

Lěd tronulsia: The Overlapping Periods in Vladimir Sorokin's Work from the Materialization of Metaphors to Fantastic Substantialism

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[...] он пытается стереть время своего поколения, а точнее, время посткоммунизма [...].¹

Linguistic and literary landslides of the norm

THE post-revolutionary 1920s and the post-*perestroika* 1990s have been described as times of a landslide in the Russian linguistic norm. The topic of this article is the second landslide, more specifically the relationship between this linguistic landslide and the literary practice of the neo-avant-garde (Moscow conceptualism) as represented by Vladimir Sorokin (born 1955). As Moscow conceptualism originates in the 1970s, I will take a brief look first at the question of what happened between the two landslides of the 1920s and the 1990s, i.e. at the preconditions both for the second landslide and for Sorokin's work in terms of consolidation and the breaking of norms.

Relatively early on in the history of the Soviet Union attempts to create a revolutionary and proletarian culture were quashed, and a conservative ideal of *kulturnost'* was formulated.² While Stalinist reconsolidation of a traditional aesthetics (so-called socialist realism) in the 1930s led only to a partial restitution of previous linguistic and aesthetic norms in official culture, the mechanisms of control from above during the post-

1 M.N. Lipovetskii, 1999, "Goluboe salo pokoleniia, ili Dva mifa ob odnom krizise," *Znamia* 11, pp. 207–15; p. 214. "[...] he [Sorokin] tries to erase the times of his generation, or, to be precise, the post-communist times [...]." All translations are my own.

2 Catriona Kelly, 2001, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin*, Oxford, pp. 260–311.

war Zhdanov era (1946–53) succeeded in standardizing Soviet culture across the board, making it provincial and prudish. The culture of the Thaw period, for example the eponymous novel by Erenburg, *Otpepel'* (1954/56, *The Thaw*), was ineffectual in questioning merely *linguistic* and *poetological* norms. The vocabulary of the prison camps as reflected in Solzhenitsyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*) was allowed to appear in the official print media only for a short time. Thus, late Soviet society was permeated with moral pretensions and taboos advocated by various groups—some hypocritically (party officials), others idealistically (predominantly female teachers and rigorist dissidents). Both official and dissident literature advocated a “hyper-moralistic” humanism yet displayed few differences in their *aesthetic* preferences.³

Alongside with pro- and anti-Soviet literature another literature was developing, an a-Soviet literature which shook “humanistic” norms by planting “flowers of evil” (*tsvety zla*),⁴ thus expanding the vocabulary of written texts to include vulgar language (*mat*) and the materialization of drastic metaphors in narratives. While the majority of late Soviet society remained ensconced in a cocoon of taboos and sanctimonious norms, this small group anticipated a development which began to be seen in the linguistic reality of popular culture only in the wake of *perestroika*.

As justified as it might be to describe the 1990s as the period of a linguistic landslide of the norm, as far as individual poetics is concerned there are many reservations that should be made, and many anticipatory acts and non-simultaneities that should be taken into account. First of all, a certain “elite” of earlier writers may have anticipated and maybe even prepared and initiated the violation of norms on the larger scale of popular or mass culture. Most of these may be situated within the wider context of Moscow conceptualism, the circle which contributed most to Viktor Erofeev's anthology *Russkie tsvety zla*.⁵ Within this circle of writ-

3 V.V. Erofeev, 1997, “Russkie tsvety zla,” *Russkie tsvety zla: Sbornik*, ed. V.V. Erofeev, Moscow, pp. 7–30; pp. 10–12.

4 Erofeev, 1997.

5 The process of liberation from taboos had, however, begun even earlier. Writers such as the Lianozovo poets Vsevolod Nekrasov, Igor' Kholin and Genrikh Sapgir or the advocate of fantastic literature Andrei Siniavsky (Abram Terts) prepared the ground for alternative poetics. Erofeev's anthology goes back as far as Varlam Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy* (*Kolyma Tales*), the first of which were written in 1954.

ers, artists and theoreticians the reputation of the most radical is attributed to Vladimir Georgievich Sorokin. Erofeev calls him the

ведущий монстр новой русской литературы [...] он взрывает их [тексты] сломом повествования, матом, предельным сгущением текста-концентрата, состоящего из сексуальной патологии, тотального насилия, вплоть до каннибализма и некрофилии.⁶

Erofeev's characterization of Sorokin's work is representative of the reception of Sorokin's writings; even sympathetic critics cannot refrain from calling Sorokin a "cruel talent" ("Grausames Talent")⁷ or an "enfant terrible."⁸ Less sympathetic readers find his texts elitist⁹ and/or boring,¹⁰ which in turn provokes his defendants to the dialectical ploy of regarding this reception as the apotropaic reaction of shocked readers unwilling to understand the specific significance of Sorokin's texts.¹¹

In order to describe the interrelationship between the linguistic and the literary landslide of the norm I shall attempt to compare the various periods of Sorokin's literary oeuvre with the contemporaneous development of language and politics in Russia. This promises valuable insights, especially since the work of Sorokin, the "leading monster," encompasses a considerable period of time on both sides of the linguistic landslide, and since critics have recently claimed a change in his poetics. Moreover, the political, social and linguistic norm is itself the "protagonist" of one Sorokin's earliest texts, *Norma*.

6 Erofeev, 1997, p. 28. "the leading monster of the new Russian literature [...] he blows them [the texts] up with a blast of narrative, with *mat*, with an extremely condensed text consisting of sexual pathology and total violence, all the way to cannibalism and necrophilia."

7 B.E. Groys, 1988, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur der Sowjetunion*, Munich & Vienna, p. 109.

8 A.A. Genis, 1997, "Chuzn' i zhido': Vladimir Sorokin," *Zvezda* 10, pp. 222–25; p. 222; V.N. Shaposhnikov, 2000, *Khuligany i khuliganstvo v Rossii: Aspekt istorii i literatury xx veka*, Moscow, p. 146.

9 E.A. Ermolin, 2003, "Pis'mo ot Vovochki," *Kontinent* 115, pp. 402–18; p. 416.

10 E.g. Iu.V. Buida, 1994, "Nechto nichto' Vladimira Sorokina: On pishet luchshe, chem dyshit," *Nezavisimaia gazeta* 05.04.1994; Bakhyt Kenzheev, 1995, "Antisovetchik Vladimir Sorokin," *Znamia* 4, pp. 202–205; p. 203.

11 M.K. Ryklin, 1992, *Terrorologiki* (Filosofia po kraiam), Tartu & Moscow, p. 209.

capacity for violence. In such a society, language itself gets abused, becoming an instrument of control and denial instead of a means of communication. Violence is done to meaning as well as to human lives./Sorokin's work "re-enacts" this violence at several levels. [...] The shock these scenes [of rape, murder, incest, cannibalism, mutilation, sado-masochism, coprophilia and defecation] administer, however, derives above all from an incongruity of language.¹⁷

Norma as well as Sorokin's other initial norm-violating texts stretch back to the late 1970s and early 1980s: *Pervyi subbotnik* (1979–84, *The First Day of Voluntary Work*); *Ochered'* (1983, *The Queue*); followed by *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (1982–84, *Marina's Thirtieth Love*); *Roman* (1985–89); *Mesiats v Dakhau* (1990, *A Month in Dachau*); and *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (1991, *The Hearts of the Four*). The destructive tendencies of these early prose texts thus precede the linguistic landslide. They did not have any influence on mass culture.

Until the late 1990s Sorokin remained an author read mainly by other conceptualist authors and neo-avant-garde theoreticians, émigré Russian literary critics and a few German professors and junior researchers.¹⁸ Up until the early 1990s, Sorokin's texts were read in manuscript form by a small circle of like-minded people as *samizdat* and published as *tamizdat* in France, Britain and especially in the German-speaking countries. Sorokin's fame abroad was eventually noticed in Russia and led to such odd exaggerations as Levshin's statement in 1993 that thirty-five dissertations were being written on Sorokin's work in Germany.¹⁹ It is true, however, that the first conference devoted exclusively to the oeuvre of Sorokin took place in Mannheim in 1997 and was dominated by German-speaking scholars.²⁰

17 Sally Laird & V.G. Sorokin, 1999, "Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955)," *Voices of Russian Literature: Interviews with Ten Contemporary Writers*, ed. S. Laird, Oxford, pp. 143–62; p. 144.

