

# The Incarnation of the Past: Sergei Lebedev's Poetics of Memory

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## *Introduction*

“[B]OOKS, novels are the restoration of a scale, of historical connections, of yourself as a person in history” (Fedorova & Lebedev 2017).<sup>1</sup> These are the words of contemporary Russian prose writer Sergei Lebedev (b. 1981). The quote is taken from an interview where Lebedev reflects on the cultural representation—e.g. in books, films—of the Gulag era against the background of contemporary Russian history politics and memory culture. Whereas the official commemoration of the Gulag tends towards abstraction, Lebedev argues, there is a need for each individual person to be able to experience and understand the life and death of each individual victim:

[...] the huge number of deaths that occurred there [i.e. in the camps, IL] have remained abstract deaths. They did not occur as cultural and civil deaths, which give birth to what we call the memory of the deceased. (Fedorova & Lebedev 2017)

Current official memory culture fails, according to Lebedev, to facilitate such commemoration and understanding, whereas certain grass roots initiatives and endeavours such as that of Iurii Dmitriev contribute to it. Historian and head of the local Memorial branch in Petrozavodsk, Iurii Dmitriev has over several decades worked to locate and document execution sites and mass graves, identify the victims and organize commemo-

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1 Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

ration events in cooperation with local authorities.<sup>2</sup> In one of several essays on Dmitriev's life project, Lebedev writes:

The millions of prisoners who were killed or died in the camps did not just die far away from family. Their deaths, which appeared as statistical data in camp administration reports and as physical acts, did not enter the country's common necropolis, that fine self-knitting web of mutual memory distributed among the living, based on the aggregate of memories that complement one another and pass through time; the aggregate supported and fed by the memorial infrastructure—funeral rites, rituals of grieving and remembering, and most importantly, by cemeteries, graves, places where the world of the dead and the world of the living meet symbolically. (Lebedev 2017)

Because of the lack of broad, public processes of discussing and coming to terms with the totalitarian past, the various forms of art, not least literature, have become important tools of memory practice in post-socialist Russia. The author of several novels that deal with Russia's troubled past, Lebedev clearly sees his books as a literary project that can be compared to the civic endeavours of Iurii Dmitriev. The urge to establish links “between the world of the dead and the world of the living” rings like a chorus in his writings on Dmitriev, interviews on his own life and work (e.g. Vuorela & Lebedev 2018) and in his fiction, as we shall see below.

As Alexander Etkind (2013) has shown, a number of post-Soviet writers of fiction turn to ghostly visions, monstrous creatures, distortions of history and manipulations of time, space and body in their “warped

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2 Dmitriev was arrested in 2016 on child-pornography charges. Following an anonymous tip-off, the police had found pictures of his adopted daughter on his computer. Dmitriev stated that the photos were taken for medical purposes, as the daughter was in poor health and it was imperative to document her progress. Several expert commissions confirmed that the images were not of a pornographic nature. After lengthy investigations and several rounds in court, Dmitriev was acquitted in April 2018. In the summer of 2018, however, the prosecution appealed the verdict and Dmitriev was arrested anew. The case dragged on until Dmitriev was sentenced to three and a half years in prison in the summer of 2020 (the prosecutor had sought a fifteen-year sentence). Upon the appeals of both the defense (who demanded his acquittal) and the prosecutor (who sought thirteen years in prison), the three-and-a-half-year sentence was overturned on 29 September 2020 and Dmitriev was sentenced instead to thirteen years in prison.

mourning” of the Soviet catastrophe. Developing his concept of “magical historicism” to grasp the particular poetics of such works, Etkind analyses what he calls “mimetic mourning” in cultural representations, understood as a “recurrent response to loss that entails a symbolic re-enactment of that loss.” (Etkind 2013, 1). Among Etkind’s examples are prose works by Viktor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, Dmitrii Bykov and Vladimir Sharov.

In this chapter, I will try to show how Lebedev’s debut novel *Oblivion* (*Predel zabveniiia*, 2010)<sup>3</sup> contributes to the mimetic mourning of the Gulag by establishing links between “the world of the dead and the world of the living,” to use the wording of Lebedev’s essay on Dmitriev. In my reading of *Oblivion*, I argue that Lebedev’s poetic strategies amount to an incarnation and transformation of the past in the protagonist’s body and mind. While the novel shares several constitutive features of magical historicism, in particular elements of the grotesque, it also foregrounds the formative development of the experiencing and narrating protagonist, as well as critical reflections on contemporary society, aspects that are less characteristic of magical historicism. Lebedev’s original take on the *Bildungsroman* can thus be read as a new approach to mimetic mourning in contemporary Russian literature.

### *History politics, memory culture and the new literature of the Gulag*

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 profoundly changed the ideological terrain in Russia, which had consequences both for state memory politics and for the societal understanding and handling of the past at large. While the opening of historical archives and intense discussions of the Soviet terror had been a hallmark of the perestroika period in the mid and late 1980s, in the 1990s, then president Boris El’tsin based the legitimacy of his politics on the rejection of Soviet ideology, including historical myths and values. This break with the past, however condemnable and dark, created a void that had to be filled with a “new idea” for an ideology that could play a role in the nation-building efforts of the Russian Federation. It also led to a lack of what the Germans call

3 Lebedev’s *Oblivion* is not among Etkind’s examples. Analyses of Lebedev’s debut novel that I have come across include those by Nina Frieß (2017), Alena Heinritz (2017), Ingeborg Jandl (2020) and Urupin & Zhukova (2020).

