to follow -- the strategy of non-doing. The events of the past few years have not only exhausted, but also compromised activist politics. Sudden moves such as the execution (not literally "shooting"?) of Parliament or the campaign against Chechnya breed conflict rather than resolve it. Every action is fraught with contradiction; allies become enemies, the left trades places with the right, good turns into evil, strength into weakness. Like an elephant in a china shop, the government has frozen in place to keep from breaking the remaining goods.

This is by no means the worst possible tactic -- silent capitulation before a world suffering a universal crisis of causality. Causes no longer correspond to effects; they are incompatible. For instance, we have grown used to thinking that a nuclear holocaust could be precipitated by the Cold War, but not by a hangover. Chernobyl, in proving the opposite, cannot help but shatter our happy faith in dependable correlations between cause and effect which obediently play out a cannon on the billiards table of Newtonian nature.

The easiest response to this crisis of cause-and-effect relationships in society, from the viewpoint of collective psychology, is to believe in

conspiracies -- any conspiracies; internal and foreign, left-wing or right, CIA or KGB. This belief is fed by a feeling of helplessness in the face of the mysterious, invisible, but powerful forces of history. Today's world has lost its sense of control over its own destiny. Everything turns out wrong, nothing works out, nothing can be counted on. Man has become a pawn in a sinister game. Purposeful effort, free will, wise action -- everything crumbles to dust. It is as though sand has been sprinkled into the mechanism of life, rubbing away the fine details.

Psychologically, conspiracy theories are an attempt to remain within the parameters of Soviet civilization, which was constructed according to a seductively simple and precise speculative schema. The belief in conspiracies is born of longing for a sensible world, the yearning to return to a rational universe, where the question "Who profits from this?" still holds some validity.

The specter of conspiracy softens the bitter loss of faith in a world of reason; it is easier to consider oneself the victim of an alien will than to surrender oneself to the will of blind, random elements. Oddly enough, the idea that an evil, conscious will lurks behind every misfortune is quite comforting. It means that all is not yet lost--the enemy can be fought, he can be exposed, or at least stripped of his masks to reveal corruption posing as virtue. By casting out evil, society performs a ritual cleansing; the more enemies are exposed, the fewer should remain among the true proponents of goodness. The image of the hidden enemy objectifies the fear of the individual before a society in which the mechanism of cause and effect has stopped working.

Belief in conspiracies is also engendered by a secret envy of those who made it into the ranks of the conspirators and escaped from chaos into a purposeful existence. All the popular speculation about the Mafia suggests that many would not mind joining its ranks, and being under its protection. After all, the Mafia is a rigid social structure, a stable, though criminal, bastion where one can sit out periods of social turbulence.

However, all attempts to return to the intelligible, controllable, purposeful, logical universe which was already being idealized in the Enlightenment utopias are doomed to failure. As today's world careens precipitously and uncontrollably into greater and greater complexity, it nullifies the image of a clockwork universe, already obsolete yet living on stubbornly in our fatherland.

## Post-Soviet Literature

After the failed putsch of 1991, which marked the end of the Soviet regime, it became vitally important to understand which writers had managed to survive the downfall of the former government. For that euphoric time also signaled the downfall of a grandiose literary system, which had intermittently adorned and disfigured, but most importantly, had nurtured our social life for several generations. The collapse of Communism and the repeal of censorship annulled that very literature which censorship had attacked so fiercely. An entire literature crashed down into the abyss.

Individual names and titles are not so important here as the worldview, without which this literature could not function. A particular metaphysical mechanism lay at the core of Soviet literature, ensuring the formation of endless metaphors for existence. The only acknowledged truth was reality, "described" in plans and reports or novels and poetry. Soviet literature's creative pretension was its attempt to "write down" the world by replacing that world with itself. Its ideal might be the famous map from Borges's short story, which is executed so completely and precisely that in the end it replaces the country in whose image it had been created. Soviet literature, like its corresponding agricultural system, acknowledged only extensive development; thus it was forced to rush feverishly, catching up with life, "writing down" all its new natural habitats. Any "unrecorded" theme was felt as a rip in the very fabric of life.

The story of *glasnost* is especially instructive because its successes were measured by the extent to which the "bare" patches of empirical reality could be covered with text. The quest for thematic virgin soil, as a particular form of land speculation, created the illusion of a boom, the falsity of which was discovered only when the countless bestsellers of *perestroika* took a nose-dive in mid-flight.

Despite all this, the exposure of the terrorist regime's atrocities did not prove fatal for it, but only increased its myth-making potential. Any attempt to break away from this model at the expense of introducing new themes only expanded it further; Soviet art, consuming anti-Soviet art, grew like rising yeast, filling every niche of the city's and countryside's reality with itself. It was not criticism of the regime, but the opening of its borders which led Soviet metaphysics to its downfall, for it could function only within a closed system. Censorship ensured the hermetic nature of that system -- not even specific examples of it so much as the very fact of

prohibition. The space of myth is bounded by taboo.

The downfall of the regime robbed society of its hard-earned symbolic arsenal and doomed Soviet literature to hopeless metaphysical orphanhood. In the post-Soviet period almost all previous literature, left- or right-wing, became *extraneous* literature.

Yet the means to overcome this crisis were mapped out quite some time ago. Although any dates are approximate, a convenient landmark might be the period immediately following Khrushchev's thaw, when social response forced literature to leave the surface of life and attend to its own problems once again. The time had come for the long-simmering modernization of Russian literature to come to a head. In order to escape its compulsory isolation and join the world's cultural community, literature had to assimilate the experience of the Silver age, which had been cut short by the government.

The dilemma facing the last Soviet generation was painfully difficult. Many writers who had come of age during the '60s found themselves waging a war on two fronts. The way to the new literature lay between the "metaphysical" social realism of the official literature and the truth-seeking realism of the "new world" variety. Literary men of both camps were either distant, or indifferent, or hostile to the modernist experience. Complicated poetics only hindered their fight for a large-scale readership. No political or ideological changes could divert the course charted back in the early 1930s, the course of extensive development for Soviet literature.

Only now does it become clear that any victory along this path was temporary. Yet if the Soviet-era bestsellers died off, for the most part, with the regime, the "intensive" management of literature bore more lasting fruit. The process of literary modernization, resumed in the 1960s, operating under the slogan of HOW rather than WHAT, yielded truly modern works of Russian literature, capable of surviving the fall of a regime that had tried so hard to destroy them.

The peculiarities of Russia's literary process defined the eclectic structure of post-Soviet literature. It is formed by the works of authors who emerged *after* Soviet literature as well as by those who were born in its depths, but managed to outlive it. The complexity of this situation annulled the familiar scale of value. The literature growing up on the ruins of the past has become an amorphous formation, with no nucleus and no boundaries.