18 Cf. Dirk Uffelmann, 2000, review article: "Dagmar Burkhart (Hg.): Poetik der Metadiskursivität. Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin. München 1999," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 45, pp. 279–82. Only a few Anglo-American and French scholars such as Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, David Gillespie or Héléne Mélat have written on Sorokin.

19 Igor' Levshin, 1993, "Etiko-esteticheskoe prostranstvo Kurnosova-Sorokina," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 2, pp. 283–88; p. 283.

20 Cf. the conference papers in Dagmar Burkhart, ed. 1999, *Poetik der Metadiskursivität: Zum postmodernen Prosa-, Film- und Dramenwerk von Vladimir Sorokin*, (Die Welt der

This Western academic surge of interest in Sorokin's work did not make the reimportation of Sorokin's work into Russia any easier. Sorokin's texts appeared alien not only because of their norm-violating content and language but also because of their apparent "provenance" from the West. Sorokin eventually became widely known beyond limited academic circles by appearing on Russian television in the reality-soap *Za steklom* (*Behind the window*) in 2001. In 2002 the pro-Putin youth organization *Idushchie vmeste* (*Those who walk together*) contributed paradoxically to Sorokin's popularity among the broader public because of their anti-Sorokin actions, including a pathetic ceremony during which they tore up his books and threw them into a huge foam toilet in front of the Bolshoi theatre. The main object of *Idushchie vmeste's* criticism was a particular scene featuring anal sex between clones of Khrushchev and Stalin in the novel *Goluboe salo* (1999, *Blue Lard*). On 11 July a certain Artem Magunians reported Sorokin to the police. Sorokin was charged under Article 242 of the Penal Code of the Russian Federation (relating to the dissemination of pornography), but the case was dropped on 25 April 2003.

Ironically it was thanks to these attacks that Sorokin became famous in Moscow. Suspicious of this effect, some critics regarded the entire affair as publicity arranged for Sorokin's benefit.²¹ Whatever the truth may be—the scandal finally made the outrageous author not only canonic, but also popular.²²

Slaven, Sammelband 6), Munich. Cf. Uffelmann, 2000.

21 See M.K. Ryklin, 2002, "Polittechnologien," *Lettre Internationale* 58, p. 112. Sorokin categorically denies this charge (Katharina Narbutovic & V.G. Sorokin, 2002, "Russland ist noch immer ein feudaler Staat: Der Moskauer Schriftsteller Vladimir Sorokin über Tschetschenien, Yuppies und die Zerstörung seiner Bücher," *Der Tagesspiegel* 29.10.2002), and Sorokin's first publisher Ivanov, who was blamed by Ryklin as well, redirected it against Sorokin's new publisher Zakharov (cf. Aleksandr Voznesenskii & Evgenii Lesin, 2004, "Chelovek—miasnaia mashina: Vyshel v svet novyi roman Vladimira Sorokina: pochti bez mata!," *Nezavisimaia gazeta ex libris* 16.09.2004). The commercial aspect has been widely discussed by I.P. Smirnov, 2004b, "Vladimir Sorokin. Put' Bro," *Kriticheskaiia massa* 4, URL: <http://magazines.russ.ru/km/2004/4/smi34-pr.html> (accessed 01.07.2005), and Brigitte Obermayr, 2006, "Verfemte Teile eines Werkes: Sorokin zwischen Sub- und Pop(ulär)kultur," *Dar i zhertva*, eds. R. Grübel & G.-B. Kohler, Oldenburg (forthcoming), and need not be discussed here.

22 The large number of interviews which Sorokin has given since 2002 and the professionally designed homepage <http://www.srkn.ru> (administered not by Sorokin himself) meet the interests of a broad public.

In the light of the above, one should bear in mind Jochen-Ulrich Peters' caveat that in the case of literature that breaks norms and liberates from taboos, it is especially important to take into account the forms of its reception.²³ This also holds true for attempts to distinguish certain periods, or at least tendencies, in Sorokin's oeuvre; even overtly unfriendly reviews may provide hints about where to look for turning points or hidden continuities, or how to contrast the results with Sorokin's own "self-reception" as reflected in his interviews.²⁴ If one broadens the horizon of academic research in this way, one cannot give a comprehensive interpretation of every literary work in question. In a non-elitist reception, details that appear on the surface of literature (such as coherent or disrupted narration, vulgar language or themes like sex and violence) tend to predominate over questions of meta-discourse and literariness. An analysis of the interrelationship between these elements becomes especially important for those of Sorokin's books which were published after 2000, allowing innovations as well as continuities in his poetics to be brought out.

Problems of periodization

The question of distinct periods in Sorokin's writing arises because of the topos of a "new Sorokin" that emerged after 2002. Many readers understood *Lëd* (2002, *Ice*) as symptomatic of Sorokin's alienation from his former conceptualistic aesthetics. Few put it as benevolently as did—at first glance—Voznesenskii and Lesin, who found that Сорочкин пишет все лучше и лучше.²⁵ However, when they flesh out their thesis of a gap between the former and the "new" Sorokin with details, their clear disapproval of the "pornography" and "postmodernism" evident in Sorokin's early work and preference for his new "realism" become obvious:

23 Jochen-Ulrich Peters, 1996, "Enttabuisierung und literarischer Funktionswandel," *Enttabuisierung: Essays zur russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Slavica Helvetica 50), eds. J.-U. Peters & G. Ritz, Bern e.a., pp. 7–17; p. 15.

24 Sorokin himself, in fact, regards a writer's interpretation of his own texts as by no means privileged, let alone the "only true" one, cf. K.Iu. Reshetnikov & V.G. Sorokin, 2004, "Ia—ne brat Sveta, ia skoree miasnaia mashina," URL: <http://www.peoples.ru/art/literature/prose/erotic/sorokin/interview2.html> (accessed 04.07.2005).

25 Voznesenskii & Lesin, 2004. "Sorokin is writing better and better."

От порнографии к чистому реализму, от постмодерна к добротной фантастике. [...] Первая часть («Лед» соответственно вторая) большой эпопеи, которая, по-видимому, должна представить нам нового Сорокина. Не того, что читатель знал прежде. Не «постмодерниста» или «порнографа», а respectable «русского писателя».²⁶

Among the scholars acquainted with Sorokin's texts there is hardly any who would subscribe without reservation to the thesis of an abrupt "shift of paradigms in his literary work."²⁷ This thesis is cited in quotation marks as the opinion of (unnamed) others: «Новый Сорокин явился!» Новый—значит, с одной стороны, не шокирующий закомплексованного читателя обилием мата, фекально-генитальных и некрофильских наворотов, а с другой, не радующий читателя «продвинутого» тем же набором.²⁸

Apart from the dispute about the birth of a "new Sorokin," which has been going on since 2002, scholars have proposed very few periodizations for Sorokin's oeuvre. Ryklin's attempt of 1998 to distinguish three phases is based mainly on predominant genres.²⁹ Ryklin thus discerns a "pre-novelistic" period beginning with the collection of short stories *Pervyi subbotnik* (1979–84), the highly heterogeneous pseudo-novel *Norma* (1979–83) and the phonetic notation entitled *Ochered'* (1983), followed by a "novelistic" period consisting of *Tritsataia liubov' Mariny* (1982–84), *Roman* (1985–89), *Mesiats v Dakhau* (1990) and *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (1991);

26 Voznesenskii & Lesin, 2004. "From pornography to pure realism, from postmodernism to good quality fantasy [...] The first part ('Lėd' is accordingly the second part) of a great epic work, which is apparently supposed to introduce us to the new Sorokin—not the Sorokin the reader knew formerly, not the 'postmodernist' or 'pornographer', but a respectable 'Russian writer'."