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—coming-to-terms with the past—a process that requires a stable period of informed public debate.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in the early 2000s, the Russian state has taken a more active stance in the politics of history. Over the last couple of decades, Russian history and memory politics have assumed a more “nationalist” accent, blurring ethnic and civic identities (Wijermars 2019, 8), while language, culture and traditional values began to play a more important role in the mobilization of cultural memory (Blakkisrud 2016, 267). The latter can be observed also in various educational and cultural-political initiatives, such as the five-year plans for patriotic education (from 2001), the Framework for a State Policy of Culture (2014) or the adoption of new laws and regulations that apply to language, film, literature and art.

The Putin regime has taken an eclectic approach to the past, rejecting neither the pre-revolutionary nor the Soviet period but rather emphasizing historical and cultural continuity, a strong state and a centralized leadership. In this process, the past has become a powerful symbolic resource for the government in legitimizing contemporary power structures (Lunde 2019, 9–31; Bækken & Enstad 2020). The 2020 amendment to the Constitution proclaiming that the state should “protect historical truth” (“Novyi tekst” 2020) is only a logical consequence of this development.

In the official memory politics concerning the Soviet era, WWII, or “The Great Patriotic War,” is the overall predominating event, celebrating Russia’s triumphant victory. Commemoration practices with regard to the Stalin era—the repressions, Gulag, collectivization, and darker sides of the war period—are more ambiguous (Sniegon 2019; Bækken & Enstad 2020). And while WWII has ceased to occupy Russian literature in the last couple of decades, new forms of post-testimonial cultural representations of the labour camps have arisen, with such disparate examples as Zakhar Prilepin’s *Abode* (*Obitel’*, 2014), Guzel Iakhina’s *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*, 2015) and Sergei Lebedev’s *Oblivion*.

In her seminal study of Gulag narratives, Leona Toker emphasizes the fundamental difference between testimonial texts and texts by writers without biographical ties to the camps, suggesting that the latter “commonly resort to experimental techniques” (Toker 2000, 210). Renate

4 For an overview of post-Soviet approaches to history politics, see Malinova (2019).

Lachmann's readings of post-testimonial works about both the Gulag and the Holocaust present a nuanced spectrum of different poetics and strategies, ranging from the allegorical to the melancholic (Lachmann 2019, 435–70).<sup>5</sup> Let us now turn to Lebedev's novel and see where it places itself in this landscape.

*Sergei Lebedev's Oblivion*

Lebedev is the author of five novels,<sup>6</sup> of which the first four deal with the Russian and Soviet past, and in particular, with the Stalin era. At the same time, the tetralogy is loosely framed as a history of the writer's own family. Importantly, the books' emphasis is not on the past *per se*, but on its potential significance for the present. In other words, Lebedev's writings focus on the ways in which we deal with the past today, both as individuals and as a collective.

The nameless protagonist of *Oblivion*,<sup>7</sup> a young boy who in the course of the novel grows to become a young man and geologist (just like Lebedev himself), has a particular and troublesome relationship to a neighbour who gradually assumes the role of a relative of the family under the name of "Grandfather 2." After an important, stage-setting prologue (part one, more below), the relationship of the old man and the young boy becomes the main focus of the novel's part two. Grandfather 2 is blind, yet appears to be watching everything and everyone; he seems harmless, but yet to possess a particular kind of power and control. Their correlation is defined by a kind of forced, growing closeness. Grandfather 2 is eager to exert his influence on the protagonist, to the point of a blood transfusion from the old man to the boy that becomes fatal to the former (an event that follows upon several other instances of life-saving actions). At the same time, the protagonist's feelings towards this closeness are—for reasons still unknown to himself—difficult and complex, evoking sinister expectations also in the reader.

5 For a range of perspectives on the ethical and aesthetic implication of post-testimonial Holocaust narratives, see Lothe, Suleiman & Phelan (2012).

6 *Predel zabveniia* (2010), *God komety* (*The Year of the Comet*, 2014), *Liudi avgusta* (*People of August*, in German 2015, in Russian 2016), *Gus Frits* (*Goose Fritz*, 2018), *Debiutant* (translated as *Untraceable*, 2020/21).

7 Not only the protagonist, but all characters in this novel are not referred to by name, emphasizing perhaps the collective aspect of coming to terms with the past.

As a young adult, the protagonist leaves his hometown in order to distance himself from what he still feels as the unpleasant shadow of Grandfather 2, embarking upon a long geological expedition into the north. This journey forms the third part. As he travels through the deserted landscape, he stumbles upon ominous remnants of the (Gulag) past.

Grandfather 2 left his flat and belongings to the protagonist, and when his old housekeeper dies, the protagonist enters the flat and finds, among other fragmentary remnants of some past life, a batch of letters from someone who seems to have been a former work colleague of Grandfather 2 in the far north. The protagonist is urged by eerie dreams to travel north. During his journey (parts 4–6) he learns that Grandfather 2 was a high-ranking prison camp commander, but also reveals details about his family life and the gruesome circumstances leading to the death of his young son. Torn between the forces of memory and forgetting, and feelings of guilt and responsibility, the protagonist's journey turns into a quest to overcome the trauma that has been almost deliberately passed onto him by his "grandfather."

