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The Art of Dissent: Parody, Travesty and Irony in Late Soviet Culture

Dmitri Shalin

Irony is the favorite tool of Russian postmodernists fighting discourse totalitarianism. They wield it like a crowbar to pry open in the simulacrum, to tear down the Potemkin portable villages built by forced discursive labor. Every new blow the ironist strikes against the official reality reaffirms his intonational freedom amidst the most coercive discourse. An ultimate weapon of the spiritual proletariat, irony proves to the intellectual that he is a subject rather than an object of discourse. Alas, ironic vigil takes its toll. The self busily disclaiming identity with itself loses track of what it really is. It knows not how to commit, empathize, make believe. Deconstructive irony is a radical *epoche* whose subject lost control over his destiny and no longer knows how to throw the parodic stick shift into reverse. Irony is indeed a double-edged sword: its corrosive edge cuts those who evade pathos and greets with cynicism constructive engagement. Irony can be construed as a dissimulative gesture signaling to the audience that the individual's face is but a mask, that discursive performance is not to be taken literally. Along with this gesture comes a deep aversion to direct speech. The postmodernist is someone who can't say I love you without immediately putting quotation marks around his words. He wants to distance himself from direct speech, ostensibly to protect himself from discourse's totalitarian proclivities and *poshlost*, but in the process he does violence to his own voice, suppresses its non-ironic modalities.

Irony is variously present in such literary genres as satire, parody and travesty. Its vocal counterpart is pathos, which thrives in epic and lyrical genres. These are two poles in a vocal continuum that we use to construct and deconstruct our social worlds. Without going into detailed discussions and definitions, let me say that satire scorns, parody mocks, travesty feigns, irony winks, bathos affects, and pathos makes believe. (I hesitate to place irony squarely in this continuum as it partakes in many genres, but I feel it could function as a particular speech genre, in which case it might have a rightful places somewhere between parody and travesty). Judged from this continuum, ironic modes are no more important for our sane existence than pathetic modes. Irony comes in handy when discourse grows too solemn and pious. Pathos is called for when discourse becomes derisive, irreverent and sacrilegious. Irony is indispensable as a hygiene to protect our faces underneath official mask, to poke fun at self-important heroes and repressive institutions. We need self-parody "to

disabuse others of the very ideas we press on them," as Mikhail Epstein put it felicitously (see his letter to me in our conference file). Tieck, Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Herzen and Kierkegaard paid homage to irony's magic touch. "He who does not understand irony and has no ear for its whisperings," wrote Kierkegaard in his doctoral dissertation, "lacks *eo ipso* what might be called the absolute beginnings for the personal life, lacks the bath of rejuvenation. He does not know the invigoration and fortification which, should the atmosphere become too oppressive comes from lifting oneself up and plunging into the ocean of irony, not in order to remain there, of course, but healthily, gladly, lightly to clad oneself again" (Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press [1841] 1965 p. 339). But irony ceases to be a defensive tactic and grows noxiously offensive when it leaves no room for the lyrical "I" and shows contempt for tact, adopts an in-your-face attitude. Seriousness is OK when it knows its limits, Bakhtin tells us. I would argue that the same applies to parody and irony.

Laughter has its violent side. Sometimes we need pathos to counter it, to extricate our words from quotation marks and turn another's speech into your own. Everyone is an ironist these days, Alexander Block commented earlier this century, and added that now it would take courage not to be ironic. Indeed, pathos requires courage when the time has come to suspend doubt and make a commitment; it builds bridges and makes fantasy come true; it calls for empathy and affirms solidarity with the other; it sets you into an e-motion without which your social construction falls apart. Just as irony, pathos can grow offensive, arrogant and coercive. It happens whenever it seeks to impose on others a politically correct line, frowns on unorthodox discourses, and treats everyone who begs to differ as a misfit whose consciousness needs to be raised. Every society seems to go through cycles where the ironic or the pathetic mode takes ascendance among its members. Cynicism and ethical commitment trade places. Late Soviet and early postcommunist culture have been marked by the excessive irony whose Homeric energies will be felt for a long time. But there are signs that its supremacy is withering away, as more ambivalent, lyrical modes come to the fore.

Given this historical dynamics, it seems prudent to ask if Russian postmodernists are mistaking their sordid historical conditions for the primordial nature of being. The schizophrenic discourse they embraced may have something to do with the schizophrenic realities surrounding them on all fronts. There is enough inanity in the world to make me wonder whether humanity will eventually succumb to chaos. The bubble of sanity we inhabit can burst at any time. But whatever the outcome, I

doubt it will have been destiny. We are participant observers in the world historical drama, and our actions just might tip the scale and make one outcome or the other more certain.

Venichka looks around and sees nothing but chaos. He cries for help -- none is forthcoming from his fellow men. He turns his eyes heavenly -- the Lord has forsaken him. We are led to believe that there is no hope in sight. But is it a fact or is it a figment of his alcoholic imagination? Was chance his true destiny or did he seal his own fate by yielding to the forces of chaos? Was his flight into insanity an act of courage or a pathetic copout? One can argue that postmodernism simply inoculates us from the insanity of this world, one can make the case that it helps spread the disease. As I said on various occasions, postmodernism is much too diverse a current to lend itself to easy generalization; there is much in it that is exciting, even wise. Still, I feel some of its proponents take themselves too seriously. The irony is that postmodernism threatens to become political correctness for our times. The grandest narrative of them all, it spawns the repressive tolerance once attributed to the liberal establishment. Its proponents reject maximalism, absolutism, totalitarianism but they do so in a curiously maximalist, absolutist and totalizing fashion. One is reminded of Turgenev's hero who sets out to prove that everything in this world is relative. "Are you sure about that?", he is asked. To which he replies: "ABSOLUTELY!"