27 Brigitte Obermayr, 2005, "Man f... nur mit dem Herzen gut: Pornografien der Liebe bei Vladimir Sorokin," *Porno-Pop: Sex in der Oberflächenwelt* (Film—Medium—Diskurs 8), ed. J. Metelmann, Würzburg, pp. 105–23; p. 106.

28 Vasilii Shevtsov, 2004, "Put' moralista," *Topos: Literaturno-filosofskii zhurnal*, URL: <http://www.topos.ru/article/2810> (accessed 23.06.2005). "A new Sorokin has appeared! This means that, on the one hand, the new Sorokin does not shock the inhibited reader by loading an abundance of *mat* and of fecal, genital and necrophiliac scenes upon him, and on the other hand, he does not delight the 'progressive' reader with the same *cornucopia*."

29 M.K. Ryklin, 1998, "Medium i avtor: O tekstakh Vladimira Sorokina," Vladimir Sorokin, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Moscow, vol. 2, pp. 737–51; p. 740.

whereas Sorokin returned—according to Ryklin—to the element of orality in his “post-novelistic” period with dramas like *Dismorfomaniia* (1990, *Dismorphomania*), *Hochzeitsreise* (1994/95, *Honeymoon Trip*), *Shchi* (1995/96, *Cabbage Soup*) and *Dostoevsky-trip* (1997), with the dramatic elements in *Pir* (2000, *The Banquet*) and *Kontsert* (*The Concert*)³⁰ and the screenplays *Bezumniy Frits* (1994, *The Mad Kraut*) or *Moskva* (1995–97, *Moscow*). This periodization is insufficient, not so much because of the fact that Ryklin (writing in 1998) does not go beyond 1998, but because he focuses solely on genre and orality. One could well extend Ryklin’s genre typology into the present: the novels *Goluboe salo* (1999), *Lëd* (2002) and *Put’ Bro* (2004, *Bro’s Way*) would then indicate a second novelistic period.³¹ However, a periodization based mainly on genre excludes various other but relevant aspects, such as the treatment of language, narration and ontological presuppositions.

The genre typology does partially coincide however with the discussion of the “new” Sorokin. Even though this topos was coined only after the publication of *Lëd*, it seems sensible to trace the assumed “shift in paradigms” back to the start of the second novelistic period, to *Goluboe salo*. Despite the politically orchestrated public anger against the alleged “pornography” in *Goluboe salo*, it is this novel which marks the turn in Sorokin’s poetics away from the exclusive use of uniform mechanisms of shocking destruction. It opens a series of “neo-metaphysical” novels (*Lëd*, *Put’ Bro*).³² From a retrospective point of view, however, the “neo-metaphysical” tendency goes back even further, to *Serdtza chetyrekh*.

30 About the only partially published *Kontsert* see Susi K. Frank, “What the f. is Koncert?,” in Burkhart, ed. 1999, pp. 229–38. A small part of it was integrated into *Goluboe salo* (GS 176–81).

31 Cf. Dirk Uffelmann, 2005, *Der erniedrigte Christus und seine Ausgestaltungen in der russischen Kultur und Literatur*, Post-doctoral thesis, Bremen, p. 855, fn. 34.

32 In *Lëd* Khrum claims to be able to look behind Maya’s veil and see an undefined essence beyond the physically apparent world: С мира спала пленка, натянутая мясными машинами. Я перестала видеть только поверхность вещей. Я стала видеть их суть. (l. 246). “The film pulled over the world by the meat-machines fell away. I stopped seeing just the surface of things. I started seeing their essence.” And in his answer to Shevtsov and Smirnov as well as in interviews of 2004 Sorokin states: Я [...] считаю «Лёд» метафизическим романом. V.G. Sorokin, 2005, “Mea culpa? ‘Ia nedostatochno izvrashchen dlia podobnykh eksperimentov,’” *Nezavisimaia gazeta ex libris* 14.04.2005. “I [...] believe that ‘Lëd’ is a metaphysical novel;” cf. D.V. Baviĭskii & V.G. Sorokin, 2004, “Komu by Sorokin Nobelevskuiu premiiu dal...,” URL: <http://www.topos.ru/article/3358> (accessed 04.07.2005).

Published in 1991, the year of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this novel both embodies the destructive tendency *and* initiates the process of dissociation from Sorokin's poetics of norm-breaking, so characteristic of his early writings.

Thus I shall propose an alternative periodization, which takes into account the changing forms of his treatment of language, of narration and storyline *and* the ontological presuppositions behind them. Such a periodization cannot claim distinct periods, but only overlapping tendencies. I will term the first and earliest tendency evident in Sorokin's oeuvre the *materialization of metaphors*, the second *positivism of emotions* and the third *fantastic substantialism*.

The ontological presupposition of the first tendency is that nothing exists beyond metaphors (and their materializations), that (textual) reality is created by (destructive) language. In order to describe this tendency in Sorokin's oeuvre one might adopt Ryklin's interpretation of Soviet reality as a transgressive "speech culture" (речевая культура).³³ The destruction of both storyline and language that has become Sorokin's trade mark is—aside from the above-mentioned *Norma*—most evident in *Roman*. *Roman* is, according to my terminology, a "Tätertext" (a text about a perpetrator/a perpetrating text).³⁴ Following a longish neo-realist introduction (R 269–636) the protagonist Roman receives a wedding present: an axe with the inscription *Замахнулся—руби!* (R 636, italics in the original).³⁵ As is typical of the poetics of the materialization of destructive speech acts, Roman follows this imperative and splits the wedding guests' heads open one after the other with utmost calm. This serial murder is reflected in uniform paratactic sentences:

Роман подошел к печке. Крайним на печке лежал Петр Горохов. Роман взял его за руку и потянул. Петр Горохов упал с печки. Роман ударил его топором по голове. Петр Горохов не шевелился. Роман потянул за руку Ивана Горохова. Иван Горохов упал

33 Ryklin, 1992, p. 5.

34 Uffelmann, 2005, p. 854. Alongside the texts concerning perpetrators, Sorokin also writes "Opfertexte" (texts concerning victims/texts as victims) such as *Tridtsataia ljubov' Mariny* or *Mesiats v Dakhau* (cf. Dirk Uffelmann, 2003, "Marinā Himmelfahrt und Liquidierung: Erniedrigung und Erhöhung in Sorokins Roman *Tridcataja ljubov' Mariny*," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 51, pp. 289–333).

35 "Once you have brandished the axe, start chopping!"

с печки и заплакал. Роман ударил его топором по голове. Иван Горохов перестал плакать. Роман потянул за руку Степана Горохова. Степан Горохов упал с печки и заплакал. Роман ударил его топором по голове. (R 649)³⁶

Uniformity does not stop here, however: it is further enhanced by sentences consisting only of subject and finite verb: Роман пополз. Роман остановился. Роман вздрогнул. Роман стукнул. (R 722).³⁷ Caught in this syntactic pattern, the text ends with the declaration that the hero (as well as the genre) has died: Роман умер. (R 726).³⁸ This transposition of aggressive speech acts into the storyline and then back to the syntactic level is, on the one hand, an elitist and avant-garde device.³⁹ On the other hand, in Sorokin's works, it is inevitably connected to the past: to the narrative patterns of classical Russian literature (*Roman*) or of Soviet socialist realism (*Tritsataia liubov' Mariny*). Sorokin uncovers the aggressive potential latent—as he suggests—in this tradition. Being in this sense a “writer of the past,”⁴⁰ Sorokin's own position confines itself to meta-discursivity.⁴¹

The meta-discursive position links the first tendency—the materialization of metaphors—with the ontological presuppositions of the second tendency, the positivism of emotions, which may be conveyed by such formulas as “there are only emotions” or “only reception matters.” In accordance with this we find a different kind of meta-literature

36 “Roman went to the stove. Petr Gorokhov was lying next to the edge. Roman grasped his arm and pulled him. Petr Gorokhov fell from the stove. Roman hit him on the head with the axe. Petr Gorokhov did not move. Roman grasped Ivan Gorokhov's arm. Ivan Gorokhov fell from the stove and started to cry. Roman hit him on the head with the axe. Ivan Gorokhov stopped crying. Roman grasped Stepan Gorokhov's arm. Stepan Gorokhov fell from the stove and started to cry. Roman hit him on the head with the axe.”