#### *A logocentric circle*

In the novel's opening scene, the grown-up first-person narrator-cum-protagonist stands на пределе Европы (1),<sup>8</sup> from where he heads backwards into time and history. The novel describes his journey, and is, at the same time, an investigation of how it can be rendered in words, as the protagonist, at the end of his journey, returns back to his experiences в слове ("in the word"), a phrase repeated in the prologue and in the novel's last sentence (5–6, 414; 11, 290). The ending of the last part thus returns to the beginning of the first, forming a potentially never-ending circle.

In her perceptive reading of Lebedev's novel, Nina Frieß (2017, 295) points to the echo of the Gospel according to St John in this beginning, and in the ensuing focus on the power of the word, of language, as in this passage from the novel's prologue:

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8 "at the boundary of Europe" (11). Quotations from Sergei Lebedev's *Predel zabveniiia* are taken from Lebedev (2012), with page references in brackets. For the English translation, I use Lebedev (2016), but since this edition contains some authorized abridgements, I occasionally adjust and/or supplement the quoted passages.

И ты понимаешь, что твоя родина—твой язык; его достоинства, его ущербность—твои неотъемлемые достоинства и твоя ущербность; вне языка тебя не существует. (8)<sup>9</sup>

As is often the case with logocentrism, it goes hand in hand with the apophatic dilemma—the insight that words cannot do justice to that which one tries to express (a recurring topic in discussions about how to describe the atrocities of the Holocaust, or Gulag experiences<sup>10</sup>), accompanied by the realization that one still has to make the effort:<sup>11</sup>

Там, на середине хребта, размышляя или разговаривая, пробуя что-то записать, вдруг понимаешь: ты вышел на край языка. (8)<sup>12</sup>

The text becomes a memorial where the “the world of the dead and the world of the living” can meet (the phrase echoing Lebedev’s own words referred to above):

[...] и этот текст—как памятник, как стена плача, если мертвым и оплакивающим негде встретиться, кроме как у стены слов—стены, соединяющей мертвых и живых. (21)<sup>13</sup>

In this way, Lebedev establishes a parallel between the act of commemoration and its rendering in words. The novel becomes a verbal, commemorative experiment, an investigation of the past “on the edge of language.” In the following sections, I will examine Lebedev’s poetic strate-

9 “You realize that your homeland is your language; its strengths, its defects are your integral strengths and defects; outside language you do not exist.” (12).

10 See the discussion in Lachmann (2019, 262–75).

11 Michael Sells views apophatic discourse as a response to the fundamental dilemma of transcendence underlying negative theology: the transcendent is beyond names, ineffable; in order to make this claim, however, one must give the ineffable subject a name. Characteristic of the apophatic discourse is that “it accepts the dilemma as a genuine aporia, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse” (Sells, 1994, 2). For more on the implications of “apophatic rhetoric,” see Lunde (2001, 44–70).

12 “There, in the middle of the range, thinking or speaking, trying to write something down, you suddenly realize: you have reached the edge of language.” (12).

13 “this text is a memorial, a wailing wall, for the dead and the mourners have no other place to meet except by the wall of words—the wall that unites the living and the dead.” (20).

gies to invoke the past in the present from three different perspectives: (1) the focus on time and tactility; (2) the role of grotesque elements; and, finally, (3) the idea of an incarnation of the past in the body and mind of the protagonist.

*Time and tactility*

The novel contains a number of explicit reflections on time and memory. For example, Grandfather 2 is described as человек без прошлого (49),<sup>14</sup> and people around him are unwilling to ask questions: Все предпочитали не знать, не говорить, не сообщать, забыть (117),<sup>15</sup> a detail alluding to the “double trauma” of Gulag survivors: the trauma of the Gulag and the trauma of the social ban of verbalizing Gulag experiences.<sup>16</sup> This kind of “aside” reinforces the fictional text’s potential to reflect on contemporary Russian historical imagination and memory culture. Nina Frieß argues that the novel applies a kind of “double coding” pointing to topical issues in official contemporary commemorative practices. True, in some cases, the targets of such “double-coded” reflections are quite clear, as in the protagonist’s reflections when—upon arrival in the city from where the letters to Grandfather 2 had been sent—he visits the local library and museum and observes that these institutions fail to show a way into the past or to reveal the relevance of the past for the present:

Библиотека как ход в прошлое не сработала [...] Музей оказался еще безнадежнее библиотеки; он был слишком нов, этот музей, и его создатели слишком заботились иметь хорошее, достоверное прошлое [...]

Прошлое не приближалось, а, наоборот, отдалялось, [...] (228–29)<sup>17</sup>

14 “a man without a past” (41).

15 “Everyone preferred not to know, not to talk, not to inform, but to forget” (87).

16 With the essential difference that in this case, the reference is to a perpetrator (as the protagonist will understand eventually) rather than to a victim.

17 “The library as entrée to the past did not work. [...] The museum was even more hopeless; it was too new, that museum, and its creators were too concerned with having a good, trustworthy past [...] The past was not coming closer, on the contrary, it was moving away, [...]” (165, adjusted).