## The Fool's Truth: Andrei Siniavsky

Siniavsky is the father not merely of free literature, but particularly of today's post-Soviet literature; this is not so much because of the government's persecution as because of aesthetic insight. He understood the nature of Soviet literature before all the others, and charted his escape route.

Today, after all the shocks which marked the end of Soviet civilization, we can fully appreciate the prophetic nature of Siniavsky's article, written back in 1957, entitled "What is Socialist Realism?"<sup>1</sup> Having described socio-realism as a historical phenomenon, he mapped out its precise boundaries in terms of time, form, and content, but in so doing crossed these boundaries himself.

Surpassing contemporary artistic currents by almost an entire generation, Siniavsky was the first to discover that socio-realism belonged neither in books and journals nor on the scrap-heap of history, but in a museum. Accordingly the relationship to a theory which has become an exhibit changes as well. The dilemmas which seemed so critically important during the years of the thaw -- to accept or not to accept, to fight or to defend, to develop or to reject -- disappear. Instead, Siniavsky presents a different, more fruitful perspective -- the aestheticization of the phenomenon. Having certified the death of socio-realism, he puts this artistic method on a shelf with all the others and allows the game of dead aesthetics to begin. This problem was resolved, though belatedly, by the final stream of Soviet culture -- socio-art. Siniavsky's theoretical constructions were embodied in the works of V. Komar and A. Melamide, V. Bakhchanian, E. Bulatov, I. Kholin, Vs. Nekrasov, D. A. Prigov, and many other artists, writers, and poets who reconstructed the socio-realist ideal by bringing it to its logical and comical conclusion.

Andrei Siniavsky's greatest creation was Abram Tertz, his literary alter-ego and the name under which almost all of his works were published. Siniavsky needs Tertz in order to avoid speaking directly. Another author's text automatically becomes foreign and as such, can be seen as a long, book-length quote. This tactic reveals Siniavsky's primary aesthetic task-- to frame the text by separating life from art. This position is based upon a specific model of the author, creator, artist, poet, which Siniavsky examines in all of his work. In his dictionary the word "artist" has an entire row of impossibly lowly definitions: fool, thief, idler, clown, jester, *iurodievyi* (a wandering holy fool). This row of definitions enraged many readers of Siniavsky's best work -- the novel of literary criticism

entitled *Strolls with Pushkin*.<sup>2</sup> Insisting that "Pushkin consists of emptiness," Siniavsky refuses the classical writer the most important thing -- authorship. The poet is a medium at the spiritualist séance of art. In his monograph *Ivan the Fool* Siniavsky describes in great detail the "philosophy" of his protagonist, who turns out to resemble the figure of the ideal poet in *Strolls with Pushkin* quite closely. To explain why the folktale always favors the foolish, lazy character, the author writes: "The Fool's function is to prove--or rather not to prove, since the Fool proves nothing but overturns all proof, hence to make manifest-that nothing depends on man's reason, knowledge, endeavor, and will. . . . The essence of these views is captured in the rejection of the ubiquitous and all-powerful reason, which interferes with the attainment of a higher truth. This truth (or reality) appears to man and makes itself manifest to him of its own accord, in a happy instant when consciousness as it were switches itself off and the soul comes into an idiosyncratic state -- that of receptive passivity."<sup>3</sup>

The philosophy of the "fool," which vividly recalls the teachings of Taoism, explains the unconscious, ego-less, intuitive, instinctual, "animal," if you like, nature of creation--the poet, submerging himself in his art, plumbs the depths bypassing his "I." Success means to deny oneself in favor of the text: "When one writes," Siniavsky says in his confessional book *Goodnight!*, "one can't think. One needs to switch oneself off. When one writes, one loses oneself, one is floating and, above all, one forgets oneself and lives without thinking about anything. Finally, one no longer exists, one dies. . . . One has disappeared into the text."<sup>4</sup>

All of Siniavsky's heroes disappear into the text -- Pushkin, Gogol, Rozanov, nameless storytellers, dissolving themselves in the anonymous element of folklore. They all pay this price for the metamorphosis of art.

The interweaving of words, the play of free-standing forms, the ritual dance, the ornamental drawing--these are Siniavsky's archetypal images, which he rapturously admires and aspires to in his prose.

Siniavsky builds his aesthetic universe on the base of these images. In his cosmogony, art is the source of life, that primal impulse of energy which gives birth to the world.

Creative art, in Siniavsky's view, does not move forward but back, toward its source. It is not the creation of the new so much as the recreation of the old. Siniavsky's aesthetic is its own sort of archaeology, or even paleontology, of art: reconstructing the whole using whatever clues and

remains have reached us.

The pathos of restoring wholeness purifies art of foreign additives. Among these Siniavsky includes logic, psychology, sociability, and the awareness of profit. Like the alchemist, the artist immerses himself in the preparation of a pure, unadulterated art, which has the amazing ability to destroy the boundary between the spiritual and the material, between word and deed. The poet, whom Siniavsky constantly compares to a sorcerer, is one who discovers the true names of things. If he succeeds, he summons them forth from non-being. Thus Siniavsky himself summoned forth --brought down upon himself -- his own destiny by describing his arrest *before* it actually happened.

Siniavsky resolutely and definitively severs the connection, so inescapable in Soviet literature, between art and progress. By turning culture to face the past, he offers it the chance to admire not the pinnacles of the imminent kingdom of reason, but, as he writes, that "divine truth, which does not lie alongside art or is not deployed around art in the form of a real-life milieu, but which is on the other side of art, in the past and at the source of the artistic image."<sup>5</sup>

### **The Landscape Behind the Looking-Glass: Andrei Bitov**

Bitov, dubbed the Slavic Proust in the West for his *Pushkin's House*, crossed the boundary separating post-Soviet literature from the Soviet as though it did not exist. Of course, this is not quite so. Bitov did not make note of pressure from the government in his writing, but he took it into account as an invisible gravitational trap, distorting the space around it. Bitov did not outlive Soviet literature so much as he carefully sidestepped it, along the outer edge. For this reason Bitov was able to lend his forced silence during the most difficult years the sybaritic form of idle reflection.

Compulsory silence forced Bitov out into the wide expanse of a virtual, alternative reality. The surrounding reality, which destroyed some and corrupted others, made Bitov assimilate a fictitious world where he was in control of the situation. Thus, wriggling out from under the yoke of the government, he managed to land in the middle of the newest world literature, engaged in the same shadowy relations between artifice and the natural.

Bitov ties this conflict to the problem of reflection, to which he dedicated one of his most intricate and most successful books, *The Teacher of Symmetry*.<sup>6</sup> Its subject is reflected reality, encountered in various forms --

mirrors, photographs, paintings, encyclopedias.

The contradiction between an object and its reflection is the conflict between nature and culture, or the conflict between the man and the writer. It is, after all, the writer who creates all these chimeras, lives in an artificial world of his own design. To unite the imaginary world with the real one, the secondary cultural reality with the primal one, to live simultaneously in two worlds--this is the dilemma which is placed before us by an epoch which has forfeited "raw" reality in the game of cultural reflections.