37 “Roman started to crawl. Roman stopped. Roman flinched. Roman knocked.”

38 “Roman/the novel died.”

39 Cf. Lipovetskii, 1999, p. 212.

40 A.S. Nemzer, 2003, *Zamechatel'noe desiatiletie russkoi literatury*, Moscow, p. 250.

41 Lev Danilkin, 1996, “Modelirovanie diskursa (po romanu Vladimira Sorokina ‘Roman’),” *Literaturovedenie XXI veka: Analiz teksta: metod i rezul'tat. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii studentov-filologov, Sankt-Peterburg, 19–21 apreilia 1996 goda*, ed. O.M. Goncharova, St Petersburg, pp. 155–59; p. 155; Peter Deutschmann, 1998, “Dialog der Texte und Folter: Vladimir Sorokins ‚Mesjac v Dachau,‘” *Romantik—Moderne—Postmoderne: Beiträge zum ersten Kolloquium des Jungen Forums Slavistische Literaturwissenschaft, Hamburg 1996*, eds. C. Götz, A. Otto & R. Vogt, Frankfurt e.a., pp. 324–51; p. 339.

in works such as *Dostoevsky-Trip* or *Goluboe salo*. While *Roman* is about the stylization of a poetics of the past as a whole,⁴² the two texts from the late 1990s deal respectively with the names of authors and with their clones. In *Dostoevsky-Trip* dealers sell drugs bearing the names of authors of classical realism and modernism, “Kafka, Joyce, Tolstoy” (ДТ 10), each of which induces a specific trip. The only relevant reality is the emotion that a text (acting as a drug) triggers in the recipient. The content is not decisive (let alone its ethical quality) but the *intensity* of the trip. The trip “Dostoevsky” successfully transports a group of experimentors into the textual world of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot* but has lethal consequences. Pure Dostoevsky is denounced as deadly; he/it has to be diluted:

ХИМИК: [...] Теперь можно с уверенностью констатировать,
что Достоевский в чистом виде действует смертельно.

ПРОДАВЕЦ: И что делать?

ХИМИК: Надо разбавлять.

ПРОДАВЕЦ: Чем?

ХИМИК: (задумывается) Ну... попробуем Стивеном Кингом.

(ДТ 58)⁴³

In *Goluboe salo* there appear clones of Russian authors who are stimulated to write. Now, however, the main outcome is no longer literature itself (as a drug), but a chemical by-product, the mysterious blue lard.

This means a shift towards a fantastic substantialization of the emotion. The substances with which this third tendency in Sorokin’s work deals belong to the order of the normative or mytho-poetic: “there should be substance.” (РВ 72–73).⁴⁴ In *Serdtsa chetyrekh*, Sorokin had already introduced an even more indefinable substance, analogous to the lard of *Goluboe salo* and the ice in *Lěd*, *Put Bro* and the third part of the ice trilogy

42 Cf. Dagmar Burkhart, 1997, “Intertextualität und Ästhetik des Häßlichen: Zu Vladimir Sorokins Erzählung ‚Obelisk;’” *Kultur und Krise: Rußland 1987–1997* (Osteuropafor-schung 39), ed. E. Cheauré, Berlin, pp. 253–66.

43 “CHEMIST: [...] Now we can say with certainty that pure Dostoevsky is deadly./SALES-MAN: Well, what can we do about it?/CHEMIST: We will have to dilute him./SALES-MAN: With what?/CHEMIST: (thinks) Well... let’s try some Stephen King.”

44 Although this substantialism is linked to metaphysical aspirations, the term substantialism seems to fit better than metaphysics; in *Put Bro* the leader of the expedition to the Tunguska meteorite Kulik contrasts метафизическое мышление (“metaphysical thinking”) with материя иных миров (“material from other worlds”).

entitled 23.000, where we encounter the ice from the Tunguska meteorite. This substance can be used only by the chosen 23,000, each of whom has a living heart which may be freed from its earthly prison by beating a hammer made of the ice of this meteorite against the individual's breastbone. When all 23,000 have been cracked open, the "LIGHT" which was lost by the metaphysically dead "meat-machines" will be restored.

Inspired by Sorokin's own clone terminology, one could describe the three tendencies listed above as Sorokin-1, Sorokin-2 and Sorokin-3,⁴⁵ i.e. as clones of the author-as-constructed-image.⁴⁶ None is identical to the extra-textual author Sorokin-x, but it seems that Sorokin-3 is closer than Sorokin-1 to the romantic and family-loving image which Sorokin draws of himself in interviews, and in which he stresses the gap between life and literature.⁴⁷ Much has been written about Sorokin-1, and because Sorokin-1 and Sorokin-2 have the meta-literary orientation in common, many scholars have touched upon Sorokin-2 as well. The one who still remains an enigma is the substantialist, seemingly "new" Sorokin-3. This recent clone deserves further attention (until a future Sorokin-4 supersedes in turn Sorokin-3).

Overlapping clones

The fantastic substantialist tendency is, however, older than the tops of the "new Sorokin"; similar elements may be found not only in *Löd* and *Put' Bro*, but may be traced back to *Goluboe salo* and even to *Serdtsa chetyrekh*, which, from the perspective of the late 1990s and 2000s, would appear to be an early signpost.⁴⁸ On the one hand this novel contains some of Sorokin's most drastic narrative materializations of linguistic metaphors (cf. Sorokin-1); on the other hand, the four protagonists are in search of a mysterious liquid which possesses transformative powers.

45 Cf. below on the clones of Russian writers in *Goluboe salo*. Norbert Wehr attributes the authorship of this novel to a clone "Sorokin-8," cf. Norbert Wehr, 2000, "Sorokin ist Sorokin ist Sorokin ist... .. der himmelblaue [sic] Speck ist Rußlands erster Klon-Roman," *Frankfurter Rundschau* 16.09.2000.

46 Sven Gundlach, 1985, "Personazhnyi avtor," *A-Ya* 1, pp. 76–77.

47 E.g. V.G. Sorokin, 2001, "Interv'iu km.ru s Vladimirom Sorokinym," *Kriticheskaja massa*, URL: <http://www.km.ru/interview/index.asp?data=06.12.2001%2014:21:00&archive=on> (accessed 27.06.2005).

48 For Smirnov, the new tendencies only begin with *Goluboe salo*, cf. I.P. Smirnov, 2004a, "Novyi Sorokin?," *Mundus narratus: Festschrift für Dagmar Burkhart zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. R. Hansen-Kokoruš & A. Richter, Frankfurt e.a., pp. 177–82; p. 177.

Thus, *Serdtsa chetyrekh* can be viewed as a “point de capiton”⁴⁹ of destructive and “post-destructive” tendencies in Sorokin’s writings. The ubiquitous violence which dominates the plot of *Serdtsa chetyrekh* might generally be explained as a literal materialization of expressions of the vulgar language *mat*. The “brain fuck” which is accomplished by one of the four heroes is the narrative materialization of the metaphor *ебать мозгу* (“to confuse”; or literally: “to fuck the brain”).⁵⁰ There is a mysterious goal, however, behind all this violence: to obtain a particular liquid into which the four protagonists, Shtaube, Ol’ga, Serezha and Rebrov, strive to transform themselves, using for this purpose various devices of mutilation. In the end a machine makes cubes of their hearts and throws them onto the frozen “liquid mother.” The reader did not have the slightest chance of understanding the intention behind this and just found himself confronted by a wave of inhuman violence, indecent sexual acts and cannibalism.