Such comments can be read as a reference not only to local institutions but also to federal commemorative initiatives such as the huge exhibition project "Russia—My History" (*Rossiiā—moia istoriia*) which presents a grandiose image of Russia's thousand-year-old history, emphasizing its formative power in shaping the national identity of today while neglecting or downplaying the darker sides of the past.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting, however, that many of the novel's reflections on time and memory are markedly poetic, thus making the socio-political reference less explicit and categorical. In one of the three dreams urging the protagonist to go north, there is a scene at a train station depicting a group of prisoners that is being taken away. The gravity of their situation is expressed poetically in the paraphrase of their fate as "not dying, but ceasing to be for the present":

Тут был самый мучительный момент сна: люди не умирали, но переставали быть для настоящего. И настоящее время спокойно длилось дальше без них, каждое новое мгновение отодвигало прежние—те, в которых эти люди еще были. (180–81)<sup>19</sup>

Later in the novel, we encounter a variation of this conception of time as the protagonist reaches the openings of the adits on a ravine slope next to the remnants of the camp site:

Время здесь не остановилось—в слове «остановилось» есть зафиксированный момент конца движения; оно словно никогда и не шло здесь, оно стояло, как вода в черных пещерных протоках, где движутся только белесые рыбы. Мне показалось, что если штольню наклонить, как бутылку, этот воздух, это время потечет наружу, но не смешается с временем дня сегодняшнего: они не узнают друг друга в качестве настоящего и прошлого. (303–304)<sup>20</sup>

18 See my analysis of this exhibition in Lunde (2019, 17–20).

19 "This was the most tormenting part of the dream: people did not die but they ceased existing in the present. The present went on quite well without them, every new moment pushed back the previous ones, in which those people still were." (134).

20 "Time did not stop here—the word stop implies a fixed moment where movement ends; it had never moved here at all, it stood like water in black caves where the only movement is by pale fish. I thought that if this adit could be tipped like a bottle, then

These poetic images of time are two of many representations in the novel of the profound abyss between the past and the present, or the disconnectedness of (the present) time to particular events of the past. How can this abyss be overcome? Throughout the novel, Lebedev explores various strategies to establish links to the past, or to evoke a sense of the past in the present. This implies a move from *representation* to *presence* (or *re-presentation*)—a striving towards evoking the (subjective) presence of elements of the past rather than an (objective) representation of them.<sup>21</sup>

One strategy to achieve this effect has to do with tactile experiences: in a range of key episodes, the touching of a concrete thing (a nail, blood, stone, body parts) spurs a flow of intense thoughts, feelings and associations pointing towards the past, often resulting in some kind of (fragmentary) insight. The tactile episodes are described in an associative and suggestive linguistic style, indicating an attempt to involve the reader in the narrator's own active perception. In a key scene in part three, the protagonist, stumbling across remnants of a camp, picks up an iron nail amongst decomposed and rotten fragments of wooden material. Nina Frieß, analysing this episode, emphasizes the fact that the nail is a cultural artefact, a human piece of work, pointing to the existence in this place of human beings: гвоздь показывал, что эти бараки—не морок, не призрачное поселение ветра и тумана, что здесь были люди. (130).<sup>22</sup> The tactile moment, I would add, and its linguistic and stylistic expression reinforce this effect. The protagonist does not in fact pick up the nail; rather, the nail literally “lies itself into his hand,” and in the following paragraphs, the “nail in the hand” is repeated three times. The nail continues its “active part” by “asking something from the protagonist”: a connection to the past is established and the protagonist experiences a flash of insight:

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this air, this time would flow out, but they would not mix with today's time: they would not recognize each other as past and present.” (216–17, adjusted).

21 In this, Lebedev's poetics reveals elements of what I have elsewhere termed an “enargetic rhetoric”: The rhetorical concept of *enargeia* (in Latin *evidentia*) may be defined as *the power of language to create a vivid presence of that which is set forth in words*. “Enargeia amounts to visual clarity, immediacy and strong emotional appeal, whilst what is represented verbally acquires, as it were, ‘its own reality’ (becomes self-evident) in the minds of both speaker and audience” (Lunde 2004, 50).

22 “the nail showed that these barracks were not a mirage, a spectral settlement of wind and fog, that there had been people here.” (100).

Гвоздь; он легко вышел из тухлявого бревна и лег в ладонь. Сама его форма [...] о чем-то просила меня. И, глядя на гвоздь, на бревна, на доски, я вдруг понял то, чего не понимал прежде: [...]. Вот так, стоя с гвоздем в руке, я почувствовал, что мне слабо отзывается место, где я нахожусь. [...] И только гвоздь, —словно он один остался от целого дома,—гвоздь был в моей руке; обладающий всей осмысленностью формы, но представляющий собой единицу, единственное число предмета, а потому и значимый, и бесполезный одновременно. (130–32)<sup>23</sup>

A similar dynamics arises in other episodes with concrete, often small or fragmentary, objects of the past—a handful of enigmatic miniature figures, a button, a stick. A particularly instructive scene takes place when the protagonist meets the author of the letters to Grandfather 2, his former work colleague and leader of the camp's death squad. The man has a stick that is an exact replica of Grandfather 2's stick, which he used to hit a dog that threatened the protagonist as a little boy, thereby saving the latter's life. The likeness is expressed in poetic wording, triggering the protagonist's memories of his own childhood where, as it turns out, he has met Grandfather 2's work colleague before.