Bitov searches for an exit from the labyrinth which has become our home. One of his best narratives is dedicated to this quest -- *Man in the Landscape*. Here Bitov maps out the central conflict of his work. There is the mute world--rocks, trees, clouds--which is made up of discrete objects, never conscious that they are part of a community, part of the "landscape." And then there is man, in whose eyes the separate becomes unified, chaos becomes harmony. Rocks and trees do not know that they neighbor one another; they only become a landscape in the eyes of man, who is, essentially, if not the author then the co-author of the landscape. If it takes nothing but man's gaze to create a view, then any man's gaze becomes a creative act. Each of us faces the challenge of constructing a picture out of a myriad separate facts, to put disparate, seemingly unconnected elements together to form a plot. The world is reflected in our gaze. Moreover, it only exists when we see it.

The correlation between man and the landscape presents the same problem as the dialogue between the creator and his creation. Therefore, Bitov's protagonist treats even God as a colleague, an artist who awaits our judgment of his creation. He says, "It is not so much what we praise as what we understand! The understanding of unity, of the fact that we are not alone--this is the purpose of creation as well as of art."<sup>7</sup>

The rightness of our understanding depends upon choosing the right point of view, which, in fact, constitutes creativity. Bitov deftly reminds us: "In my opinion, painting is a window. Or a mirror. After all, a mirror is also a window. A window through the wall, looking out onto the world . . . the canvas, the format, the perspective, the gaze. The frame of the viewfinder . . . the choice of viewpoint."<sup>8</sup>

All of Bitov's characters rush about along with the author in search of this viewpoint, a viewpoint in which the mute and speaking universes might

link up.

Portraying the artist's wanderings through a chimerical labyrinth, Bitov seeks out some thread which might might might guide him.

At the end of *Man in the Landscape* the author finds temporary relief in dissolving his narrative's clever philosophizing with the tenderness of living warmth. As he sits, dashing off the final lines of his book in the kitchen of a country house, several chicks climb onto his feet and snuggle there for warmth. A world riven by analysis can only be unified by some living thing, for that can not be dissected in any way. Or rather, it can be, but the one is dealing with a dead chick rather than a live one.

Organic chemistry, harboring the mystery of all living things, is the key to the wholeness of 21st century culture, inspired by pathos; these are the problems that concern Andrei Bitov today. In seeking ecological wholeness Bitov ascribes an organic character to his own literature. His text is like a coral reef: every narrative branch breeds new branchings. Evidence of his vigor lies in his ability to grow -- that is, a general incompleteness. The highly original conclusion of *Man in the Landscape* is no accident; at the end of the final sentence, Bitov omits the period, granting the aforementioned chick syntactic freedom.

### **The Midas Touch: Vladimir Makanin**

Makanin<sup>9</sup> edged his way into Soviet literature sideways. His biography is partially to blame. He entered the field of literature by way of mathematics, in which he had garnered considerable success. He turned to writing following a mental breakdown in connection with a serious accident, the aftermath of which tormented him for several years.

A cautious isolationism prevented Makanin from indulging in the literary battles which so frequently replaced literature itself for native writers. Scrupulously avoiding any party allegiance, he emerged with a different, unfamiliar to Soviet literature scale of generalization. Gradually this prolific and multifaceted writer's prose acquired a quality of almost cinematographic realism. Makanin often worked out a plot with visual imagery. Monologues and dialogues ring hollow, almost behind the scenes. The text is frequently organized around contrasts of light. Episodes flash by with cinematographic dynamic force. Makanin writes deftly, charting events "on the dotted line"). Usually one only perceives the greater plan, and never encounters the dull, padded medial one. Rejecting wordy description, he arranges his bulging hyper-realistic shots

around gaps and emptiness.

Having found the path to symbolic monumentalism, Makanin managed to embody in his mature work the archetypal conflict of our time: man's spiritual torment and his doomed tendency to destroy what he most loves. The stranglehold of love's embrace is the theme of his book *Baize-Covered Table with Decanter*<sup>10</sup> which won the Booker prize in 1993. (At the time I was a member of the selection committee and hotly defended this choice.) The story in this short novel echoes Kafka's *The Trial*, only instead of a criminal court, Makanin's court is friendly. In the course of the story/inquest he reveals a Jesuit-like interdependence of souls, woven together into a collective, united by a feeling of mutual guilt. A court of comrades is the most merciless of all, for it is always ready to justify itself with its love for the accused.

This same theme of deadly love turns the excellent war-story *The Captive of the Caucasus*<sup>11</sup> into a thoughtful parable. A soldier in a nameless war along the southern border reluctantly kills a captured highlander, whose beauty arouses a rapt, almost erotic response in him. Hatred does not cause war -- rather, it is passionate, unrequited, perverse love, Makanin asserts, reducing geopolitical conflict to the level of human, intimate, physical relations.

Makanin never allows the political to supersede the biological. He was able to wander off the beaten path precisely because he discovered a new artistic dimension for himself. The social theme gives way to our biological nature--man as an individual.

His breakthrough was a piece written back in the early 1980s entitled "Citizen on the Run."<sup>12</sup> The story revolves around the painfully knotted relationships connecting the three main "characters" in Makanin's mature work: nature, personality, and society. Makanin structures these universal elements into a deeply felt, piercingly real and immediate worldview, one which catapulted the author from the confines of infantile Soviet writing into the vast and sober planes of world literature.

"Citizen on the Run" is a tragedy of fate. Its protagonist, a builder trying to accustom himself to the Siberian plains, hates his endless Sysiphean labor. In the cultivation of wild nature, he has a fateful touch, like Midas, which kills every living thing. The ruined wilderness that he has destroyed spurs the builder further and further into the untouched taiga; he is possessed by virgin lands.

To admire nature is not an aesthetic necessity, but a search for the right landmark, the way to ground zero, a homecoming. Makanin's protagonist yearns to declare his biological affinity with the untamed taiga. He does not personify nature; on the contrary, he struggles to dissolve himself in its inhuman, unconscious element. The way back to a divinely indifferent nature comes at the cost of personality, the flight into the obscure anonymity of a "citizen."

In Makanin's view, man has three hypostases: either he is the impersonal biological representative of *Homo Sapiens*, or he strives to embody his unique personality, or else he is once again a faceless member of the crowd, drowning that uniqueness in collective irresponsibility.

All of modern culture faces this life-or-death dilemma: how does one maintain a happy medium, how does one map his course between Scylla and Charybdis--between the pre-personality state of nature and the post-personality state of the collective? How does one manage, along the road from "biology" to "sociology," not to miss that one narrow, crooked trail that leads us to ourselves?