Behind this curtain of violence and sex, however, the reader of 2004 who is already acquainted with the striving of the 23,000 chosen to be transformed into “LIGHT” with the help of the ice substance (*lěd*), recognizes in *Serdtsa chetyrekh* a metaphysical thirst. In this instance, the citation of liturgical elements⁵¹ acquires a second meaning beyond mere parody. Admittedly Genis exaggerates when he suggests that *Serdtsa chetyrekh* has a “deep religious content,”⁵² since the intended “communion” fails.⁵³ The mere presence of a vague religious tendency may have contributed however to the short-listing of *Serdtsa chetyrekh* for the 1992 Booker Prize; there was something untypical of Sorokin-1 and Sorokin-2

49 “Anchoring point,” literally “upholstery button,” cf. Jacques Lacan, 1966, “L’instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud,” quoted as: “The insistence of the letter in the unconscious,” *Yale French Studies* 36/37, pp. 112–47; p. 121)—in contrast, however, to Lacan’s term between different series of signifiers rather than between signifiers and signified.

50 Cf. Christine Engel, 1997, “Sorokin im Kontext der russischen Postmoderne: Problem der Wirklichkeitskonstruktion,” *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch* 43, pp. 53–66; p. 62; also Ryklin 1998, p. 742; M.N. Lipovetsky, 2000, “Vladimir Sorokin’s ‘Theater of Cruelty,’” *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, eds. M. Balina. N. Condee & E.A. Dobrenko, Evanston, Ill., pp. 167–92; p. 178.

51 Engel, 1997, p. 57.

52 A.A. Genis, 1992, “Merzkaia plot,” *Sintaksis* 32, pp. 144–48; p. 146; Genis, 1997, p. 223.

53 Christine Engel, 1999, “Sorokins allesverschlingendes Unbewusstes: Inkorporation als kannibalischer Akt,” in Burkhardt, ed. 1999, pp. 139–49; p. 147.

in *Serdtsa chetyrekh* which made the book somewhat more accessible to the less sophisticated public.

Other similarly vague metaphysical motifs may be found in the novel *Goluboe salo*, which was published eight years after *Serdtsa chetyrekh*. *Goluboe salo* consists of letters written by a certain Boris Gloger in 2068 from Siberia to his homosexual lover. In these letters Gloger reports on the progress of an experiment with the clones of Russian writers, whose textual products are attached to Gloger's letters: Dostoevsky-2, Akhmatova-2, Platonov-3, Chekhov-3, Nabokov-7, Pasternak-1 and Tolstoy-4. Of greater importance for the development of the plot than these stylizations is blue lard, the by-product excreted by the writers during the writing process. This lard is stolen by a sectarian group of "earth-fuckers (землебы)"⁵⁴ and transported by a giant bald baby to the Moscow of 1954. Hitler and Stalin are still alive, and the latter appears as the homosexual lover of Khrushchev. In the final battle with Hitler for the blue lard, Stalin gains the upper hand and injects the lard through his own eye into his brain⁵⁵ which subsequently expands; Stalin thus gains world domination. We, however, return to Gloger, while Stalin now serves as a helper to Gloger's friend. The book is rounded off with a Chinese and "new speech" glossary.

Idushchie vmeste, who claimed to represent the average Russian reader, took offence in 2002 mainly at the scene in which the Khrushchev-clone performs an anal penetration of the Stalin-clone. Again, this is the realization of a semi-political, semi-sexual metaphor derived from vulgar language: *Хрущев выеб Сталина* ("Khrushchev called Stalin to account"; literally: "Khrushchev fucked Stalin"). But as far as the storyline as a whole is concerned, the simultaneous violation of political and sexual taboos is only one of the diverse dimensions to the novel.⁵⁶ The anger of the broader public at this violation of a taboo came at a point in time when the very object of criticism was itself about to disappear—beneath the neo-substantialist layer. True, it appears as a quotation of Sorokin's own earlier poetics of aimless violence, when "count" Khrushchev explains

54 A parody on the late Slavophile movement *pochvennichestvo*.

55 As Peter Deutschmann argues, this is the materialization of a metaphor of reading—through the eye into the brain: Peter Deutschmann, "Der Schrein der Kunst: Vladimir Sorokin's „Bufet“," *Festschrift für Christine Engel und Ingeborg Ohnheiser*, Innsbruck (forthcoming).

56 The adjective голубой in the title means not only the colour but also "gay."

his torturing of a young man as follows: Я никогда не пытаю за *что-то*, Иосиф. Я говорил тебе. И не раз. (GS 241, italics in the original).⁵⁷ The same holds true for the cannibalism scene that follows. The undeniable presence of ingredients from the former discourse of sex and violence has made some readers, such as Mikhail Zolotonosov, jump to the conclusion that they have already fathomed all the devices used by Sorokin in *Goluboe salo*: Наш великий писатель не столько *исписался*, сколько *испридумывался*.⁵⁸ From a distance, however, one can see in *Goluboe salo* an overlapping of two layers of Sorokin's writing. The use of elements from his initial, scandalistic poetics cannot be described simply as a relapse from the язык будущего into the любимое и многожды апробированное занятие—пародирование-низвержение «классических ценностей».⁵⁹ Both layers coexist⁶⁰ and interconnect in this second scandalistic-substantialist “anchoring point” in Sorokin's oeuvre.

Apart from this encounter between Sorokin-1 and Sorokin-3, *Goluboe Salo* also contains an echo of the meta-literary tendency of Sorokin-2, with its use of names or clones of authors from the past. When he catches sight of a book on Khrushchev's bedside table, Stalin asks him: «Ты много читаешь?»—взгляд Сталина упал на книгу./«А что еще делать затворнику?»/«Я забыл, что такое книга». (GS 260).⁶¹ What follows is a dialogue about Solzhenitsyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* in which the GULAG is parodistically transformed into a “LOVELAG,” where the prisoners perform various forms of deviant sex (GS 260). Moreover, the struggle for the blue lard between the sect of the “earth-fuckers,” the clone of Hitler and that of Stalin may be read simply as a parody of fantasy literature, but it also reveals a new normative category—the transformative metaphysical substance. The meta-literature produced by the clones of Dostoevsky & Co. turns into a fantastic substance.

57 “I never torture *because* of something, Iosif. I have told you so more than once.”

58 Mikhail Zolotonosov, 1999, “Vladimir Sorokin: Goluboe salo. Roman,” *Novaia russkaia kniga* 1, pp. 18–19; p. 18. “Our great writer has exhausted not so much his writing as his inventions.”

59 Nemzer, 2003, p. 250. From the “language of the future” into the “favourite and often approved exercise of parodying and overthrowing classical values.”

60 As Lipoetskii, 1999, p. 208, points out: В «Голубом салe» есть и то, и другое, и третье. (“In *Blue Lard* there is the first tendency, the second, and the third.”)

61 “You read a lot?” Stalin looked at the book./“What else is there for a hermit to do?”/“I have completely forgotten what a book looks like.”