Like a weather vane that dutifully follows the wind's direction and serves as its faithful index, conceptualists feel the bygone era's violent winds, which weathered their bodies and dried up their souls. Like a dumb idol forced to partake in a pagan ritual through its very iconicity, conceptualists show more than a fleeting family resemblance to idols and idolatry they mock. Like a jester who feigns it doesn't hurt at all when somebody slaps him in the face, conceptualists escape into irony to cover up the stinging pain from a ghastly spectacle in which they were symbolically implicated. Their faces are contorted in a grimace signifying disengagement, but their expressions are iconic as much as they are ironic. It is this bio-social semiotic of postmodernist aesthetics in general and Russian conceptualism in particular that interests me greatly. Icon, index, symbol -- these are the three basic sign forms. Postmodernists come conceptualists work closely with all three, but they pretend that their icons and indexes are mere "linguistic symbols," whose own body is supposed to be indifferent to the events they signify. Yet, they hardly escape the culture's inexorable iconicity and indexicality. The conceptualist simulating gesture has an unmistakably dissimulating ring to it. The joke

may be on the joker, after all.

Baudrillard's notion of "simulacrum" needs to be complemented by another one -- "dissimulacrum." If simulacrum is a copy masquerading as reality, then dissimulacrum is reality masquerading as fiction. A simulator pretends that something is there when it is not. A dissimulator pretends that there is nothing when there is something. The former wishes to pass his mask for a face, the latter is trying to convince us that his is "really" a mask. One is busy imitating enthusiasm, constructive activity, and meaningful social routines, the other rushes to disassemble or dissemble them even before they are brought into being. One fakes total presence, the other feigns total absence. In short, the two are twins; theirs is a siblings' rivalry; the one can hardly do its job without the other, as they continue to pretend that they pretend or that they don't. Culture does not so much lose its body in these exercises as it whittles down its emotionally-laden substance and masks its all too real deformities. The postmodernist escape from soma into the playfully linguisticized discourse strikes me as a symptom. Of what?

The postmodern ironists' dis-ease with their own materiality indicates a spirit that has grown weary of its gravity-bound incarnations. Russian conceptualists are particularly at home in this strenuous self-denial, their attitude fed by centuries of neglect and denigration that body had been exposed to in Russian culture. I see this attitude in early Russian monks who mortified their flesh and preached silence as the highest form of devotion. It is evident in Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Fedorov with their quest for degendered existence and purely spiritual love. Its traces could be found in Nikolai Berdiaev and Alexander Block who experimented with the idea of sexless marriage, mixed with *khlysty*, and evinced profound ambivalence about human flesh. The Russian dis-ease with the body and its mundane functions is nowhere more evident than in the Russian sectarian movement. Its members' self-flagellational vigils were designed to elevate spiritual culture over its profane embodiments, but there was enough room for doubt left as to whether the secret pleasures the participants experienced in the process were entirely spiritual. Theology and art seem to work here hand-in-hand, disembodied culture, sublimating it into a symbolic apparitions, castigating the body as an unsavory vessel for the sacred soul. Or as you put it yourself so eloquently, "it is reality, brimming with health, full and round to the eye, that would rather serve the demonic seduction of humanity, turning it toward the earthly path and away from the celestial" (p. 58). The critique you offer toward the end of your book shows your more nuanced attitude toward postmodernism and conceptualism, but I think it needs to go

further in thematizing the Russian predilection for cultural disembodiment. The disembodied ideal of culture I detect in Russian conceptualism is matched by the dismembered concept of language, the disemboweled notion of semiotics, and the disassembling blueprint for ethics. All these features are consistent with the postmodernist corpus.

Take, for instance, postmodernist linguistics. It is thoroughly Saussurian in its binary thinking. The signifier is directly linked here with the signified, the sign is explicated through other signs, the meaning is transparent to the interpreter's gaze, and speech is a function of grammatical code enciphered in language. The semiotics that grew from this view has no use for human body, emotions, and voice; it dissolves semeiosis into voiceless discourse that speaks the speaker and signifies the signifier. Humans are always the signified here. They re-produce the linguistic code rather than produce it. Everything that could be said and is worth saying has already been said. We can only mouth the episteme and replicate the hyperreal copy. An original uttering is a theoretical impossibility.

This postmodernist creed contrasts with the semiotics developed by Charles Peirce and his pragmatist followers, who prefer the triadic model to the binary one. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is mediated here by an interpretive act, which completes the natural semeiosis. Our interpretive practices endow the word with meaning and breathe life into the inanimate linguistic machinery. Without the signifying act, the word -- language -- signifies nothing. It comes to mean something in deed and in situ, when the subject picks from its possible senses the one most needed and takes it to mean something definitive, not for all but very specific practical purposes. According to Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead, signification is not just a mental act: it could be a feeling, an action, a habit which tests the meaning we assign to things and situations against their obdurate properties and social valences. Linguistic signification grows from prelinguistic, nonsymbolic forms of semeiosis, which humans share with their protosapient ancestors. Our vocal gestures are implicated here -- not as surface phenomena akin to droning and muttering but as bio-social events deeply rooted in our body.

Voice, *golos*, is not just a capacity to *golosovat*, make empty political utterances. It is vested in the human body and it goes to its emotional core. Unlike discourse, voice exists in real time and space and triggers momentous physiological processes. Activated by our vocal cords and tongue, our voice reverberates with feelings, quivers with emotions, it has a certain diction that usually tells us more than the self-conscious subject seeks to communicate. Even when voice simulates and dissimulates, it has

an undeniable presence; it lets us in onto real events which no ironic discourse could camouflage. (I shall note parenthetically that dramaturgical act is always transcendental and transcendental act is always dramatic). Distorted, tortured though Gorbachev's glasnost might have been, it was no mere "voiceness," as you seem to imply (p. 97). It gave hope to many people who were not completely jaded or lulled by decades of ideological droning. The violent shrieks and howls we are hearing ever since are genuine indexes, whose bio-social semiotics bespeaks a repressed culture that is finally baring its emotional wounds.