### **The Good News: Venedikt Erofeev**

With every year that passes since the death of Venedikt Vasilievich Erofeev it becomes harder and harder to believe that a real live author stood behind the mythical image of Venichka in "Moscow Stations"; an author who had also written the essay on Rozanov entitled "Through the Eyes of an Eccentric," the collage "My Little Leniniad," and the tragedy *Walpurgisnacht*.[13](#)

The thing is that Erofeev was born, lived, and died during a different (Soviet) epoch. Yet he belongs to the infinitesimal minority of Russian writers who did not remain there. A few pages of his works were able to cross, here and there, the historical dividing line between the two Russias

Erofeev was a lonely figure in Soviet literature, which busied itself with aimless wanderings among shallow, realistic schemas. Disregarding the malice of his day, Venichka sought the root of things: man as a point of intersection of all planes of being. Erofeev's text is always a tense, religious experience. His entire sense of the world is suffused with apocalyptic pathos.

Along these ancient paths, Erofeev's innovation becomes clear. He is

completely archaic; the high and the low are not yet torn asunder in his world, and the "norm," a moderate style, is missing altogether. For this reason all of his characters are luminaries, drunks, *iurodievye*, madmen. Their social wretchedness is a point of departure for rejecting the world in order to penetrate the heart of things.

One of these characters is Erofeev himself, the author, whose unquestionable darkness and condensed complexity constantly tempt and provoke the reader. By erecting a barrier to the understanding of his text, Erofeev leaves us with the torturous and captivating task of penetrating his design. He brings down upon the reader the enormity of a living ideological chaos, as mysterious as any living thing. In this surrealist cocktail, made up of distorted quotations and snippets of character, of mumbled prayers and futile curses, of foolish practical jokes and grave tragedy, he dissolves the pseudo-comprehensibility of the world.

Common sense and logic have no place in Erofeev's universe; there is no law, no order. Viewed from the outside, he remains incomprehensible. Only by entering Erofeev's poetics, only by learning his surrealistic language, only by becoming the protagonist (or ultimately, the co-author) can the reader perceive the tension of the philosophic/religious dialogue carried on by the characters. This dialogue is always considerably facilitated by vodka.

Venedikt Erofeev is a great explorer of the metaphysics of drink. For him, alcohol is a concentrated otherworldliness. Intoxication is a means of breaking free, of becoming -- literally -- not of this world.

Vodka is the midwife of the new reality, whose birth is suffered in the character's soul. Each sip melts the rusted structures of our world still further, returning it to its original amorphousness, to that fruitful primeval chaos in which things and events exist only in their potential.

Washed clean by the nightmarish cocktail "Komsomolka's Teardrop," the world is born anew, and the author calls us to the christening. Hence the awareness of life's fullness and freshness which overflows the bounds of the text and charges the reader.

This strange, almost primordial, savage, ecstatic joy holds the key to the poem's best-kept secret--its optimism, so wholly contradictory to the plot.

The world's rebirth occurs in every line, in every word of the poem. The important thing is not the protagonist's fate, nor even the author's, but

the words -- an endless, unstoppable stream of truly free speech, liberated from logic, from cause-and-effect relationships, from the responsibilities of meaning and import. Erofeev trusts the random assonance, the play of sounds which juxtaposes the incongruous. Venichka summons coincidences from thin air, much like the unpredictability of hiccups; everything rhymes with everything -- prayers with newspaper headlines, the names of boozehounds with the surnames of writers, excerpts from poetry with foul curses. Not one word is extraneous. Every line simmers and boils with fantastical literary material, conceived amid alcoholic fumes. The drunken protagonist plunges headfirst into this protoplasmic discourse, leaving the sober ones to worry about its make-up. Venichka simply trusts his own tongue. He sows words from which meanings sprout up, like seeds. He is only the sower; it is up to us, the readers, to reap the harvest. It depends solely upon us -- the interpreters, the novices, the disciples.

### **The Rock Garden: Sergei Dovlatov**

Dovlatov's [14](#) central theme is an apology for the odd man out, whom he depicts humorously and affectionately, with sincere love and touching understanding. Here lies the source of his enormous -- not simply massive, but universal -- native success. The secret is the author, the same one who also appears invariably as his protagonist. Both as a writer and as a persona, Dovlatov consciously chose an extremely advantageous position for himself. In the East it is said that the sea will always win out over the rivers because it lies *below* them. Thus Dovlatov won his readers over by his lack of superior airs; in describing a humble world, he views it through the eyes of the underdog.

Dovlatov's protagonist has nothing to teach the reader. On the one hand, he is too weak to stand out from a world which is bogged down with flaws, and on the other he is too human not to forgive, both the world's sins and his own. The reader is grateful to the author who invites him to share an emotion so rare in our demanding literature -- tolerance.

Following Venichka Erofeev, whom he always admired, Dovlatov sped toward a place which often had no room for heroism. Weakness defuses the merciless zeal of reform. Weakness frees the spirit from longing for perfection, both its own and particularly that of others. Dovlatov loved the weak, barely tolerated the strong, despised judges, and viewed human shortcomings leniently, even his own. He believed that as soon as one began to separate the necessary from the useless, life would become unbearable. In his short stories he never deletes details which contradict

the narrative, an image, or a situation. On the contrary, his material always centers around the extraneous, the absurd. The pathos of his writing lies in its defense of the foreign. Success hinges on a sense of measure: the maximum amount of senselessness with the minimum of coincidence.

Dovlatov offers his reader the philosophy of non-doing -- seeing all, understanding all, but agreeing with nothing, striving to change nothing.

Dovlatov's transparent narratives are closed to interpretation; after all, he does not attempt to explain life, but only follows it obediently. His creative subject is life freed of any interference by the author, captured and transcribed into words. Even the author's "I" -- his eternal protagonist, named Sergei Dovlatov -- is but an equal participant in the dialogue, no more than the other characters; the author refuses to answer for any of them.

This refusal is Dovlatov's indirect protest against metaphysical subtext. Sliding along the surface of life, he gratefully accepts any of its manifestations.

Dovlatov trusted life to the fullest, surrendering before its richness, complexity, and diversity. He refuses to pass judgment on reality and does not partition it into categories of good and evil. There are no pure, unmixed colors here. Any tragedy that floats within the grasp of his prose invariably turns into a tragicomedy. Dovlatov himself, however, always remains neutral, firmly refusing to offer an evaluation. Life is a primary given, valuable by itself for its natural flow, which successfully repels all of our assaults on it. In the words of Xuan-tze, only the natural cannot be changed.

Dovlatov appreciated the natural; this is why his prose stands out with its sense of raw, crude authenticity and "factographic" (to the extent of using real names and documents) precision. Yet fact, in these stories, emerges from that irrational world which introduces phantasmagoria and grotesque into pseudo-documentary prose. In dealing with the fantastic Dovlatov holds to the baroque artistic method: the more peculiar the content, the more rigid and disciplined the form. Thus, if Venichka Erofeev uses alcohol, that eternal source of fancy and delusion in Russian literature, to blur the boundaries between character and author, then Dovlatov uses vodka to accentuate them: the character might be drunk, but the narrator -- never.