Sorokin's Grail

Beginning with the opening pages of *Lëd*, the atmosphere is less parodistic and meta-literary than in *Goluboe salo*. The only device that makes the first of the four parts of *Lëd* differ from conventional narration is serialization (repetition of similar actions with small variations): In post-Soviet Moscow certain blue-eyed and blond people are searching for other blue-eyed blonds whose “hearts speak” when they strike their breastbones with hammers made from a special sort of ice, which is distinguished from ordinary ice (*led*)—and is the *lëd* from the Tunguska meteorite that landed in Siberia in 1908. Those who have been successfully “cracked open” (the unlucky others, to whom the text pays little attention, die) are admitted to a sect whose members press their hearts together instead of having sexual intercourse, and by so doing experience a state of supreme bliss and rapture. Even an inveterate cynic suddenly feels pity for the heart of a dying rat. The emotional positivism of Sorokin-2 is enriched here with an appeal to pity and love: «А вот с сердцем, ты говоришь... ну... чувство острое. Это как если влюбишься в кого-то?»/«Сильнее... это... черт его знает как объяснить... ну... когда кого-то очень жалеешь и он очень родной. [...]» (L 143).⁶² By concentrating on the “heart,” *Lëd* makes reference to *Serdtsa chetyrekh*; the heart turns out to be the organ of cognition, superior to all other forms of emotion evoked by the (meta-)literature of Sorokin-2. The ice itself plays the role of a new philosophers’ stone or Grail.⁶³

The second part acquaints the reader with the prehistory of the post-Soviet search for the “alive at heart.” This prehistory is narrated as an autobiographical report given by Varia Samsikova, or “Khrām” (the name of her heart), about the gathering of the chosen 23,000 from World War Two and from the Stalinist era on 1 January 2000. On this day, one of the chosen announces that in eighteen months time the number of 23,000 will have been reached and everything will turn to “LIGHT” (L 180). The third and fourth parts are much shorter than the first two: The third consists of a users’ manual for a technical device called ОЗДОРОВИТЕЛЬНЫЙ

62 “The heart, you say... well, that’s a keen feeling. Is it like when you fall in love with someone?/Stronger... it’s... damn, I don’t know how to explain it... well... it’s like if you really feel sorry for someone and he is very, very close to you. [...]”

63 Cf. Genis, quoted in Lipovetskii, 1999, p. 213; Nemzer, 2003, p. 549.

комплекс «LĚD» (L 287–89)⁶⁴ to which the promoters have added a series of reports compiled by the first testers of the device (who have all felt their hearts and seen the “LIGHT”). Returning to fiction in the fourth part, the text ends with a short scene in which a small boy gets up in the morning and finds instead of his parents an Оздоровительный комплекс «LĚD» as described in part three and a small piece of *lěd*. As the boy does not know how to handle the device, the novel ends with a still life with toys and ice, open for the reader’s concretization: Лед лежал рядом с динозавром, высываясь из под одеяла. Солнечный свет блестел на его мокрой поверхности. (L 317).⁶⁵ Has the transformation of the parents already taken place, or does the fact that the boy is still there prove that the transformation of the world into “LIGHT” has failed?⁶⁶

If the text had ended with the users’ manual in part three, one might have concluded that the end of *Lěd* recalls the de-literarization at the end of *Roman*, *Tritsataia liubov Mariny*, *Norma* and—to a lesser extent—of *Goluboe salo*. But the linear narration of the second (and in part also of the first part) and the open ending of the final part point away from such de-literarization, and they thereby earned Sorokin unexpected sympathy even from hitherto hostile readers.⁶⁷ It is probably as a result of the specific expectations of experienced readers of Sorokin, that Nemzer sees in *Lěd* certain traces of “Sorokin’s trademark physiologism.”⁶⁸ Yet sex is declared by the sectarians to be a disease, and sexual intercourse is replaced by a fantastic form of heart copulation without penetration. Referring back to latent tendencies in Sorokin’s early writings, I would argue that it is only now that the “longing for the sublime,”⁶⁹ which for so many years was hidden beneath the surface of “physiological ‘humiliation,’”⁷⁰ finally breaks through.

64 “Health-improving apparatus ‘LĚD.’”

65 “The *lěd* was lying next to the dinosaur, poking out of the blanket. Sunlight gleamed on its wet surface.”

66 Cf. Elena Romanova & Egor Ivantsov, 2005, “Spasenie, ili Apokalipsis (eskhatologija liubvi v romane V. Sorokina ‘Led’),” URL: <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/romanova.html> (accessed 04.07.2005).

67 Ermolin, 2003, p. 408.

68 Nemzer, 2003, p. 549.

69 Burkhart, 1997, p. 264.

70 Georg Witte, 1989, *Appell—Spiel—Ritual: Textpraktiken in der russischen Literatur der sechziger bis achtziger Jahre* (Opera Slavica N.F. 14), Wiesbaden, p. 146.

In *Lëd* literature is hardly mentioned.⁷¹ What happens to the chosen is not initiated by their reception of art (or meta-art) but caused by contact with the transformative substance, the *Lëd*. But can the reader believe in the proposed ideal love between the chosen? Thousands of non-chosen people have to die in the course of the selection process which is fatally reminiscent of the National Socialist concept of the “Auslese” of the privileged Aryan race.⁷² It is no wonder that Shevtsov associates this selection process with the elitism of terrorists.⁷³ The normative good for which the chosen few strive in *Lëd* is—if viewed from a conventional/humanistic point of view—a fantastic evil. As the second part of the planned ice-trilogy, *Put’ Bro*, states explicitly, the chosen few are at war with humankind (PB 176).

A clone of the Grail

Put’ Bro was published after *Lëd*, but logically constitutes the first part of the planned ice-trilogy. Bro, who also appears in *Lëd*, when he hands over the responsibility for gathering the chosen 23,000 to Khram, is the first man to touch the ice of the Tunguska meteorite. For the reader acquainted with the substantialism of *Lëd* this does not come as much of a surprise (to the hitherto highly sympathetic reader Igor Smirnov, the two texts seem to be almost identical, built on the principle of “parallelism”).⁷⁴ Moreover, *Put’ Bro* is narrated in the same linear fashion as the second part of *Lëd*. The expectation of the reader, that in such a linear narration a textual catastrophe similar to that in *Roman* must follow, is however disappointed.⁷⁵ *Mat* is used in “homeopathic doses.”⁷⁶ Even violence, which was still omnipresent as something inevitable in *Lëd*, fades into the background.

71 Only once does Khram laconically report the paradox that many of those who are “alive at heart” are found in libraries (L 275).

72 See Smirnov 2004a, p. 178; Sorokin denies any association with the Aryan racism of the German Nazis and explains the fact that the “brothers of the LIGHT” are blond and blue-eyed by the alleged inconspicuousness of this combination (Natalia Kochetkova & V.G. Sorokin, 2004, “Ia literaturnyi narkoman, no ia eshche umeiu izgotovliat’ eti narkotiki,” *Izvestiia zarub.* 15.09.2004).

73 Shevtsov, 2004.

74 Smirnov, 2004b.

75 И разумеется, все время ждешь, что вот сейчас, вот прямо сейчас ПРОЗА кончится, начнется... Ну то, что обычно у Сорокина рано или поздно начинается. Ничего подобного! Voznesenskii & Lesin, 2004. “And of course, all the time you are waiting for PROSE to end, to begin, now, at this very moment... Well, waiting for that thing to begin which usually begins in Sorokin’s books sooner or later. But nothing of the sort happens!”

76 Voznesenskii & Lesin, 2004.

Only the repeated striking of the breastbones with the ice-hammer reminds the reader of Roman's axe in *Roman*. But the ice-hammer does not murder; it awakens to new life: Когда же ледяной молот ударил ему в грудь, Дерибас умер./А Иг появился на свет. (РВ 173).⁷⁷

The price the text (or the reader) pays for this ineffectualness is boredom. The long biographical narration about the childhood and youth of Aleksandr Dmitrievich Snegirev, with manifold mechanical alienation effects,⁷⁸ contains few hints about the subsequent metaphysics of the light, ice, heart and meteorites. The traditionalist linear writing strains the reader's expectations to the extent that the entire detailed description of the expedition to Tunguska serves as one long retardation. The reader knows in advance that only the gradual intensification of Snegirev's metaphysical hunt is relevant. However, almost everything that follows—the contact with the ice, the awakening of Bro, the first hammer and cracking open, the first intercourse by heart, the cathartic crying fit and the search and serial finding of the first twenty-one—is well known from *Lěd*. Having read *Lěd*, the reader of *Put' Bro* can no longer be interested in the action or even the literary devices of *Put' Bro*,⁷⁹ but only in recognizing the ice-cosmology.