In this reckoning, it would seem to make more sense to talk about "ideospeech" than "ideolanguage." Not just because Russian ideological tetrads translate so well into other languages, or because shrewd politicians and con-artists have deployed them since Thucydides, though these are weighty portends. The point is rather that doublespeak reveals itself in paralinguistic tell-tell signs even more vividly than in its lexical and syntactic patterns. I agree with you that ideology is first and foremost about power, but I don't think language is to blame. Ideology engenders a distorted emotional culture of intolerance and hate, which bursts through and makes its hegemonic presence felt in ideospeech acts. It is at this embodied level that debased culture shows to us its true physiognomy. We feel it in our twisted guts, faces contorted into fake smiles, expressions of hate frozen in our eyes, and other emotionally vested value judgments we pass on the world and our selves. We can simulate and dissimulate these semiotic indexes, but they are a presence no deconstructive finesse could erase. The recourse to irony does not help the matter. It adds a new cycle to the dissimulational spiral and helps hide the snarled web of the ironist's motivations. "Irony is almost inevitable where mind is at cross-purpose with the heart," says Georgy Fedotov (Sudby i Grekhi Rossii, Vol. 2, p. 344). If so, then the conceptualists' ironic vigil hints at a crying gap between their heartfelt emotions audible in their voices and anesthetized minds inscribed in their discourse.

Does conceptualist art imitate life or is it the other way around? I do not know nearly enough about conceptualists' personal habits to have the answer, but I would venture a hypothesis that there is a linkage between their lives and their art, that the conceptualists' ironic detachment from ideological hyperreality spills over into their relationships with flesh and blood people. Conceptualist art, and more broadly postmodernist discourse, engenders a certain ethos: the in-your-face ethics of putdown and insult. When Baudrillard says, "I don't want culture, I spit on it" (Forget Foucault, p. 81), you can clearly sense venom in his voice and

visualize an indexical gesture. Conceptualist artists mimic the same gesture, as they settle the old accounts with their tormentors. Conceptualists are not as violently inclined as some radical postmodernists, but I sense a passive-aggressive attitude in their voice which heaps scorn on those who don't see things their way.

Conceptualist art is hyperrepresentational, in that it seeks to convey not things themselves but their ideological essences. Conceptualism sucks into itself bits and pieces of reality, and in the process purifies its objects from humanity they once embodied. So, what is left is a cipher, an ideological code, cartoonish characters set into motion by the omnipotent puppet master. Hence, Kibirov's "Speech by the Comrade Chernenko," where his astringent imagination brings to life the living corpse of the General Secretary addressing a Soviet writers' meeting. Everybody in this clever satire is a nincompoop. There is a slew of well known characters who show up at the scene, decked out with the all too familiar claptrap: Evtushenko, "barely able to hold back his feelings"; Bergolts and Inber, "wailing like common harridans;" Samoilov, "applauding nobly with restraint"; Erenburg, Pasternak, Rozhdestvensky take their turns, dutifully signing their obeisance to the party line; they are followed by Block, Puskin, Lermontov, Dante, and Homer who make a brief appearance to give the happening a phantasmagoric dimension. A few tangible details crop up here and there (Pasternak looks like a "startled child," Rasputin "for a moment forgot about his beloved Lake Baikal "), but these quasi-personal tidbits only underscore the spectacle's studied one-dimensionality. It must be real fun to jerk these straw men and women around, dissolve them in the ideological formalin, burn them in effigies. One longs for a *noncomic* relief, but none is forthcoming.

While the Soviet Writers' Union was in place, such a spoof had real bite. When the same method of turning people into their linguistic shadows is employed today, it becomes an ideology, an ethical imperative to cut everybody down to size. Lev Rubinstein's extensive catalogue of commonplace utterances that he assembles on index cards and reads in a more or less random fashion implies that people are walking clichés with no emotional substance to their verbalizations. We are all cultural dupes, the writer tells us, eager to consume linguistic garbage and bound to reproduce unreflexively the existing order of things. We feign being alive, for there is no reality behind our spurious yearnings. We simulate with vengeance, all of us, except maybe for conceptualists themselves, who have figured out the charade and managed to escape the common dupery through their ironic overextension of idiomatic commonplaces. I am yet to come across a postmodernist willing to say, "I am a cultural dupe, wired

to the media, bent on mindless consumption, and faithfully reproducing hegemonic institutions." Ilya Kabakov comes closest to admitting that much. When Oskar Rabin approached him regarding participation in the famous Bulldozer exhibition of 1974, Kabakov turned him down and allegedly said, "All my life I have crawled on four feet. I stand up on four feet. And you are trying to stand like a normal person on two legs" (Komar and Melamid, in Baigell and Baigell, eds., *Soviet Dissident Artists*, p. 268). This is a graphic -- iconic -- description, hinting at the toll Soviet culture exacted from its artists. But even Kabakov couldn't say it in all sincerity; his confession was tongue-in-cheek; his artistry expressed a thoroughly nonconformist spirit. The postmodernists' stance implies that its practitioners are autonomous subjects, endowed with taste, perspective, and critical judgment. Why, then, deny critical agency to others?

As the above example suggests, language furnishes us with all purpose linguistic frames that mean everything and nothing at the same time, and that to mean *something*, they have to be appropriated by speakers and deployed in situ and in actu. Words and concepts are but samples of frozen semantic sperm gathered in dictionary tubes, stored away in textbook vaults, and waiting to be fertilized in speech acts. For a conception to occur, there must be speakers lending their voices to impersonal discourses in mundane situations where chosen meanings are acted upon in earnest make-believe.