In the spirit of this "Leningrad baroque," Dovlatov treats the irrational elements of his prose exactly the same as the rational. The lack of a premeditated position or of any particular conception of life prepares the author for those bizarre surprises which real, unplanned life constantly throws our way.

Dovlatov's short stories resemble a rock garden. The appeal of an unpolished stone is the lack of forethought. Its beauty is not of our making, and thus a rock garden does not fit neatly into our aesthetic. This is neither realism nor naturalism, but the art of artlessness. By equating the viewer with the exhibit, it teaches the viewer to live instead of judging life.

One appreciates Dovlatov's reserve, taste, and tact in making the living come alive in his prose -- not correcting the world around him, but leaving it as it is.

### **The Lesson of Freedom: Sasha Sokolov**

Unlike his contemporaries, Sasha Sokolov was able to write more of freedom than of slavery. Sokolov's freedom is like the horizon: distant, beckoning, unattainable, yet only on the path toward it can discoveries be made. For example, we encounter finely detailed prose, which Nabokov juxtaposed with Russia's conceited universalism. *A School for Fools*<sup>15</sup> became the first Russian book to bring Nabokov's approach to literature back to native soil.

Sokolov's prose is new, but the subject of his novel is outrageously traditional. The protagonist's rebellion -- a classic "coming-of-age" theme -- takes place in a "school for fools," which has become a symbol of the common, everyday world, stuck in its dead-end imagery.

To attain freedom, the protagonist must overcome both language and time, which are at the root of all bondage; herein lies the complicated nature of Sokolov's prose. In order to make his book *possible* Sokolov invented his own time and language.

Professing a sort of linguistic pantheism, he breathes life into language, endows it with the capacity to grow.

Sokolov breaks apart constructions that have grown together over time and imparts individual meanings to each part of a word. Like a conjurer of spirits, he does not create images but calls them forth from roots and

prefixes. Thus, having dismembered the unprepossessing word "issiaknut" ("to run dry"), he discovers there a potentially fruitful stump -- "siaku.". And on the page these Japanese-sounding syllables give rise to the now-Japanese railway men Muromatsu and Tsuneo-sani, and from there an entire snowy landscape in the style of Khokusai follows: "The snow is about seven or eight *siaku* deep, on average, but the large drifts can be more than a *tze*."<sup>16</sup>

For Sokolov, language is an experimental plot of land where he grows and cultivates his images, a garden where he picks flowers, never hesitating to bend their natural forms to fit the shape of his artistic puzzles. By enlivening language, by imbuing its serviceable phonetic and grammatical forms with meaning, Sokolov overcomes the ossification of its constructions; language acquires an independent existence. "What is expressed" and "how it is expressed" organically merge into one. *A School for Fools* is the result of language's "self-destruction" as it incorporates itself fully into the text.

Such language, dissolved in the book, no longer threatens to enslave it, to hold it captive in the chains of cause and effect. *A School for Fools* is a "simultaneous" book. Rather than a scroll unraveling through space and time, it recalls a holographic image where the pictured objects hover in a complicated, mobile interrelationship, depending on one's angle of view. The narrator of *A School for Fools* wanders around his book, pausing wherever he pleases.

By arranging all events in the plane of "synchronicity," Sokolov's narrator gains power over time itself. The world in *A School for Fools* is hopelessly limited. Escape is impossible. The space around the narrator has contracted. The road to freedom, that eternal source of chance encounters, adventure, coincidence, has become an impenetrable border. Having come up against it, Sokolov exchanges space for time.

The image of time is presented as an exclusively material metaphor in the book: "The pendulum, slicing the darkness into equal hush-black parts."<sup>17</sup> Such time is palpable, weighty, visible, dependable; it is always with you, within reach, before your eyes. It lies within the space of memory. Sokolov's protagonist can only truly live in the pictures flickering across the screen of his subconscious. Escape is impossible for a student of the school for fools, for this guarded enclosure of civilization is built right into his mind.

Sokolov's tragedy stems from the contradiction between the organic world

of freedom and the social world of necessity. The hero has no place in either one. He is doomed to the torment of a dual existence, the pain of which can be dulled only by the delirious memory of freedom on the horizon.

### **Doodles in the Margins: Tatiana Tolstaya**

A refined escapism links Sasha Sokolov's prose with Tatiana Tolstaya's<sup>18</sup> Her theme is escape into an enclosed world, protected from vulgar everyday existence with lovely metaphorical details.

Most often this is the world of childhood. Tolstaya's plots are built around quite a rigid schema. Frequently, the story involves transgression and punishment; the character betrays his childhood and pays by living a meaningless life and dying the inglorious death which almost always awaits him at the story's end. Tolstaya's stories are not episodic, but rather dedicated to man's entire fate, from beginning to end. His story is concluded in advance; the outward biography is roughly sketched in, but rich, vivid detail reveals the process of his inner development -- or rather, degradation.

Viewed as a series of events, everyone's life is unremarkably similar, reading like a personnel data form -- born, schooled, married, etc. Tolstaya counterbalances this terrifying uniformity with an enchanting metaphorical universe, which grows up in the margins of her characters' biographies.

Metaphor is Tolstaya's secret weapon, the magic wand with which she transforms fact into fairy tale. For all this, however, she is not a good fairy, and her stories do not end well. The world is frightening all by itself. Life is fundamentally tragic from the outset because it must obey Chronos. Yet Tolstaya does not even accept *that* version of life. Defiantly she creates her own world -- tame, cozy, immortal. Talking objects live there, such as the "young, timorous lampshade<sup>19</sup>; it always smells like Christmas; one speaks the language of the nutcrackers there. Of course, this world is not large -- the whole thing fits under a child's bed. But it can send its shoots into the grown-up world--metaphors which take everyone they encounter into a sort of enchanted captivity, turning them into fairy-tale characters. The trouble is that no one quite manages to grasp the helping hand extended by the author; rapacious life dunks everyone under the Lethe's dark waters. No one manages to balance on the shaky border between factual and make-believe reality.

In any case, the hidden but crucial secret of Tolstaya's appeal lies not in her plot-line, but in her deviations from it. Her world is composed of talking objects, each of which can tell its own tale, wittingly departing from the storyline. The path along which Tolstaya leads her readers toward the finale winds around in such elaborate loops that the narrative space of a room expands to epic proportions. The closer we examine the text, the more expressive details we discover, each leading its own independent existence. Each line forces the reader to trade in his binoculars for a magnifying glass; each line gives birth to the plot in its turn. Everything that happens to pass along the author's field of view begins to wriggle about, acquires spirit, independent life, exhibits a certain kind of behavior. This abundant, excessive prose simply teems with the same peculiar creatures that overflow Bosch's canvases.