No less long-winded is the description of the fascination with the newly discovered substance, including a pathetic cosmogony in italics. Only in certain details does *Put' Bro* differ from *Lěd*: Bro claims to be the mouth through which the world soul speaks (РВ 208). Moreover, the awakened hearts in *Put' Bro* are even more powerful; thus Bro and Fer together are able to “scan” a whole town to see if there is another latent live heart in it, they can communicate through walls with each other while their hearts work together as a magnet which can force a not yet awakened heart into unconsciousness.

The substance *lěd* seems to dominate everything. It even becomes interactive itself which is stressed by the use of italics: И Лед *ответил* им. (РВ 144).⁸⁰ But the attentive reader finds vestiges of the Sorokin-2 para-

77 “But when the ice hammer hit him in the breast, Deribas died./And Ig was born.”

78 Through the perspective of a child, for example, adults' sexual intercourse (РВ 17). This device is repeated as the chosen few observe the behaviour of the “meat machines” in totalitarian Germany and the Soviet Union (РВ 262–85).

79 This is in contrast to the aim of the alienation effects in Bertold Brecht's epic theatre: Bertold Brecht, “Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater?,” *Theorie des Dramas*, ed. U. Staehle, Stuttgart, pp. 68–80; p. 73.

80 “And the *lěd* answered them.”

digm of the positivism of pure emotion too: [...] Лед—всего лишь мост к другим сердцам. Лед—это помощь. (РВ 119).⁸¹ And when the chosen few reflect how they can survive under Stalinist terror, they are paralyzed by fear: what counts is inner, emotional life alone.

Moreover, there are some features in *Put' Bro* that could still be interpreted in meta-literary terms: literature is evoked, but as something that has to be overcome. The hero Bro has forgotten who Dostoevsky was. Dostoevsky's complete works appear to him as всего лишь бумага, покрытая комбинациями из букв. (РВ 226).⁸² All the nineteenth-century writers, whose portraits hang in the public library, work like writing machines not unlike the clones in *Goluboe salo*. Even more evident in the storyline is the unwillingness of the chosen few to communicate in human words: Ненавистный рой слов [...] (Л 96).⁸³ In the small thematic differences to *L'ed* one can observe the absence of *variatio*, the chief virtue of rhetoric and literature,⁸⁴ while the frequent use of italics for the meta-physical strivings might be taken to be an exposure of primitive literary devices (as in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*).⁸⁵ Finally, Bro shoots at the anagram "ЛОМ О СМОКИНГИ ГНИ, КОМСОМОЛ!" (РВ 146).

While these meta-literary devices do not have any formative significance for the plot as a whole, another meta-linguistic device (known from Sorokin-1), the materialization of metaphor, forms the very basis of the trilogy, especially *Put' Bro: Лед тронулся* (the ice has started to break).⁸⁶ It is never quoted explicitly, but the components *Лед* and *тронуться* are

81 "[...] the *l'ed* is only a bridge to other hearts. The *l'ed* is help."

82 "Just paper, covered with combinations of letters."

83 "The hateful swarm of words [...]"

84 Smirnov, 2004b, maintains that this novel is intended as a parody of literariness: [...] «Путь Бро» [...] разрушительно пародирует самую литературность [...]. "*Put' Bro* destructively parodies literariness itself [...]" ; it would then still be "metafiction" (David Gillespie, 1997, "Sex, Violence and the Video Nasty: The Ferocious Prose of Vladimir Sorokin," *Essays in Poetics: The Journal of the British Neo-Formalist Circle* 22, pp. 158–75; p. 165) in the sense of Sorokin-1 and Sorokin-2.

85 "*Der Mensch soll um der Güte und Liebe willen dem Tode keine Herrschaft einräumen über seine Gedanken.*" ("For the sake of goodness and love man must not concede death power over his thoughts.") Thomas Mann, 1986, *Der Zauberberg: Roman*, Frankfurt, p. 686.

86 A popular quotation from Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov's *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev*: Лед тронулся, господа присяжные заседатели! "The ice has started to break, gentlemen of the jury." Vasilii Shevtsov's open letter to Vladimir Sorokin of 14 April 2005 is entitled "Led tronul'sia? Korotkii otvet Vladimiru Sorokinu" (*Nezavisimaia gazeta ex libris* 14.04.2005), but Shevtsov does not develop this motif any further.

omnipresent in the novel. The closest they come to one another is in Bro's visionary dream of the ice: И вдруг палец, пройдя между ребрами, тронул сердце. И в сердце что-то *стронулось*, сдвинулось с места. (РВ 77, italics in the original),⁸⁷ and in the episode in which Deribas' train is structured by the refrain Поезд тронулся ("The train has started to move").⁸⁸ If projected onto the whole of Sorokin's oeuvre, the quotation *Лед тронулся* suggests that the ice of destruction has started to break.

However, Sorokin himself protests against such a meta-aesthetic interpretation:

[...] не для того я садился писать биографию Саши Снегирева, нашедшего космический Лёд, прикоснувшегося к нему и переродившегося в нечеловека, чтобы всего лишь «занудно и неинформативно» посмеяться над конструирующим обществом. Я [...] пока еще пишу для себя, а не для конструирующего общества. Да, когда-то в романе «Роман» я столкнул два стиля, как два чудовища, дабы они пожрали друг друга и выделилась та самая энергия аннигиляции и очищения языка, доставившая мне колоссальное удовольствие. Но подобные эксперименты волновали меня в середине 80-х. «Лёд» и «Путь Бро» построены совсем по другому. [...] Авторы [...], как правило, меняются во времени и пишут совсем не то, что двадцать лет назад.⁸⁹

The question as to whether Smirnov is right in seeing in *Put' Bro* a "destructive parody of literature" or the author in denying this interpretation, need not be solved one way or the other. The very *possibility* of meta-literary interpretation remains.

87 "And suddenly the finger, which had penetrated between the ribs, touched the heart. In the heart something *moved*, shifted from its place."

88 For example РВ 184.

89 Sorokin, 2005, p. 5. "[...] I did not sit down to write the biography of Sasha Snegirev, who found the cosmic *lěd*, touched it and was turned into a non-human, in order to merely laugh at consumerist society 'in a boring and uninformed way'. I [...] am so far still writing for myself and not for consumerist society. Yes, once, in the novel *Roman*, I did knock two styles together like two monsters, for them to eat each other and exude that energy of annihilation and of the purification of language which gave me such enormous pleasure. However, similar experiments excited me in the 1980s. *Lěd* and *Put' Bro* are constructed completely differently. [...] Authors [...], as a rule, change in the course of time and write something completely different from what they wrote twenty years back."

Something else, however, is becoming less and less debatable: The metaphysical motifs, the new adherence to transformative substances that “physicalizes metaphysics”⁹⁰ are becoming a basic feature of Sorokin-3. This impression is so strong that some readers expect a further intensification of the metaphysical element, possibly even something clearly religious,⁹¹ from the third part of the ice-trilogy.

Elitist egalitarianism

Is the substantialist Sorokin-3 as described above, is this clone a “new” Sorokin? Or are the overlapping features between Sorokin-3 and his predecessors Sorokin-1 and Sorokin-2 more substantial than shifts in their poetics?