Postmodernists qua conceptualists fail to imagine that "concept" is more than a purely verbal device -- *konzept*. Concept is a seed of future reality, a semantic chromosome that carries within itself a genetic code waiting to be decoded in speech. Thanks to our concepts, we can "conceive" things as meaningful objects and populate with their namesakes landscapes in our emergent uni-verse, literally "one verse" recited by those who inhabit a given universe. New verses mean new uni-verses. Were it not for embodied speech practices, the luscious landscapes comprising our universe would break apart into randomly scattered objects. Every meaningful event is conceived on location, in a situation implicating the other, where logos can satisfy its prodigious erotic appetites and where idea and matter can penetrate each other, germinating in a definite thing. Once conceived, things don't exist as meaningful objects for all eternity; they have to be reconceived with every human encounter. One thing may turn up as many objects, and one object could be impersonated by many different things. When particulars are brought into being as concrete universals, they have a certain emotional afterglow, a kind of birthmark which distinguishes a thing for us from a thing in itself. This

metamorphosis requires a social setting and a live transaction, without which our language games remain sterile.

The endless play of difference we find in deconstructionist texts occasions few extratextual events. One sign begets the other but scarcely any engenders the inhabitable universe. The offsprings that come from deconstructionist texts are typically stillborn, unable to stir our feelings, plunge us into e-motions, move us. Whatever embryo of meaning is conceived in the conceptualist mind is promptly killed by its deconstructive imagination. The latter doesn't like to carry its babies to term, relying on irony as an all-purpose contraceptive device. No sooner does sentiment escapes its rib cage, that conceptualists pluck its feathers and clip its wings with their ironic tweezers. Deconstructive irony is a dissimulating gesture, a dissimulacrum which puts our self into quotation marks to prevent it from being taken seriously and engendering a meaningful reality. It is a functional equivalent of birth control -- a symbolic rubber wrapped around emotions to make sure no conception will take place.

Notice that Russian conceptualism wasn't always radically deconstructive. It started as an inspired satire on socialist realism and its pompous style - a "nostalgic socialist realism," pioneered, or at least popularized, by Komar and Melamid. Like a grown up stumbling on a wooden horse he rode with zest in childhood, Russian conceptualists look back at their young pioneer neckties and realize in astonishment that they once wore them with pride. Komar and Melamid's childhood is still glowing with warm memories of hot pursuits and boy scout exploits, but this benign sentiment soon gives way to more conflicted emotions. Ambivalence merges with resentment, resentment breeds irritation, irritation shades into contempt and occasions a smirk at any one who might still harbor the feelings once felt by conceptualists, who have finally grown too big for their britches. In developed conceptualist art one finds little humor and plenty of sarcasm aimed at inane rituals and coercive discipline imposed on the not so young pioneers by their stalwart jailers/teachers.

What gives real pathos to conceptualists' irony is their first-hand experience with the communist grand narrative. As all Soviet citizens, Russian conceptualists were forced to put on uniforms and dramatize inane realities as meaningful and sane. We know what it feels like when you lend your face to the cause you loath or look the other way as somebody else's soul is tortured on the racks. That's when irony is summoned to help abort the bastardly reality conceived against our will. But the imbecilic creatures we abort are our offsprings. Every one of us, conceptualists included, could be slapped with a paternity suit, for we did

take part in the debased discourse and helped nurture socialist realities. It is therefore a double irony that we witness here. Those very faces that produced hateful reality labored hard to cut it down to size with their ironic gestures. We could be charged in "consorting with an enemy" as well as taken to court for "illegal abortion." As a matter of fact, some especially brave and brazen ironists among us were taken to court for that very crime, known in common parlance as "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda."

Putting this into semiotic terms, we can say that ironic gesture is always iconic and indexical, that it implicates ironists in the reality they bracket. You can distance yourself from the mask you are wearing, but your own face is sucked into the dramaturgical act. Thus, quotation marks you place around swearing (a racial slur, a blasphemous word) does not prevent some of it from rubbing off on you. Andy Warhol assumes an ironic posture when he says that artists who cannot sell their art are failures, but he means it more than he pretends. He purports to debunk consumerism of late capitalism, but sets up an "artistic factory" which churns out millions of dollars' worth of commodities that have been sold on capitalist markets. While Woody Allen mocks himself in front of the audience, he manages to transcend his predicament, but the relief he gains is temporary; it lasts while he is performing on stage in front of an audience. He has to keep jesting and parodying himself, lest somebody notices that he only pretends to pretend, that his willfully donned mask of a meshuganah from Brooklyn is really a naked face contorted in self-loathing. Irony helps vent anger and dull the pain, but the relief is short-lived. It is a plague and a therapy at the same time, it is a spectacle which lets us fight pain with laughter, a carnival where you can wear the mask of otherness pretending it is not your real self. Postmodern ironists are bent on turning life into a never-ending carnival where they can don their masks in a never-ending game of dissimulation. But the ploy threatens to fall apart and bury compulsive ironists under its debris. Just as people stricken with leprosy in the medieval times turned their stigma into a mark of a true chosenness, deconstructive ironists claim that their stigma is a blessing in disguise. They are postmodern stigmatics who endeavor to bear the cross for all of us but end up being crushed by the burden. (Did you notice that jesters and ironists are very sad creatures who are apt to fall into the blackest depression?).

The radically deconstructive irony that sprouted in the postmodern age has little resemblance to its romantic predecessor. Ironic detachment ceased to be a defensive strategy designed to protect one's face beneath the official mask and is transformed into an offensive weapon used to

clobber over the head anyone who begs to differ. It is no longer self-irony hinting at the self that it is at odds with itself, but a diatribe directed at the lifeworld and the dupes inhabiting it. For all their talk about the other and alterity, postmodernists don't have much respect for the sanctity of the other person's selfhood, which they put down and eviscerate with their ironic stratagems. Deconstructive irony is cheerless, its playfulness is forced, its voice growing hoarser by the minutes as it mounts an all-out assault on meaning and meaningfulness. Sharpened on the anvil of deconstructive irony, conceptualism turns into the art of universal putdown, which leaves an indelible mark on its practitioners. Prigov shows little mercy and takes no prisoners. Kabakov tells us our life is garbage. Sorokin is bent on painting us as living corpses. Rubinstein is convinced that we are walking clichés. This conceptualist art evinces few traces of nostalgia. Early Kibirov has a gentler touch, but even he couldn't resist the temptation of reducing people to their cartoonish shadows. He laments the plight of his protagonists, but his tears are mostly fake.