Tatiana Tolstaya's writing is remarkable in its distinctive biophilia. Nabokov most prized this same "spontaneous conception of life" in Gogol's work, for it ensured a kind of literary backdrop for the unfolding of real drama.

Tolstaya provides this drama before the lushly painted stage scenery. Here we have living pictures of remarkable narrative energy, each of which represents a tightly wound story; they do not convey, illustrate, or correlate with the action, but simply accompany it. Take, for example, this romantic description of a garden: ". . .the radishes' black cupolae, the terrible, exposed white nerve of horseradish, secret potato cities.[20](#) Or this "gothic" landscape: "A chicken dangles in its string shopping bag behind the window as though punished, twisting about in the black wind. The naked tree droops in sorrow.[21](#)

Any of these pictures is, in its own sense, a hieroglyph. Though able to function alone on a blank page, with no neighbors, it remains an integral part of the common structure. Offering each of her tales in its whole or in its parts, Tolstaya forces the reader to approach the text from a bird's-eye view -- simultaneously focused on the near and the distant.

The story composed of autonomous narratives seems to elevate the entire art by a degree. It achieves such aesthetic density that it blows up the linear narrative. The text takes off from the flat page and acquires a volume which allows the narrative to proceed in several dimensions -- not only along the course of the plot, but also above it. Such "composer-like" writing demands the same virtuosity of the author as of an organist, who, as we know, plays one melody with his hands and another with his feet.

The essence of these three-dimensional cryptographs lies in the interrelation between micro- and macrocosms. For Tolstaya, form neither contradicts nor follows content, but rather lives alongside, in symbiosis. The stories' mini-plots of talking elements and hieroglyphs infect her prose as a microbe would infect an elephant. Measure plays no further role here; the small does not become large, but imposes its will upon it just as yeast directs the dough. Prose which has been infected by tiny wrapped-up images and plots sets off an uncontrollable reaction. Suddenly, even for the author, it seems, peculiar life-forms self-generate within the text. Observing her mischief-making is the greatest joy in reading Tolstaya.

### **The Schizophrenia of Signs: Vladimir Sorokin**

Vladimir Sorokin, author of the pop-art books *The Queue*<sup>22</sup> and *Marina's Thirtieth Love*<sup>23</sup> the metaphysical parody *The Hearts of Four*, the anthology of stylizations entitled *Stories*<sup>24</sup> the novel called *Novel*, and many other works, is the *enfant terrible* of Russian letters. Sorokin was one of the *lastsamizdat* writers, and his prose took a painfully long time to reach its readers, which is understandable. It cannot fail to infuriate; not so much in its abundant, shocking, sadistic depictions (this tactic has been quite thoroughly exploited in recent literature), as with its deliberate incomprehensibility. When this incomparable stylist, capable of any literary manner, finally speaks in his own voice, all we hear is gibberish.

For Sorokin, art is an equation in which the value of  $x$  is knowable, but not to us. A culture's religiosity is revealed in its readiness to accept the unknowable element -- chance, chaos, the absurd. If an answerable riddle guards against being solved, then an unanswerable mystery replaces resolution.

For example, in Sorokin's prose the mystery disguised in pathologically prolapsed, disintegrating speech allows for post-Soviet literature, robbed of the old language, to express itself. As the first writer to establish the death of the Soviet language, Sorokin constructed his own, "schizophrenic" semiotics, where the sign loses its signified much as in abstract painting. One could say that Sorokin shifted post-Soviet society from a painting by Laktionov onto a Kandinsky canvas.

Sorokin's most incomprehensible and least understood novel, *The Norm*<sup>25</sup> explores this type of "schizoreality." Composed mainly of fractured pieces, this book is unified by a single common thread: the author destroys the sign, thereby annihilating any transferable meaning of words. Here the metaphor is substantiated so literally that it ceases to be

a metaphor at all. Thus Sorokin materializes metaphors from rhetorical Soviet poetry, robbing key words of their transferable, figurative meaning.

By no means is this an example of soc-art kitsch, as many critics have deemed it. Sorokin does not strive for a comic effect. *The Norm* is not a parody, but a profound exploration of the Soviet literary (and in a wider sense, metaphysical) system. In order to study its workings, functional mechanisms, the limits of its stability, Sorokin conducts a series of semiotic experiments on the various layers (both in terms of style and meaning) which compose its literary space.

A brilliant example of such a test is a fragment written in the classical style. In relation to the rest of the specifically Soviet text, this "beautiful excerpt," which resurrects Chekhov's way of life, Turgenev's love, and Bunin's nostalgia, would appear to play the part of real life -- that is, represent that initial, natural, normal state of things which was left behind, allowing for the appearance of the nightmarish Soviet "norm" described in the novel. Yet Sorokin destroys his own illusion with one skillful move. Suddenly, a crude, abusive comment invades the precisely stylized text with no apparent motivation, "piercing," like a needle through a balloon, the integrity of this supposedly true universe.

Thus, conscientious to the point of pedantry and expressive to the point of repulsion, Sorokin demonstrates the metaphysical emptiness left in place of the collapsed system. This emptiness is ultimately expressed in the novel as line after line of the repeating letter *a*, or sheer gibberish, or simply blank pages.

Having tracked the emaciation and disappearance of the metaphysical foundation of Soviet life, Sorokin leaves the reader alone with such an unbearable void of meaning that survival in it no longer seems possible. Hence the rage and revulsion which this writing elicits in so many readers. But this essentially inevitable reaction is part of the design, an artistic device allowing the author to map out the boundaries before he violates them.

Sorokin's art is most significant for its lack of compromise, both ethical and aesthetic. Perhaps it is precisely in this extremism -- artistic, philosophical, religious -- that the avant-garde desperado and innovator Vladimir Sorokin, like no other, approaches Russia's spiritual tradition, which he carries on even as he rejects it.

However skillfully his writing is constructed, it can by no means be

relegated to the sum of its literary devices. One senses something else here -- spiritual temptation, a perverse asceticism, inverted piety.

This sectarian spirit lends Sorokin's works a narrative intensity that borders on the insane.

Sorokin can be linked with another important tendency in post-Soviet culture. I believe that we will only truly appreciate the achievements of our newest literature when they are translated into the prevailing contemporary language of our century's end -- the language of video-imagery.

Here Sorokin may prove invaluable. He mastered the key device of postmodernism better than anyone -- writing on different levels in such a way that "up" does not preclude "down" and "down" does not complement "up." Such deliberate double meaning allows quite esoteric material to be packaged and presented in mass-culture genres without the viewer's awareness.

