

The Old Man's New Language: Semantic Shifts and Linguistic Countermeasures in Aleksei Slapovskii's *Oni*

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ALEKSEI SLAPOVSKII (b. 1957) is one of the most prolific and successful writers in contemporary Russia. Since 1986, he has published numerous stage plays, short stories and novels, and written several screen plays. So far four of his novels have been shortlisted for the Russian Booker Prize and two have been filmed.¹ The variety, accessibility and popularity of his texts have frequently prompted critics to discuss whether he is a *light* writer. In spite of this “myth of superficiality,”² recognition of Slapovskii's literary talent and serious concerns has increased over the years, and he is now generally acknowledged as one of several contemporary Russian writers who challenge not only the axiomatic opposition of popularity *vs* seriousness,³ so dominant in post-Soviet literary criticism, but also that of realism *vs* modernism.⁴

The distinctive mark of a Slapovskii novel is the combination of psychologically credible, realistic characters and an energetic, occasionally playful author-narrator, and an extremely entertaining plot revolving

1 See Slapovskii's own homepage <http://slapovsky.ru>. See also: Sergei Chuprinin, 2007, *Russkaia literatura segodnia: Bol'shoi putevoditel'*, Moscow, pp. 373–75; Viacheslav Ogryzko, 2004, *Russkie pisateli: Sovremennaia epokha: Leksikon*, Moscow, p. 444; the homepage of the Russian Booker Prize <http://russianbooker.org>.

2 Sergei Kostyrko, 2004, “Bezal'ternativnost' Slapovskogo,” *Novyi mir* 12, http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2004/12/kost15.html.

3 Kostyrko, 2004.

4 Thus, Slapovskii is regarded as one of the writers who exemplify the new artistic paradigm of “postrealism” in N.L. Leiderman & M.N. Lipovetskii, 2006, *Sovremennaia russkaia literatura 1950–1990-e gody v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2 (1968–1990), Moscow, pp. 583–98.

around thought-provoking issues. His novel *Oni* (*They* 2005) is no exception. Chiefly socio-philosophical in its concerns, it comes across as an engaging investigation of what is going on in today's Russia behind the news headlines, in people's lives and in their minds, when they are on their own, but particularly when they interact. A major point is the impossibility of standing alone: everybody needs a *they* to oppose or a *we* to belong to, and what the novel explores is thus nothing less than the social basis of personal identity and the communication involved in norm formation. All the novel's characters experience the current challenges arising from these basic conditions, they identify particular problems and more or less energetically try to solve them. However, one character stands out, since Slapovskii lets him focus directly on the means of communication, on the *linguistic* norm. The problems identified by this character, Mikhail Mikhailovich Nemeshev, and the solutions he tries out form the theme of the following analysis.

Behavioural confusion and semantic unreliability

One of the most noticeable aspects of Slapovskii's novel is that all its main characters, regardless of age, sex and social status, are confronted with important choices concerning their individual moral development and way of life. Material conditions and unforeseen events are of significance, but everybody seems conspicuously *free*—from heritage, tradition, norms. Correspondingly, the interrelations and communications between these individuals are characterised by a marked absence of established social standards. Owing to the eventful plot, every single character in the novel is presented as at once subject to and contributing to a vast number of behavioural subsystems depending on the particular situation. But these systems are permanently in a state of flux, with the result that the parties concerned must search for common ground every time they meet. While the radicalisation of this basic fact of human life makes parts of the novel resemble literary situation comedy, it obviously also represents authentic behavioural confusion in contemporary Russia.

This confusion makes Russia, not least its populous capital, the perfect place for confidence tricks and *flash mobs*, both of which play a significant part in the novel's plot. The flash mobs are particularly interesting for my analysis, since they deliberately challenge behavioural norms and play with the processes of their formation. Confronted with the seem-

ingly pointless actions of such group performances, chance passers-by must necessarily choose a reaction: should they ignore, watch or participate? Should they enjoy or condemn? Everything is in play since it is not even clear which attitude would imply conformity and which creativity.

To the 67-year-old Mikhail Mikhailovich Nemeshev everything is in play *all the time*. Compared to other characters in the novel, who are adapting to and somehow tackling the sliding norms and new possibilities—for instance they manage to sustain their dialogues even if they cannot decide on either formal or informal address, and keep alternating between *вы* and *ты*—he stands out as not only the most confused and susceptible, but also the most indignant and independent. The changes he observes are so many and so great that he suspects a hostile occupation of his country has taken place. And he believes to have found linguistic evidence that this is indeed the case:

Он давно догадывался об оккупации, но окончательное прозрение пришло однажды в отделении Сбербанка, куда он пришел получать пенсию. Он стоял в очереди, читал от скуки информацию и объявления, и вдруг его как ударило. Над одним из окон висела бумажка: «ОБСЛУЖИВАНИЕ КЛИЕНТОВ ПОСТРАДАВШИХ ОТ НАЦИОНАЛ-СОЦИАЛИЗМА ВО ВРЕМЯ ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ». М.М. перечитывал это раз десять. И понял. То есть он тогда не понял, что именно он понял, но было ощущение озарения. Жертвы (или люди, или пусть худшее, но терпимое—«лица») превратились в холодное и деловитое—«клиенты». Фашизм превратился в национал-социализм. То же, да не то. Великая Отечественная превратилась во Вторую мировую, что отчасти верно по форме и совершенно неверно по сути! И даже презрительное отсутствие запятой после «клиентов» показалось М.М. многозначительным намеком на то, что теперь—можно. Что именно можно, он не понял и, если честно, не понимает до сих пор. Но—можно.⁵ (12–13)