Я смотрел на палку; теперь я видел, что она не была такой же —она была той же, именно той палкой, что переломила хребет черному псу; [...] палка была как зримая рифма, как одинаково звучащее окончание двух, может быть, разных слов; я не просто узнал в ней конкретный предмет из своего прошлого—ее существование показало мне истинный объем этого прошлого, как будто в затемненных помещениях за границей памяти вдруг вспыхнул свет. (278)<sup>24</sup>

23 “The nail; it came out easily from the rotting wood and lay in my hand. Its form [...] was asking something from me. Looking at the nail, the logs, the boards, I suddenly understood what I had not understood before: [...] And so, standing with the nail in my hand, I felt that the place was weakly affecting me. [...] And just the nail, as if it were the only thing left from an entire house, the nail was in my hand; retaining the meaning of its form, but representing the singularity of an object, and therefore it was simultaneously meaningful and useless.” (100–101, slightly adjusted)

24 “I was looking at the stick; now I saw that it was not just similar to, it was the one, the stick that had broken the black dog's back; [...] the stick was like a visible rhyme, like the similar-sounding endings of two—perhaps different—words; I didn't just recog-

The sight of the stick leads to a flash of insight:

я почувствовал, как моя жизнь преломляется в мгновении настоящего, как луч—в увеличительной линзе, преломляется и выстраивается этой линзой понимания; я узнал то, за чем ехал, —и это знание, оказывается, всегда было со мной, в моей памяти. (282–83)<sup>25</sup>

The protagonist discovers “what he had come for,” but also that “this knowledge had always been with him in his memory,” as a remnant of the past, embodied in the person of the camp official that he had met early in his childhood. In a broader perspective, the insight reveals the necessity of activating one’s (cultural) memory and relating it to one’s own identity, an image that can, again, be taken to refer to contemporary Russian memory culture. Let us turn now to the question of how the nature of this memory—fragments of a sinister past—can be conveyed in fiction.

*“He ate me”—grotesque elements*

*Oblivion* displays some of the poetic features of magical historicism as described by Etkind. In numerous episodes and descriptions, grotesque elements come to the fore, conveying unsettling, murky feelings. Such elements appear on several levels of the novel, from the interpersonal—the young boy’s relationship with Grandfather 2—to perceptions and descriptions of landscapes, faces, bodies and actions.

The grotesque is introduced in the prologue, where the protagonist recalls how he once ate the meat of grayling caught in the water where dead corpses of prisoners had been thrown:

И тебя рвет съеденной рыбой, в мясе хариуса—эта плоть, и ты уже—людоед, и все вы—людоеды, потому что ели эту рыбу, пили эту воду, в которой растворены умершие. Тебя тошнит, но

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nize in it a concrete object of my past—its existence showed me the true dimension of that past, as if a light suddenly flashed into dark spaces beyond my memory.” (199, the translation omits most of this passage).

25 “I sensed that my life was being refracted in the present moment like a beam in a magnifying glass, refracted and reset by this lens of understanding; I learned what I had come for, and that knowledge, it turns out, had always been with me, in my memory.” (202).

нечистота не проходит, она в твоём теле, в твоей крови навсегда.  
(20)<sup>26</sup>

This “deathly communion” (*smertnoe prichastie*, 20), foreshadowing also the protagonist’s blood tie to Grandfather 2, becomes an ambiguous image of the past taking possession of our bodies, providing us, at the same time, with a particular gift of vision:

И тогда ты понимаешь, что смертное причастие принято тобой сейчас не случайно. Через него, как через вновь обретенный дар зрения, ты видишь свое тело, свою память, свою судьбу как предуготовление: наследство крови, наследство воспоминаний, наследство чужих жизней—все жаждет слова, ищет речи, ищет до-исполниться, случиться до конца, быть узанным и оплаканным. (21)<sup>27</sup>

Among the things left in Grandfather 2’s apartment, the protagonist finds some small wooden figures—workers, animals, tools—that appear to be part of a larger set. The figures give off “the aura of madness”; they are “scary,” and the protagonist does not want to take them into his hand, as if the tactile association will bring him too close to a world of death—to a world of the dead: *Казалось, что прикосновение к ним небезопасно; что они как-то связаны с умершими уже людьми, которых они изображают* (157).<sup>28</sup> The next thing he discovers are the letters sent to Grandfather 2 by his former work colleague, obviously over many years. The reading of the letters, describing in detail the hunting and killing

26 “And you vomit the fish, that flesh is in the meat of the grayling, and now you are a cannibal, all of you are cannibals because you ate that fish, drank that water, in which the dead are dissolved. You threw up, but the uncleanness remains, it is in your body, in your blood forever.” (20). Urupin and Zhukova (2020, 237) argue that the occasional use of the you apostrophe in the novel is a way of appealing to the reader’s feeling of co-responsibility.

27 “And then you understand that the deathly communion was not accidental. Through it, as through newly granted vision, you see your body, your memory, your fate as pre-destination: the inheritance of blood, the inheritance of memories, the inheritance of other lives—everything craves the word, seeks to speak, seeks to complete itself, to happen to the end, to be recognized and mourned.” (20, adjusted).