For example, let us take Sorokin's screenplay "Moscow."<sup>26</sup> On the surface we follow the plot twists of a rather ordinary, in today's cinema, criminal drama. But encoded underneath is the semiotic comedy already so familiar to observant readers of Sorokin's prose. The entire screenplay is based upon actualizing metaphors, making them literal. Sorokin methodically goes about replacing figurative meanings with direct ones. Thus the hero hides his stash on the outskirts of town, among letters of reinforced concrete spelling out the word "MOSCOW." Afterward, he replies with a clear conscience that he "hid the money in Moscow."

In another, characteristically grim episode, we witness an interrogation where a man is being tortured with an inflatable hose inserted into his anus. Yet in reality this is nothing but a literal depiction of the idiomatic expression "One bandit has swindled another" (lit., "filled with hot air").

The combination of street poetry with profound linguistic philosophy is a heady, purely Sorokin-esque brew which may successfully be realized in the new post-Soviet cinema.

### **The Field of Dreams. Viktor Pelevin**

The prose-writer Viktor Pelevin, whose collection of short stories

entitled *The Blue Lantern*<sup>27</sup> won the minor Booker prize of 1993, can be called the most characteristic representative of specifically post-Soviet literature. His first major work, *Omon Ra*, was translated into German, French, Dutch, and Japanese. It is now being published in America by a highly regarded publishing house and garnering favorable reviews, in which Pelevin is compared with Joseph Heller, author of the modern classic *Catch-22*. Such flattering parallels are justified not so much by Pelevin's style as by the wide scope of his satiric generalizations. In *Omon Ra* Pelevin destroys the fundamental tenet of a totalitarian society: "Weak individuals make for strong government." He demotes the regime from a mighty "evil empire" to a pathetic impotent, unable to display power but only to simulate it. In this tale dedicated to the "heroic Soviet kosmonauts," this simulation is exposed with comic details, such as a space suit made from pea-coats, motorcycle goggles instead of space helmets, and moon research vehicles in bicycle lanes. Yet Communism, unable to fulfill its threat to transfigure existence, still hopes to transfigure consciousness. This problem, so central to Pelevin's poetics and metaphysics, is addressed in the book by the commissioner of the space colony: "As long as there is just one soul, in which our cause is alive and winning, this cause will not die. It will make for a whole universe... One pure and honest soul is enough in order for our country to become the first in the world in the race for the conquest of the cosmos. One such soul is enough in order to raise the red flag of victorious socialism on the distant Moon. But one such single soul is necessary for at least a moment because it is in it that the flag will be unfurled."<sup>28</sup>

To get a true sense of the strategic novelty of Pelevin's prose, it is useful to compare him to Vladimir Sorokin.

Sorokin's theme is the fall of Soviet man, who, having lost his innocence, is exiled from the socio-realist Eden into an incoherent, chaotic world that is subject to no overriding common plan. The fall from grace is realized in language. Sorokin's characters stumble over every stylistic step and finally tumble headlong into a linguistic hell. The journey from the kingdom of necessity to the free world concludes with a fatal neurosis -- the pathology of a language choking on its own incoherence.

Pelevin builds instead of destroying. Using the same broken remnants of the Soviet myth as Sorokin, he creates fabulous conceptual constructions. For Pelevin, the Soviet government's strength lies not in its sinister military-industrial complex but in its ability to make its phantoms real. Although the art of "summoning sleep" is by no means the exclusive province of totalitarian governments, they are the ones that create the

mystical "field of dreams"--a zone of heightened myth-making tension, where anything at all can happen.

Pelevin views the surrounding world as a series of artificial constructions, among which we are condemned to wander, eternally and futilely searching for "raw," original reality. Although these cannot be called true worlds, they cannot be called false either, at least not while someone is left to believe in them. After all, all perceptions of the world exist only in our minds, and psychological reality does not lie.

Pelevin is a poet, a philosopher, and a chronicler of the border zone. He renders the junctions between different realities habitable. Bright artistic effects spring up at the points of juncture -- one picture of the world, superimposed upon another, creates a third, distinct from the first two. From his vantage point over the demolition of epochs, the writer peoples his stories with characters who inhabit two worlds simultaneously. Thus Soviet workers also live in this or that video game. The proletarian becomes an American spy, the Chinese peasant Zhuang becomes a Kremlin leader, a student turns into a wolf. The most inventive treatment of the border theme appears in the novella *Mittelschpiel*. Its protagonists, the foreign-currency prostitutes Lucy and Nelly, had been party workers in their Soviet lives. In order to adapt to the different times, they traded in not only their professions, but their gender as well.

Oddly enough, Pelevin stubbornly relegates the central "idea," the conceptual essence of his stories, to the narrative periphery. Everything truly important is expressed indirectly. The deeper meaning of the action always reveals itself suddenly, seemingly out of place. The most fundamental thoughts are found coming from a loudspeaker on stage, on a scrap torn from an army newspaper, a quote from a propagandist brochure, a speech given by a party organizer at a meeting. Nothing is extraneous to Pelevin's poetic design, because in his world chance is the unrecognized (so far) natural order. Pelevin's text is not so much a narrative as a pilgrim's tale. Everything returns to a single theme, which means that even the author does not really care about the subject of conversation; it is not the material that is important, but its discussion and interpretation. The deeper meaning can be found in any plot, even the most trivial; the more trodden it is, the brighter and more unexpected is its hidden esoteric core.

Pelevin structures many of his works around this device, including his entymological mystery *The Life of Insects*, which retells perhaps the most well-known of Krylov's fables, "The Ant and the Dragonfly." However, the

book *Chapaev and Nothingness* is the true *chef d'oeuvre* of this sort of poetics. This novel grew out of a single clever premise. Pelevin took the characters from the folktale-anecdotes of the "Chapaev saga" -- Vasilii Ivanovich himself, Petey the *aide-de-camp*, machine-gunner Anka and the 'red' burglar Kotovsky, and turned them into the subjects of a Zen Buddhist parable. Thus in the novel Chapaev becomes the abbot, keeper of the Dharma, Zen master, and teacher, who, in the highly eccentric manner characteristic of Eastern wise men, is leading his favorite pupil toward enlightenment; this is, of course, the Petersburg poet Peter whose surname is, oddly enough, "Nothingness," and whom we also know as Chapaev's *aide-de-camp* Petey.

The countless anecdotes about Chapaev served as Pelevin's point of departure for this metamorphosis; in them he saw Zen riddles, Buddhist questions without answers. In the novel every such riddle, with its corresponding explanation, is yet another step on Petey's path to enlightenment. This is how it sounds in the text:

"'Petey!' Chapaev's voice called from behind the door. 'Where are you?' 'Nowhere!' I muttered in reply.

'That's it!' Chapaev hollered unexpectedly. 'Good job! Tomorrow I will give thanks before the infantry line-up. / . . ./ Everything we see can be found in our consciousness, Petey. That is why we cannot say that our consciousness "is" anywhere. We are all nowhere simply because there isn't a single place of which one could say, "We are there." Hence, we are nowhere.'"