Today, conceptualism is no longer a mere *epater la bourgeoisie*. It becomes far more ambitious as conceptualists take on being as such. Unsheathed before our eyes is a metaphysical irony that contrives to unmask the entire universe of meaning as a fraud. Conceptualism casts its jaundiced eye at the world and finds it lacking in any credibility. Every political platform is a lie, postmodernists tell us, every paradigm is a hoax; there is no being, only emptiness and death lurking beneath our phony selves and feigned enthusiasms. Whatever identity we claim to possess is counterfeit. Our hopes, dreams, desires, commitments are pathetic ploys that keep us from looking into the deathly abyss hidden just below the surface. Nothingness, sheer nothingness, beribboned and engraved, is what conceptualists extol in their most fervent prayers and what we are to embrace as the only authentic presence.

If you want a literary allusion, I'd say that postmodernists stand Don Quixote on his head. While the man from La Mancha 's fecund imagination populates the world with imaginary entities, postmodernist deconstruction is bent on turning every meaningful occasion into a simulacrum, an existential nonevent. Conceptualists destroy all manners of ideological monsters in a bid to liberate humanity from the tyranny of paradigms. Along the way, they turn parody onto itself, rendering it largely meaningless. For parody feeds on the gap between mask and face, appearance and reality, and it becomes superfluous when this gap disappears, when the only real thing left is parody itself. Constitutive imagination is supplanted with a deconstructive one, grand narrative with the self-effacing narrative, constructive paradigm with the self-

deconstructing paradigm, and a self-fulfilling prophecy with a self-unfulfilling prophecy -- a prophecy that assures its own failure.

The paradigmatic urge to parody every paradigm produces ideological arabesques, political ornaments, moral fugues, and other non- or anti-narrative art forms. Their nonthematic unity precludes any attempt to derive a rationale for action from this absurdist pastiche. If there is any morale to be found here, it is a "plague on both your houses," or better still, *nam tataram vse ravno*. . . . Conceptualist aesthetics can be amusing or annoying depending on your mood, but it rarely fails to sap ethical substance. Liberalism, conservatism, socialism, capitalism, democracy -- this ideological claptrap enslaves the one who takes it seriously. The only sure way to avoid totalitarian simulacrum is to keep constructive imagination at bay and practice deconstructive engagement. So, beware of pathos and embrace irony, shun commitment and mock politics, poke fun and take refuge in the safety of quotation marks, enjoy your solitary play and always, always keep your protective irony unwrapped and ready to use.

A characteristic quote from Prigov appears in your book, Mark. In it, Prigov juxtaposes Sorokin and Chekhov as the perfect expressions of the modernist and postmodernist sensibilities:

Precisely in his [Chekhov's] writing this exceedingly thin film of nice, delicate and touching human relationships is meant to cover up, stave off the terrifying subterranean chaos (terrifying from Chekhov's standpoint, of course) that threatens to burst out and blow away with its foul breath the thin, restraining film of culture. . . . [T]he film with which Sorokin deals differs from the one envisioned by Chekhov, and not just in its historical particulars but in its cardinal new intent. That is to say, his film no longer masks the chaos but clings to man, envelops him, and more than that -- it tries to usurp his place, his thoughts and feelings. Having come that close to the human being, the film [of civility] brings him that much closer to chaos (A. Prigov, "A im kazalos v Moskvu! v Moskvu!", Pp. 117-116 in *Vladimir Sorokin*, Moskva: Russlit, 1992).

It is the modern man who struggles to insulate himself from chaos, Prigov seems to tell us; the postmodern man doesn't avert his gaze and stares right back at it. He may not bring chaos to heel, but at least he is not going to feed himself illusions and half-truths about his ability to tame it. Treating absurdity with discursive remedies is like spoon-feeding fish oil to someone afflicted with Carposi sarcoma. Trim your political agenda, decenter your whole being, anesthetize yourself with irony, and chaos

won't seem half as bad as it does to a sober-minded man stuck up on reason and civility.

From the discourse-analytical standpoint, sign is the true substance of discourse. It is meant to be transparent to meaning, its body completely irrelevant to what it signifies. Looked at from this angle, the expression "I love you" means the same thing whether it is written or verbalized, framed in the 12 pitch or 10 pitch, rendered in capital or small case letters, signed in Cyrillic or Japanese script -- its pure sign value stays more or less the same. The voice-analytical perspective highlights live speech, intonation, vocal delivery -- the iconic/indexical properties of communication essential to pragmatist linguistics. What is said is no more important than how it is said. The bodily accompaniment has significance quite apart from the message's semantic content. Given an ironic twist, the expression "I love you" may well mean the opposite of what its purely semantic content implies. This is what Bakhtin tried to articulate when he criticized Saussurean linguistics and urged attention to utterance, intonation, life speech genres. This is what George Mead and Lev Vygotsky seemed to have in mind when they urged to move beyond the thought-sign toward the larger behavioral context of linguistic consciousness. And this is, I take it, what Charles Peirce sought to communicate when he brought into one continuum icons, indexes and signs. (In my last year at the University of Leningrad I wrote a thesis on Mead and Vygotsky, but now I see that it should have also covered Peirce and Bakhtin).