28 “It seemed that touching them had its dangers; that they somehow had a connection to the dead people they depicted” (118, adjusted).

of seals and bears for seal blubber and bear fat, has a nauseating effect on the protagonist, who wants to flee from everything associated with Grandfather 2, including the blood which once saved his life:

Я снова ощутил, как во мне обращается кровь Второго деда, как растет короткий звериный волос, растут слишком твердые ногти; мне хотелось соскоблить мясо с костей, вылить кровь, вычистить костный мозг. (163)<sup>29</sup>

The grotesque elements reinforce the tension of emotions that torments the protagonist—on the one hand, an urge (at times obsession) to delve into Grandfather 2's past, on the other, a deep reluctance to do so. The depiction of the journey that takes the protagonist to the city of the letter-writer contains a description of the names of the mountains that he sees along the way, invoking dark, murky feelings suggestive of the crimes and suffering that have taken place in the area:

Окрестные горы носили имена, данные местными народностями; эти имена оставляли в гортани ощущение сырого мяса, разгрызаемых костей; прочитав с карты десятков названий кряду, ты словно выпивал густой крови, от которой на холоде идет пар; названия эти отдавали дымом костра, рыбьей чешуей, сыромятной кожей, собачьим и человеческим потом [...] (224–25)<sup>30</sup>

A similar imagery arises in the description of the old woman who lives with Grandfather 2's former work colleague:

Она стояла за дверью, в полутора метрах от меня, но я не мог сказать, человек она или изображение; [...] мой взгляд притяну-

29 "Once again I sensed Grandfather II's blood circulating in me, I could feel the short animal hairs growing, the too-hard nails growing; I wanted to gnaw meat from my bones, ooze the blood, suck out the marrow" (122, adjusted).

30 "The area's mountains bore names given to them by local ethnic groups; these names left the sensation of raw meat and gnawed bones in your throat; reading a dozen names in a row from the map was like drinking thick blood that was steaming in the cold; the names were redolent of campfire smoke, fish scales, rawhide, canine and human sweat [...]" (163).

ли ноздри—две черные точки, два хода во внутреннюю темноту тела.

Мне почудилось, что из этих черных отверстий, словно из дыр в каменной стене или в скале, могут выползти ящерица или змея; что они не принадлежат лицу, они—только проемы, опасные, зловещие; если бы я мог, я бы в тот миг закрыл, замазал плотью ноздри старухи. (276)<sup>31</sup>

Noteworthy is both the emphasis on the corporeal and the protagonist's involvement: in one case, he compares the pronunciation of the mountain names to the drinking of thick blood, in the other, he experiences an urge to fill the old woman's nostrils with flesh, presumably with his own fingers. The lengthy description of Grandfather 2's former work colleague, in turn, highlights his almost deathly appearance: он был не просто худ, а иссушен, словно его выпили, опростали, накололи на иглу, как насекомое, и годы держали под стеклом на бархате. (283),<sup>32</sup> dwelling on repulsive details about the old man's various body parts before linking his pain and disease to his own past, his own lived life:

[...] он медленно отравлялся проживаемой—и прожитой—жизнью, отравлялся прошлым, его шлаками и ядами, копящими-ся в тканях тела. Его убивало время—в буквальном смысле; (283–84)<sup>33</sup>

The grotesque elements reinforce the conflict experienced by the protagonist between his wish to find a way into the past and his resistance to that same past. Elements of the past are not only scary; he feels absorbed by them. His feeling of being literally swallowed by the past is expressed in

31 "She stood at the door, a meter and half from me, but I could not say whether it was a person or an image; [...] my gaze was drawn to the nostrils—two black dots, two entrances into the inner darkness of the body. I imagined that a lizard or snake could crawl out of those black apertures, like holes in a stone wall or a cliff; that they did not belong to the face, they were openings, dangerous, evil; if I could, I would have shut the old woman's nostrils, filled them with flesh." (197–98, adjusted).

32 "he was not just thin, he was desiccated, as if he had been drained and pinned like an insect and kept for years under glass on a velvet cloth." (202).

33 "[...] he was slowly being poisoned by the life he was living—and had lived—poisoned by the past, its slag and toxins accumulating in body tissue. Time was killing him, literally;" (203, adjusted).

several variations, some of which, again, are on the grotesque side, as in the scene where he goes for lunch with the local police captain who is supposed to help him track down the address of Grandfather 2's former work colleague:

капитан ел маслины, обсасывая косточки, и аккуратно выкладывал косточки на край тарелки; он ел—меня, он был здешний, а я пришлый, и он очень хорошо это знал. (270)<sup>34</sup>

*The incarnation of the past*

To be swallowed by the local police captain may be read as a grotesque distortion of the inspired incarnation of the past in words alluded to in the novel's prologue. Lebedev's poetic strategies to overcome the distance between the past, with its (un)dead, and the present, with its living, do not try to entirely solve the conflict referred to above, but rather to explore its implications by varying it in a string of poetic images. In the early part of the novel, the protagonist feels as if Grandfather 2 is innerly dead and disconnected from the world of the living (66). Through the blood transfusion, this "deadly life" or "life-giving death" has become a part of himself. The journey thus becomes a way of overcoming death within himself, death in the form of blood he cannot do without.