The indisputable humor of the Chapaevan apocrypha in no way negates the serious import of Russia's first true Zen Buddhist novel. Its perspicacity benefits from the different stylistic registers in which the author discusses the highest truths. Each of the novel's ten chapters is written in its own language, reflecting this or that level of reality and providing the frame in which the author conducts his experiments with truth. The stylistic metapsychosis and reincarnation of ideas in various linguistic forms does not change the essence of this truth, which is inexpressable in words. And yet Pelevin's entire book is a riddle -- how does one write a novel about something which cannot be written about?

## **Conclusion**

Most remarkable about post-Soviet literature is that it has not yet managed find a new name for itself. The memory of the previous stage

helps to retain continuity with a past which, contrary to expectation, this literature is in no hurry to part with. Thus, today even the common generational debate in the literary process often takes the form of a battle for the Soviet legacy. In fact, the dividing line has already been drawn: the "fathers" of the Sixties inherited the rational, and the "children" the irrational part of the Soviet past. The former received Soviet man's conscious mind, the latter his subconscious.

In assimilating this new theme, today's literature seeks to resolve a double problem. On the one hand, defining the Soviet regime as the rudimental form of the collective unconscious benefits society; the diagnosis determines the therapy. On the other hand, the expression and depiction of the nation's subconscious is in itself the main task of any artist. It is not surprising that the first successes of post-Soviet authors lie in this realm of revealing the subconscious. It provides a rich source of myth-making energy. For this reason many writers find the socio-realist tradition extremely important. As a dream, it allows the collective unconscious of Soviet society to blurt out secrets in its sleep -- in socio-realism the words let slip accidentally are far more significant than the deliberate ones. As a matter of fact, this forms the boundary between soc-art as the last stage of Soviet culture and the beginning of the new round. Soc-art exploits the materials of socio-realism; post-Soviet culture -- its methods.

The history of the past decade has shown that if the stability of the Soviet regime turned out to be illusory, its phantoms have become quite real. The regime's attempt to control reality truly succeeded only in death. Today's culture, enchanted by the power of these necro-effects, hastens to master the mechanisms by which the regime created (with considerably greater success than previously suspected) its own reality.

How best to use this valuable experience in a world which is more and more acutely aware of its own artifice? This question remains to be answered by the present generation of Russian writers, who teeter on the brink of the future, trying to make habitable the narrow cultural space of the cliff's edge itself

## **References**

This paper was translated from Russian by Masha Barabtarlo.

1. Abram Tertz, "Chto Takoe Sotsialisticheskii realism" in *The Fantastic World of Abram Tertz* (London: Inter-Language Literary Association, 1967) p. 444. English translation by George Dennis, *On Socialist Realism* (New York: Pantheon, 1960).
2. Abram Tertz, *Progulki s Pushkinym* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange, 1975) p. 64. English translation by C. Nepomnyashchy and S. Yastremski, *Strolls with Pushkin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
3. "Andrei Siniavsky, *Ivan-Durak* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1991) p. 39.
4. "Abram Tertz, *Spokoinoi Nochi* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1984) p. 263. English translation by R. Lourie, *Goodnight!* (New York: Penguin, 1989).
5. "A. Siniavsky, *Ivan-Durak* opt. cit., p. 71.
6. The most representative Russian edition is A. Bitov, *Imperia v Cheteriekh Izmereniakh*, " (Kharkov: Folio and Moscow: TKO ACT, 1996). English translation by S. Brownsberger , (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990).
7. "A. Bitov, "Chelovek v Peizazhe" in *Imperia v Chetyriekh Izmereniakh* (Kharkov: Folio and Moscow: TKO ACT, 1996) vol. 4, p. 74.
8. "Op. cit. p. 86.
9. There are two representative anthologies in English: Makanin, *Escape Hatch and the Long Road Ahead*, trans. M. A. Szporluk, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1996) and *The Loss*, trans. B. Lindsey, (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1998).
10. Makanin, *Stol, Pokrytyi Suknom i s Grafynom Poseredine* trans. by Arch Tait (London: Readers International, 1995).
11. Makanin, *Kavkazskii Plennyi* trans. by Arch Tait in *Glas* (vol. 11, 1996).
12. In the book *V. Makanin. Rasskazy* (Moscow: Covremennik, 1990).
13. The most complete collection of Erofeev's writing, including the works mentioned above, is *Ostavte Moiu Dushu v Pokoie* (Moscow: Kh.G.S., 1995). "Moskva-Petushki" was translated into English as Erofeev, "Moscow

Stations" (Theater Communications Group, 1998).

14. A superb edition of Dovlatov's writings is: S. Dovlatov, *Sobranie Sochaniï* in 3 volumes (St. Petersburg: Limbus Press, 1993). Many of his books have been translated into English. See *The Zone* trans. A. Frydman (New York: Random House, 1985); *Ours* (Wridenfield & Nicholson, 1989); *The Suitcase* trans. A.W. Bouis (New York: Grove Press, 1990); *A Foreign Woman* trans. A.W. Bouis (New York: Grove Press, 1981).

15. S. Sokolov, *Shkola dlia Durakov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976). There is an English translation: *A School for Fools* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1988).

16. Op. cit., p. 37.

17. Op. cit., p. 128.

18. Tolstaya released two short-story collections: Tolstaya, *Na Zolotom Kryltse Sideli* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardia, 1987); Tolstaya, *Liubish-Ne Liubish* (Moscow: Oniks, OLMA-PRESS, 1997). Both are available in English: Tolstaya, *On the Golden Porch*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Tolstaya, *Sleepwalker in a Fog*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

19. Tolstaya, *Na Zolotom Kryltse Sideli*. . . (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardia, 1987) p. 6.

20. Op. cit., p. 66.

21. Op. cit., p. 33.

22. There is an English translation of *Ochered*: V. Sorokin, *The Queue* (Readers International, 1988).

23. V. Sorokin, *Tridtsataia Liubov Mariny* (Moscow: R. Elinin, 1995).

24. V. Sorokin, *Rasskazy* (Moscow: Russlit, 1992).

25. V. Sorokin, *Norma* (Moscow : 1994).

26. V. Sorokin, A. Zeldovich, "Moskva" (*Kinostsenarii* vol. 1, 1997).

27. Many editions of Pelevin's work have come out recently, both in

Russian and in English. In the United States, New Directions Press has published *The Yellow Arrow* (1996), *Omon Ra* (1997), and *The Blue Lantern: Selected Stories* (1997); all trans. Andrew Bromfield. Here I refer only to the original publications: V. Pelevin, *Sinii Fonar* (Moscow: Tekst, 1991); *Omon Ra*, *Znamia* no. 5 (1992); *The Yellow Arrow*, *Novy Mir* no. 7 (1993); *Zhizn Nasekomykh (The Life of Insects)*, *Znamia* no. 4, (1993).

28.V. Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, *Znamia* no. 5 (1992), p. 62.

---