Voice is silently present in every discourse. It is a bio-semiotic event that links human discourse to subhuman communication and hints at the origins we share with other mammals. This semiotic phenomenon is marked by what Peirce calls "firstness" or "iconicity." Voice is a perfect example of an icon, of a medium that is also a message. As an iconic body of the sign, voice tends to stay in the background of symbolic exchange. It does its job as a carrier of arbitrary meaning, the way a "red octagon" at the intersection presents itself as a "stop sign." But just as the shape, color and position of the stop sign mean something quite apart from the sign's intended meaning, the voice in discourse means something quite apart from what it was intended to mean. We behold it with all our senses, paying special attention to the discrepancies between its proclaimed intent and its non-assigned significance. Thus, we look beyond the forbidden discourse and identify with an outlaw blessed by a sensible voice and withhold our sympathy from a mendacious sheriff or a conniving politician spouting a politically correct line. In real life, a communist party member can show emotional intelligence even when he dresses his

message in the official terminological garb, while a dissident espousing liberty and justice may acquit oneself as an intolerant person through his vocalization. In all such cases, we are attuned to the various levels of signification through the tension between iconic, indexical and symbolic properties of discourse.

If voice is an icon marked by firstness, then the emotion it conveys is an index characterized by "secondness." As every genuine index, emotion partakes in the event about which it testifies without being identical with it (weather vane comes to mind as another common example). Emotions reveal attitudes that may or may not be readily accessible to the organism itself. To the extent that these bodily dispositions become available to the individual and are intentionally communicated to others, our emotions acquire the quality of "thirdness" and turn into "signals." Sign's body begins to shrivel in size and significance at this point. Discourse grows oblivious of its vocal substrate as it moves away from live speech to written communication. In purely symbolic communication, sign's value is effectively severed from the sign's body, which is not supposed to mean anything in and of itself, only what members of a language community arbitrarily allow it to mean. All consciously signifying activity is, in this respect, dissimulating, its iconic significance and indexical proximity to the event being sacrificed to its symbolic value.

As discourse grows autonomous, it comes to dominate and colonize voice. It turns into politically correct speech that wants to be taken at face value. Politically correct signing subdues messy particulars with patented universals in a drive to maximize certainty. Accounting designed to capture things themselves systematically glosses over their qualities that don't fit the accounting schema. Unfettered voice would have alerted us to the recalcitrant particulars tossed around by chaotic crosscurrents, but discourse sweeps the mess under the rug and imposes a seal of official determination on a muddled situation. Where intonational dynamics attuned to uncertainty quickly registers unpredictable changes in the situation, discourse stays its course and glosses over the particulars that won't fit into its ideological mold. Voice always tells us more than discourse intends to. For we aren't just talking heads and mouthpieces for master discourses; we are emotionally-charged, full-throated, gut-wrenching voices whose iconic presence breaks through discourse. Voice may turn into a whimper when discursive oppression is overwhelming, it may sound like a howl of a wounded animal, it can become temporarily inaudible, but it speaks volumes to us if we care to listen and pay close attention to its peculiar semantics, syntaxis and style.

While postmodern hermeneutics privileges discourse over voice, pragmatist hermeneutics favors voice over discourse. Unlike the postmodernist who is bent on exposing voice as a mouthpiece of discourse and reducing it to an archetype through intertextual deconstruction, the pragmatist aims to recover voice within discourse, to appropriate a unique experience shining through worn-out discursive devices. The relationship between voice and discourse is not a transitive one, however. While voice is a silent presence in every discourse, the reverse is not necessarily true. We can't dialectically invert this proposition and say that discourse is a silent presence in every voice. Voice is there before discourse the way moaning is there before meaning. Minding precedes mind. Voice-sensitive hermeneutics acknowledges that the individual needs some discourse to communicate his experience to others, but it is always on the lookout for novel, emergent, unpredictable inflections that subvert and update the familiar discursive pattern. When the same text appears on more than one occasion, it means a different thing. Thus, a quotation from Marx acquires a new connotation depending on whether it is invoked by Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Lukacs, Gramsci, Lifschitz or Ilienkov. Novel linguistic events happen; to recover them, to discern a unique way in which a familiar universal has been particularized is the task of pragmatic hermeneutics.

Postmodernists correctly sense the danger inherent in discourse production. Language that speaks us is not just a figure of speech. It reflects the all too familiar situation where one is forced to say something one couldn't possibly mean, sign feelings one doesn't feel, suppress emotions deemed to be politically correct. Hence, the need to rescue voice buried under discourse. But is discourse really such a menace? Is it always to be blamed? Should we agree with Prigov that "every language harbors within itself a totalitarian ambition to conquer the entire world, to cover it with its terms and who itself is an absolute truth" (*Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 05/12/93). To be sure, discourse can be used to clobber people over their heads, but it also has therapeutic qualities, it helps us break the strangle hold of the dead speech on our minds, and gives exquisite pleasures to those who have mastered it. Freud's, Ricoeur's and Habermas's intuitions are all on target here. Discourse does a lot more than postmodernists would allow. It sickens and it heals, it enslaves and it empowers, it stunts creativity and it opens new horizons of meaning -- it is a floating signifier to which we attribute agency that rightfully belongs to those who speak the discourse.

Remember Brodsky: "The poet is the instrument of language." This line can be read as a variation on Heidegger's maxim "language speaks the speaker." Brodsky played with this thesis when he gave a public talk at

the UNLV a few years ago. I remember him saying that few Russian writers dared to immerse themselves in the Russian language and allowed its powerful currents to stir them toward truth. He named Platonov as one of the exceptions. Solzhenitsyn, he said, had a considerable linguistic acumen, but he resisted language, didn't allow himself to be carried away by it. There is some important truth encysted in this dictum. But there is also some obfuscation. I asked Brodsky, how come Platonov, Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky spoke the same Russian language, yet each was deposited on a vastly different linguistic shore and had such remarkably different insights to offer? Could it be that these individuals were not merely hapless instruments in the hands of language but active beings guided in their linguistic journeys by their emotional intelligence and moral intuition? I need to check with those present how exactly Brodsky answered my query, for my memories are rather dim. He might have said something to the effect that it is language that lets you have any particular insight, but I don't think he joined issue with me. Again, I find pragmatist intuitions more inspiring than those that animated Heidegger and his postmodernist followers. We only need to take a closer look at Soviet discourse to realize that we speak language as much as language speaks us.