In the latter half of the novel, the protagonist has two momentous experiences at two symbol-laden places: a quarry outside the city constructed on the camp site (end of part 4) and a sinkhole on a remote island that he has set out to find (part 6) upon hearing the full story of Grandfather 2's life as chief commander of the camp, including his expulsion of a group of prisoners to this island (part 5).

The experience at the quarry leads the protagonist to a kind of rational insight. He understands that he must first establish his own identity before he can make inquiries about that of others, or, in other words: he must relate the (transgenerational) past to his own identity:

А здесь была адова дыра в земле, и были побитые обвалом ка-  
леки; и нельзя было что-либо узнать бесстрашно, нужно было

34 "the captain ate olives, sucking the pits and neatly placing them on the edge of his plate; he was eating me, he was local and I was a stranger, and he knew that very well." (194).

сперва ответить на вопрос, а кто ты сам,—прежде чем спрашивать о Втором деде; нужно было встать под обвал, вызвать его на себя, остаться здесь, даже мыслью не посягая избежать чего-либо — и только тогда тебе откроется что-то, потому что ты сам станешь частью того, что откроется. (264)<sup>35</sup>

The “hellish hole” foreshadows the protagonist’s Dantesque experience in the sinkhole in part six,<sup>36</sup> but before that, he visits the graveyard of the camp staff where he meets the guard, a former stonemason and engraver, who tells him the tragic story of Grandfather 2’s family: his wife and young son. The son dies at the age of seven as a result of a gruesome “gift” presented to him by his father, who has had a miniature model of the camp made by a prisoner, the work of three months. The boy is terrified by the model, destroys it and flees from his room to the sinkhole where he falls down and is killed. The “scary figures” that the protagonist found among Grandfather 2’s belongings in his apartment are remnants of this “toy.” The narrative of the meeting with the stonemason fluctuates between the latter’s details on camp life, his own life, Grandfather 2’s life and reflections by the narrator, once again touching upon questions of memory and the role of the individual:

Достаточно одной зарубки, одной меты, чтобы нечто не исчезло. Нужен лишь один человек, который возьмет на себя труд памяти; помнить—означает быть в связи с реальностью, даже иначе — самому быть этой связью; не мы удерживаем в воспоминаниях реальность прошедшего времени, а само прошлое, когда-то сцепившееся, сложившееся по-живому, говорит памятью человека, и речь эта ровно настолько ясна, насколько сам человек не лжив не в смысле намерения следовать правде, а в смысле абсолютности позволения говорить собой. (313–14)<sup>37</sup>

35 “But here was the hellish hole in the ground and cripples damaged by a mine collapse, and I couldn’t learn anything dispassionately, first I had to reply to the question of who I was, before asking about Grandfather II; I had to stand beneath a mine collapse, call it down on myself, stay here, not even think about trying to run away—and only then would something be revealed to me, because I would become part of what was revealed.” (189–90, adjusted).

36 See Lachmann’s discussion of the Dante topos in Gulag literature (2019, 267–69).

37 “One engraving, one line, was enough to keep a thing from vanishing. It needed only

Again we can see a parallel between Lebedev's literary project, his protagonist's stance, and Iurii Dmitriev, arguably the role model of "that individual" in Russian society. In what follows, poetic elements take the lead again, as the protagonist sets out to find the island of the expelled prisoners. The narrative culminates in the scene at the sinkhole, where the protagonist is absorbed by the hole, simultaneously "falling into the dark abyss within himself." Rational thought is now taken over by bodily experience:

Взгляд за край воронки я не помню; то, что я увидел, ударило не по глазам, а со скоростью света распространилось в моем теле, и тело дрогнуло от безвыходности сознания; сознание пыталось скрыться, чтобы не вмещать увиденного, но пути не было, и тогда во всем теле словно угас день; я падал в яму—и падал в темный провал внутри себя; (391)<sup>38</sup>

The hole turns out to be full of corpses, preserved by the permafrost. They are kept in limbo, preventing them from becoming part of the (memory practices of the) living:

Но смерть—это не исчезновение, не мгновенный переход от наличия к отсутствию; умирает один человек, но те, кто вокруг, должны докончить его смертный труд скорбью и оплакиванием; девять дней, сорок дней—часть события смерти, которую свершают живые. А если живые и мертвые рассоединены—эта не-

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one person to take on the labour of remembering; remembering means being connected with reality, or even being that connection; we do not preserve the reality of the past in our memories, the past itself, having once linked up in a living connection, speaks through human memory, and the speech is exactly as clear as the person is honest, not in the sense of following the truth, but in the sense of absolutely allowing it to speak through him." (226).

38 "I do not remember looking over the edge; what I saw did not hit my eyes, but spread within my body at the speed of light, and my body trembled as my consciousness could not seek refuge anywhere; my consciousness tried to hide in order not to take in what it had seen, but there was no way, and it was as if the day went black in my whole body; I was falling into the hole and falling into the dark hole inside me;" (276, the translation omits most of this passage).