Sorokin-3 seems to be less elitist as a result the recent predominance of linear narration and of something at least approaching a happy end. It would seem that something similar to the integration of Stephen King into Dostoevsky, which is described as a possible solution in *Dostoevsky-trip*, has now taken place. Against the background of the great appeal of esoteric movements in post-Soviet Russia, Sorokin’s substantialist fantasy stands out as an *exoteric* gesture. Indeed, it is tempting to view Sorokin’s approach to post-Soviet popular culture and growing distance from the poetics of the past (from Dostoevsky to socialist realism) as “postmodern” in a Western sense.⁹²

As early as 1999, Lipovetsky noted a new affinity between Sorokin and Pelevin (*Generation “P”*). While the new publishing house (Zakharov) for *Put’ Bro* almost led automatically to a comparison of Sorokin with the other major writer published by Zakharov—Boris Akunin. Indeed—there is an affinity between *Put’ Bro* and Akunin’s *Azazel’* (*Azazel*),⁹³ but there still exists the *possibility* of an elitist interpretation of *Put’ Bro* as well. В этом романе можно увидеть, например, противоречие между его элитар-

90 Smirnov, 2004b.

91 Shevtsov, 2004.

92 Genis’ formula for Western “postmodernism” is “avant-garde + pop culture” whereas “Russian postmodernism” is “avant-garde + *sots-realism*”: A.A. Genis, 1999, “Postmodernism and *Sots-Realism*: From Andrei Siniavsky to Vladimir Sorokin,” *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, eds. M.N. Epstein, A.A. Genis, S. Vladiv-Glover (*Studies in Slavic Literature, Culture and Society* 3), Oxford & New York, pp. 197–211; pp. 203, 206.

93 Cf. Smirnov, 2004a, p. 180.

ной тематикой и как будто подчинившей себе текст авторской ориентацией на широкую, эстетически и интеллектуально ущербную публику.⁹⁴ So *Put' Bro* can, as Nemzer puts it, be regarded as an ambivalent “elitist-egalitarian product”; it is accessible both to an elite and to infantile consumers.⁹⁵

The shi fit towards contemporary popular culture does not imply any ethical cleansing in Sorokin's work. The neo-metaphysical substantialism of Sorokin-3 is closely linked to inhuman violence.⁹⁶ The scenes of cannibalism and torture in *Serdtsa chetyrekh* and *Goluboe salo* may be explained as the remnants of Sorokin-1; although the dry, matter-of-fact recounting of the victims' deaths does not direct the reader's attention to them (as was the case with Sorokin-1), the “cracking” of the tested “meat-machines” in *LĚd* is ethically unacceptable.⁹⁷ The violation of the norm is thereby transferred from the level of materialized metaphors to inhumanity on the level of action, which is presented as a breakthrough to metaphysical love.

In his 2002 interview with Narbutovic, Sorokin claimed to be the same author as always: “Ich bin immer noch derselbe Wurm, der überall hinkriecht, wo es lebendiges Fleisch gibt.”⁹⁸ However, in the answer to his friend Igor Smirnov in 2005 he rejects Smirnov's diagnosis of a meta-discursive “transinformativity” in *Put' Bro*⁹⁹ and insists on authentic emotionality (тогда, возможно, сцена казни Тараса [Бульбы] вызовет у

94 Smirnov, 2004a, p. 179. “In this novel one can observe for example the contradiction between his elitist themes and the author's orientation, which has subordinated the text to itself, towards a broad public aesthetically and intellectually on the decline.”

95 Nemzer, 2003, pp. 548–50.

96 В романе [«Путь Бро»] все эмоции героев сдвинуты в сторону трансцендентного, но сорокинское имморализма в результате подобного смещения акцентов якобы в метафизику не стали ни меньше, ни больше, чем в прежних романах. Evgenii Iz, 2004, “Bumerang ne vernetsia: Teplaia mashineriia i Ledianoi molotok,” URL: <http://www.topos.ru/article/2855> (accessed 04.07.2005). “In the novel [*Put' Bro*] all the emotions of the heroes have shifted towards the transcendental, but of the Sorokinian immorality there is, as a result of the displacement of emphasis into metaphysics as it were, neither less or more than in previous novels.”

97 Which the extra-textual author does not deny, cf. Maiia Kucherskaia & V.G. Sorokin, 2005, “Mnogie budut plakati,” URL: http://www.polit.ru/culture/2005/03/09/sorokin_print.html (accessed 04.07.2005).

98 Narbutovic & Sorokin, 2002.

99 Smirnov, 2004b; Sorokin 2005, p. 5.

вас искренние слезы [...]),¹⁰⁰ which may be understood as a return to the traditional Russian “aesthetics of responsibility” and “ethopoetics.”¹⁰¹ Or are we to read this as just a new form of meta-discursivity, as a new sort of transposition of the “well-known aesthetic strategy of subversive affirmation?”¹⁰² Are we to believe Sorokin’s “self-reception” in interviews? And which of his interview statements from what time? I would argue that both aspects might be true, even if they contradict one another. In the “new Sorokin” there is little new, but there is no longer any “subversive affirmation” in the sense of a “subversion via affirmation,” rather destruction *and* affirmation, overlapping each other.

For the skilled reader of Sorokin-1 and Sorokin-2 this new form of double gesture is difficult to accept. In Sorokin-3 something seems to be missing. Sorokin anticipated this as well—as early as in *Goluboe salo*. In this novel, Khrushchev explains to Stalin that something is wrong with the book they are discussing—the Solzhenitsyn-clone’s work *Odin den’ Ivana (Leopol’dovicha) Denisóvicha (One Day in the Life of Ivan (Leopoldovich) Denisóvich)*—yet this could also be applied to the works of Sorokin-3: там описаны какие-то невинные детские сношения. Нет ни ебли в печень, ни говноебания, ни подкожной ебли. (GS 261).¹⁰³

Surprising non-coincidences

What is the relationship between the linguistic landslide of the norm of the 1990s and the poetological shift from Sorokin-1 and -2 to Sorokin-3? It is quite evident that in the 1990s Sorokin wrote less than he had done

100 Sorokin 2005, p. 5. “in that case, it is possible that the execution of Taras [Bul’ba] will move you to *sincere* tears [...]” (My italics, *D.U.*). Cf. as well Boris Sokolov & V.G. Sorokin, 2005, “Vladimir Sorokin: Rossiia ostaetsia liubovnitsei totalitarizma,” URL: <http://grani.ru/Culture/Literature/m.86612.html> (accessed 04.07.2005).

101 Walter Koschmal, 1996, “Ende der Verantwortungsästhetik?,” *Enttabuisierung: Essays zur russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Slavica Helvetica 50), eds. J.-U. Peters & G. Ritz, Bern e.a., pp. 19–43; pp. 19–21.

102 Obermayr, 2006, referring to Sasse’s and Schramm’s formula “subversive Affirmation” (Sylvia Sasse & Caroline Schramm, 1997, “Totalitäre Literatur und subversive Affirmation,” *Die Welt der Slaven* 42 (2), pp. 306–27; p. 317), which was for its part inspired by the formula “Subversion durch Affirmation” from the blurb of the German translation of *Serdtsa chetyrekh: V.G. Sorokin, 1993, Die Herzen der Vier: Roman*, transl. Thomas Wiedling, Zurich.

103 “there are descriptions of some sort of innocent children’s intercourse in the book. There is neither liver-fucking, nor shit-fucking, nor subcutaneous fucking.”

previously.¹⁰⁴ Sorokin himself admitted in 1992 that he “had exhausted a mine” and “taken a pause” after *Serdtsa chetyrekh*.¹⁰⁵ In the 1990s he focused on plays and film, and returned to the genre of the novel only in 1999, with *Goluboe salo*.

Thus, the elitist writer took his leave of poetic norm-breaking at a time when the landslide of the norm was just beginning to become a mass linguistic reality. And the mass reaction to poetic destruction came only after one of its former protagonists, the “new Sorokin,” transcended his elitist poetics of shock. When the masses became aware of Sorokin’s norm-violating poetics, thanks to his cameo appearance in *Za steklom* in 2001 and to the attacks of *Idushchie vmeste* in 2002, a post-destructive tendency was already well developed in Sorokin’s work. Thus, the tendencies in the poetics of one of the earliest and most radical norm-breakers, the neo-avant-garde writer Sorokin, never in fact coincided with developments in mass culture and linguistic reality. He anticipated the landslide, but was attacked for this only after he had already moved forward into another field.

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Put’ Bro (PB): V.G. Sorokin, 2004, *Put’ Bro*, Moscow.

¹⁰⁴ Nemzer, 2003, p. 250.

¹⁰⁵ Laird & Sorokin, 1999, p. 161.