If you take postmodernists literally, you would think that Soviet discourse completely dominated life in the Soviet Union . Every human being appears in this account as a parrot babbling official verbiage. The reality, as we know, was more complex. Not all discursive practices fitted the official mold. There were semi-official, non-official, dissident, anti-Soviet discursive forms that existed along side endless variations on the master discourse, variations that sometimes strayed so far from the main theme that they effectively became themes in their own right. "Discursive genres" strike me as a far better calibrated tool than "master discourse" when it comes to accounting for the Soviet speech situation. Following Bakhtin, we can picture language as a living continuum extending from archetypal myths, mythologems and master discourses to discursive fields, speech genres and speech dialects, all the way down to local lingos and individual speech variations. What makes this a living continuum is a speech act fueled by voice -- a voice that does not let itself to be consumed by discourse. I would dare say that there are more discursive fields, real or potential, in any modern society than there are individual members who partake in them. This applies to a country as repressive as the Soviet Union.

Even before Stalin's death, there were plenty of linguistic forms to chose from. After 1953, the choice expanded dramatically. Overlapping or

independent as they were, Soviet discourses didn't swallow the individual completely. The Soviet individual partook in many discursive fields, borrowed from different terminological arsenals, and displayed a bewildering variety of selves. Discursive fields left him considerable leeway as to how the individual would terminate indeterminacy and quantify oneself. The self emerging on the intersection of such fields was decentered, it spilled over discursive borderlines and was only partially predictable. Individual behavior was akin to a wave that moved in all sorts of directions, occasionally registering as a particular with a definite identity. The Soviet individual never ceased to emerge as a person and repeatedly surprised himself and others with his nonconventional role playing. Surely, he felt the gravitational pull of various idio-languages, but these were only discursive blueprints. Which one would prove decisive in shaping his quantum-self often could be predicted, but then only with a margin of uncertainty.

If individual selves continued to emerge in Soviet society, so were discursive fields contingent on identities assumed by individuals. Speech genres proliferated, discursive communities multiplied, including many that had no official stamp of approval. Few if any discursive norms were sacred among Soviet citizens. Some were ignored, others given lip service, still others honored in the breach. When a certain discursive form would grow stale or oppressive, the Soviet individual used irony, parody, travesty and kindred vocal strategies intended to dramatize an assumed identity as bogus, to highlight one's speech as "merely" official discourse. The Soviet individual was a master of his discourse, not its passive victim whose identity was stamped on his forehead. For all its simulating and dissimulating proclivities, Soviet society didn't abolish reality. Every Potemkin portable village needed speakers to lend their voices to official discourses. The vocal presence continued to be felt right in the middle of an official spectacle. Discursively constructed in this haphazard fashion, Soviet society was neither a complete chaos nor a monolithic order but a semi-ordered chaos continuously shaped and reshaped by self-conscious actors. Which is how human society looks when captured through the pragmatist-interactionist optics. "Society transpires here as a universe of interferentially overlapping fields, coalescing around symbols and meanings and exerting various pressures on individuals caught in their gravitational pull. When the borderlines separating these interactional fields are strictly policed, they behave like 'bodies,' revealing their 'corpuscular' qualities. On other occasions, their 'wave-like' properties are more in evidence, as crisscrossing identifications whittle away at their thingness, making the fields appear as fuzzy, gaseous, easily penetrable

formations" (Shalin, 1986, Op. Cit., p. 18).

* * * *

I have traveled full circle and returned to where I started: chaos, uncertainty and moral responsibility. Postmodernists, in my view, come down much too hard on discourse and are too pessimistic about our ability to lead a sane existence in this absurd world. Their stark and cheerless visage of the world steeped in chaos should not be taken literally. As any resource, discourse could be misused and abused, but it is a valuable resource nonetheless. It helps us get a handle on chaos, to convert it into semi-ordered chaos or, if you prefer, semi-chaotic order. Contrary to postmodernist wisdom, rhetoric matters. Liberal rhetoric breeds fewer totalitarian consequences than communist rhetoric. Democratic discourse lets you manage uncertainty in a more humane way than a nondemocratic discourse. Looked at from this angle, "democracy is a historically specific mode of managing uncertainty. [Its institutions] promote conflicting life-forms, open up public discourse for an ever-widening range of participants, and maximizes public's role in defining the terms in which indeterminacy can be legitimately terminated" (Shalin, 1991, p. 266). This approach shifts the theoretical focus from the economic to the terminological means of production of objective reality. Nondemocratic polities seek to monopolize this control, democratic societies decentralize it. While the latter system increases the margin of uncertainty and spurs dissipative processes, it offers more flexibility and furnishes a greater over-all stability than the authoritarian polities do (this is one reason why "plan" is currently bowing to "market"). "[Democracy] . . . recognizes that uncertainty is inevitable and then turns it to positive account" (John Dewey and John Childs, *The Educational Frontiers*, New York: Appleton-Century, 1933, p. 309). Indeed, democracy thrives on uncertainty, encourages its members to judge particulars for themselves, and compels us to revise our universals. It also designates an expansive private domain where individuals are left to their own devices and can experiment with unorthodox terminological practices.

Democratic discourse is superior to its alternatives in yet another respect: it cultivates human voice and rewards emotional intelligence. These qualities indispensable to sane living fall under the heading of civic culture. Civic virtue thrives in the emotional culture which promotes trust, tolerance, prudence, compassion, humor, and it wilts when overexposed to suspicion, hatred, vanity, cruelty and sarcasm (you will find this statement reprinted from my newspaper column on the back of our conference program). Mistaken are those who pin their hopes on correct

political "signals" and dismiss emotional littering as mere "noise." The vocal medium is very much the message when it comes to politics. While emotions that confer dignity on the other are democracy's lifeblood, violent emotions that hold others in contempt subvert its sacred thrust. Emotional sanity is, consequently, as central to democracy as discursive political rationality.