завершенность, этот вечно длящийся момент, обратившийся в лед, переживают течение времени. (393–94)<sup>39</sup>

In a bizarre way the protagonist has become a contemporary witness of the past. At this point, he falls into a dream, and when he awakes, he finds an axe in the hand of the dead man under his body. With the axe, he can chop steps into the ice of the surrounding walls and ascend from the hole: живые и мертвые встретились, и мое тепло стало их теплом. (401).<sup>40</sup> The protagonist saves his own life, and becomes, in the process, *the missing link between the dead and the living*. The reconciliation takes place at the border of life and death, earth/hell and heaven. The protagonist reenacts the death of the young son of Grandfather 2,<sup>41</sup> with whom he shares the latter's blood, but overcomes death. He now feels that Grandfather 2's blood is no longer within him. The novel's finale takes the form of redemption, as the protagonist is rescued from a boat floating down the river. From here, he starts his "return trip—in words."

#### *Concluding remarks*

The complex of problems linked to the cultural memory of a troubled past is represented by Lebedev in distinctly poetic terms, in the sense that poetic, aesthetic devices play a great role in his text. Lebedev's prose abounds in metaphors, ekphrastic passages, parallelisms, symbolic language, in addition to the devices that I have discussed in more detail

39 "Death is not disappearance, it is not an instantaneous transition from presence to absence; a man dies but the ones around him must complete the deceased's labour of death with grief and mourning: the services held on the ninth day, the fortieth day are part of the event of death performed by the living. If the living and the dead are separated, this incompleteness, this endlessly lasting moment turned to ice stops the flow of time." (277–78, adjusted).

40 "the living and the dead had met and my warmth became their warmth." (281).

41 Heinritz (2017, 66) interprets *Oblivion* as an example of what she coins "mediated magical historicism," in that the magical and the grotesque elements "take place on an epistemic level, in the perception of the first-person narrator, in his dreams, imaginings, and his descriptions of them," whereas in "immediate magical historicism" (of which Olga Slavnikova's *2017* (2006) serves her as an example), the magical and the grotesque "operate immediately in the reality of the fictional world." This is an interesting idea and the role of the reflecting and perceptive narrator-cum-protagonist is certainly of utmost importance in Lebedev's novel. However, I would argue that the distinction is not absolute, but perhaps rather one of scale, since also Lebedev's novel contains scenes of immediate mimetic reenactment.

above: tactility, embodiment and the grotesque. At the same time, we find numerous concrete reflections and references to the socio-political context of today's Russia. Lebedev's critical stance towards contemporary Russian history politics and memory culture is known from interviews, essays and talks. In this sense, the novel is clearly situated at the intersection of the aesthetic and the ethical/political.

The emphasis on the disparate yet concurrent two-way movement—the protagonist's journey into the past and the past's craving to take possession of him—that come together in the verbal representation of his experience, reinforces the urgency, but also extreme difficulty, associated with any appropriate *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.<sup>42</sup> The tactile episodes function as mediating situations where moments of (fragmentary) insight may arise, or steps toward connecting the past to the present may be taken. Elements of the grotesque help to convey the nature and dimension of this past, and to overcome the abyss between the past and the present, between the undead and the living.

Lebedev's poetics of memory are markedly different from the classics of the genre of camp literature. His prose lacks the laconic directness and chronicle style of Solzhenitsyn's and Shalamov's witness accounts. The distance to the reality described is, of course, much greater, and a new language, a new poetics has to be found in order to establish meaningful post-testimonial links to the past. Lebedev's (and his protagonist's) position is that of *post-memory*, where, in the words of Marianne Hirsch, the author of the concept, the "connection to the past is [...] mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." (Hirsch 2012, 5). In interviews, Lebedev himself speaks of the "post-existence of the Gulag" (Fedorova & Lebedev 2017).

Lebedev's approach is moreover unlike several other representatives of the "new Gulag literature," as mentioned above. Prilepin (*Abode*) uses hypernaturalistic descriptions to express extreme physical and mental suffering while his text also employs elements of a romanticized socialist-realistic narrative style. Iakhina's stories have a touch of melodrama in them,<sup>43</sup> while her language is poetic and subtle with elements of fairy-tale and magic.

42 As Nina Frieß (2015, 300) points out, the protagonist calls himself наказанный (punished, doomed) to have the ability to remember.

43 See Irina Anisimova's contribution to this volume and Lunde (2019, 129–65).

Also, Lebedev's poetics differs from post-Soviet fiction with a less direct link to the legacy of the camp system but clearly addressing the Soviet terror in broader terms, such as the radical texts of Vladimir Sorokin, who lays bare the horrors of past violence through deconstructive strategies, linguistic excessiveness and surrealistic scenarios, or Vladimir Sharov, who resorts to apocalyptic imagery and historical reimaginings.<sup>44</sup>

In Lebedev's prose we see elements of such radical poetics—audacious imagery, symbol-laden metaphors, grotesque, magical and surreal elements—but also a “return to history,” as it were, in the sense of a clearly visible field of contextual reference with regard to both geographic and temporal dimensions (the space and time of the Gulag) and to historical imagination in today's Russia (contemporary memory culture). Finally, Lebedev's quest is solidly grounded in the perspective of today, exploring any individual's obligation towards the society's collective efforts to come to terms with its past.

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44 For the implications of Sorokin's devices for the particular context of Gulag representations, see Lachmann (2019, 448–53), on Sharov, see Etkind (2013, 229–32), Ready (2020).

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