If democracy is aching today, it is in part because we have neglected the emotional intelligence which nourishes it. Civil rights are no substitute for civility. Nor is political correctness, whether it comes in radical, liberal, conservative, or any other garb. Political correctness is ultimately a failure of moral imagination. I use the latter term to designate our ability to wade through unwieldy circumstances and bring sanity into this world without succumbing to absurd or closing eyes to chaos. You can't bring chaos to heel but you can tame it, and then some, if you are willing to make sense together and cultivate your emotional intelligence. This is where Chekhov becomes relevant again.

I couldn't disagree more with Prigov about this remarkable figure on the Russian cultural scene. Prigov's take on Chekhov as a quintessential modernist and Sorokin as his postmodern antithesis is very clever. It is entirely consistent with the Nietzschean ethos of radical postmodernism, which dismisses a call for civility as a failure of nerve, a species of feint-heartedness to be remedied by the robust postmodernist invectives. I read Chekhov differently. In my reckoning, Anton Chekhov showed moral imagination when he refused to succumb to chaos and urged his countrymen to practice political sanity and cultivate emotional intelligence in a society that was all messed up. He countered the Russian absurd with his tactics of small-scale projects and took solace in civic virtue. His advice still rings true today: "Start with yourself, reach out to your neighbors, communicate to others your good will, give credit to your enemies wherever it is due, have courage to admit when the problem has no ready solution, avoid grand-standing and take up small deeds. In sum, make sure your emotions are intelligent and your intellect is emotionally sane" (forgive me for yet another auto-citation).

Here is a real life parable that illuminates the small-scale-deeds theory. A man is walking down along the seashore after a storm which washed ashore countless little sea creatures. A little boy is picking them up, throwing them back to sea. "Why are you doing this," asks the man. "There are hundreds of thousands of them -- what difference does it make if you save a few?" The boy picks up another little sea horse, returns it to its elements, and says: "It makes a difference for this one . . . and for this

one . . . and for this one. . . ."

As world-weary adults, postmodernists see no point in trying. They allowed themselves to be mesmerized by the enormity of the task and the sheer dimensions of chaos. They convinced themselves that constructive efforts are absurd in the face of impending destruction and imminent death. Hence, their ethics is nihilist, their engagement is deconstructive, their ironic strategies are aimed at discourse communities that haven't yet fully unraveled. The ethics of uncertainty that pragmatists urge for our age rejects cynicism, calls for experimentalism, and appeals to our emotional intelligence and moral imagination. This ethics is premised on the notion that individual action makes a difference, that it matters whether we add a quantum of sanity to this world or stare blankly as it sinks into the vortex of insanity, whether we stay ironically aloof when someone is consumed by chaos or jump into its current to save a struggling soul, whether we use discourse to ridicule speech communities or to repair and expand the pluralistic universe. An overdose of ironic detachment breeds cruelty that might have been avoided were we to add a little pathos to our discursive vocalization.

Now is a good time to pause and look into the mirror. The reader must be wondering if I ever dismount the high moral horse and get down to the dirty particulars. Indeed, how much posturing is there in my pragmatist rhetoric? Or to put it in more neutral terms, Is there any flesh and blood person who meets the standard of emotional intelligence? Sergei Averintsev alerted me to this question in his February 4, 1997 , letter to me where he offered feedback on my "Notes on the Recessive Genes in Russian Culture" (Zvezda, 1995, No. 6). In this article, I talk about the Chekhov-Losev's perspective on emotional intelligence and moral imagination. "I was puzzled by your reference to A. F. Losev, who boasted his contempt for Chekhov," Averintsev writes:

Please forgive me, but did you read his main works (especially his *Dialectics of Myth*) where he heaps scorn on liberalism and everything that reaks of "Renaissance" and "new Europe "? . . . Aleksei Federovich, may he rest in peace and glory, was an unusually gifted and hard-working man, whose name I cherish, all the more so that for a while I had an informal relationship with him and was somewhat of a student of his -- but you are talking about quite different things. Far more appropriate would be to mention here the name of M. M. Bakhtin who developed the concept of dialogical truth and really knew how to talk to people from different walks of life. Generally speaking, the lists you compile, especially when they are intended for a Russian audience, appear to be

unexpectedly arbitrary, which raises the question about the genre. When the right and the left compile their lists of "our kind of people" and "their kind of people" . . . that suites them fine; but can you, who is opposed to generalizations and committed to truth as "objective uncertainty," do the same? "There are 9 and 60 ways of constructing tribal ways, // And -- every -- single -- one -- of -- them -- is -- right!", wrote Kipling (did he anticipated postmodernism?); by the same token, there are 9 and 60 ways of being tolerant, of being intolerant, of [.]mixing tolerance and practicing intolerance, and so on.

I take this to mean that no one has a monopoly on moral imagination. Quantum selves that we all are, we always find an occasion to fall flat on our faces. I know I do. That is, I espouse emotional intelligence, but I can't say my actions are always emotionally sane. Sometimes my voice cracks with intonations that make me cringe. And not only when I sing (an avocational pursuit), but also in other spheres where my competence is on the line. Once again, Chekhov's experience comes to mind. Here is a man who hoped to squeeze a slave out of his blood stream, drop by slavish drop, and assiduously cultivated *intelligentnost*. Was he always up to the challenge? Not really. Just read his correspondence, check the memoirs of his contemporaries, and you will see that he was all too human in practicing the craft of living. But he surely tried, and all of us are better off for his effort. The quantum of sanity he imparted to the world has made it a touch more bearable for all of us. Now, it is incumbent on us to try to do the same.

According to cosmologists, the fate of transgalactic formations, if not of the whole universe, turns on the strange happenings in the quantum micro-world. Chaos theorists tell us that a little grain of sand can become a focal point around which chaos coalesces into a newly emergent order. So, maybe the quantum of sanity we bring into the world would ultimately determine whether it acts like a semi-chaotic order or a disorderly chaos.