5 References are to Aleksei Slapovskii, 2005, *Oni*, Moscow. “He had long suspected there was an occupation, but the final revelation came to him one day in the local bank, where he had come to take out his pension. He was standing in a queue, forced by boredom into reading all the information signs and announcements, and suddenly it struck him. Above one of the counters was a note saying: SERVING CLIENTS WHO SUFFERED UNDER NATIONAL SOCIALISM DURING THE SECOND

As this passage illustrates, Mikhail Mikhailovich, or M.M. as he prefers to call himself, is shocked and troubled by the general semantic unreliability of the signs—linguistic as well as others—that surround him and by which he must somehow navigate. His particular life circumstances at once contribute to this confusion and intensify his semiotic activities: he has recently become a pensioner, which means he has lost the solid identity that came with a job, just as he has lost meaningful things to do with his time. He is confused about everything: his time, his place, his role in society. To make things worse, he used to be a social science teacher, and having thus once embodied the socio-political norm, he must now, as it were, enact the drama of the old norm stepping aside. In his search for firm ground, he finds a foothold in the suspicion of an occupation. Initially, M.M. is uncertain about his own role in the secret regime; he is afraid of supporting it, but also of being exposed as subversive. In what turns out to be the central episode of the novel's plot, he experiences a violent attack from a man whose briefcase has just been stolen. Since M.M. had nothing to do with the theft and does not resemble the young boy running away from the crime scene, the only explanation, to his way of thinking, is that he looks like and is a *victim*. However, he refuses to die quietly and continues his quest to uncover the occupation, and with this quest comes the more heroic identity of a *lonely partisan*, партизан-одиночка (399).

To other people in the novel M.M. appears mad or senile, and to the reader, having access to the workings of his mind, his paranoia is obvious. But like any paranoid—Dostoevskii's Goliadkin is a case in point—he may in fact be right about some of his fears. He is out of balance, destabilised, has lost his bearings, but so has the surrounding society. The linguistic norm that M.M. has learned and come to regard as inviolable

WORLD WAR. M.M. re-read the note about ten times. And then he understood. That is, at the time he didn't understand what exactly it was that he had understood, but he had this sense of insight. Victims (or people, or the worse but still acceptable 'persons') had turned into the cold and professional 'clients'. Fascism had turned into national socialism. Which was the same thing, and yet not quite the same. The Great Patriotic War had turned into the Second World War, which was partly correct, formally speaking, but completely incorrect in essence! Even the disdainful omission of a comma after 'clients' seemed to M.M. to be a meaningful hint that now, it was permitted. What precisely was permitted, he didn't understand at the time and, to be honest, still doesn't understand. But it was permitted." (All translations of the Slapovskii text are my own.)

is indeed sliding and, in fact, his compulsive analysis of what is going on reveals heightened semiotic and linguistic sensitivities and gives us a fascinating insider's view of ongoing semantic shifts in the language. I will now identify some of these shifts and scrutinize M.M.'s various countermeasures.

Linguistic stereotypes

M.M.'s enemy on the linguistic front is not so much new lexical developments and violations of long-standing norms in themselves. Surprisingly, and again not unlike Goliadkin, he even welcomes the many foreign words in contemporary Russian, for they intervene in the open and may thus be fought openly:

Да еще путаница понятий и слов. Обилие иностранщины наводит на мысль об интервенции, захватничестве, мысль утешительную: ненависть к внешнему врагу делает душу крепкой, трескучей и праведно жестокой, как русский мороз. (11)⁶

The real enemy, according to M.M., lurks, more profoundly, somewhere in the jeopardized relation between familiar Russian words and what they signify—or used to signify:

Но загвоздка в том, что и родные слова будто кто-то подменил. Уже слово *утро* не кажется ясным и зовущим, *день* не видится звонким и наполненным, *вечер* не томит тревогой радости, все стало только лишь сменой времени суток... (11)⁷

Of course, this is the complaint of an idle pensioner, who longs for his active, structured past. It reveals, however, that M.M. is sensitive not only

6 “And there’s also the confusion with concepts and words. The abundance of foreign elements gives rise to notions of intervention, of a takeover,—a consoling thought: hatred of an external enemy makes the soul hard, crackling and righteously severe, like the Russian frost.” Goliadkin, as is well known, believes in the open fight, without masks, and also praises the Russian frost: “Frost suits the Russians, Russians and frost get on famously together!” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1972, *Notes from Underground. The Double*, trans. J. Coulson, Harmondsworth, p. 184.

7 “But the snag is that it is as if someone has also substituted our own words. The word *morning* no longer appears bright and alluring, *day* no longer seems resonant and rich, *evening* no longer torments you with a happy anxiety, they have become nothing more than alternating parts of the day...”

to lexical and grammatical changes, but also, even first and foremost, to ongoing changes in the *connotations* of familiar words, which supposedly still denote what they have always denoted. As an amateur linguist, M.M. is not so much concerned with purely lexical, grammatical or semantic aspects of the language changes, but with the more complex phenomenon of what a word at once denotes and connotes, in other words, with *linguistic stereotypes*.

I use the term “linguistic stereotype” in the same sense as Lew Zybatow in his monograph on changes in the Russian language after *perestroika*.⁸ Zybatow retains the definition of stereotype from other sciences—as a schematic, cognitive formula, which is resistant to change but not unchangeable—but goes beyond the purely psychological, and the focus on content and function, to linguistic explanations of the processes of stereotypisation, taking into account the available linguistic means and forms of communication.⁹ The underlying question for Zybatow’s investigation of a selection of Russian stereotypes is: what causes the semantics of a stereotype to change in people’s minds and how is this change related to language; basically, what is the relation between the psychological phenomenon and its expression in words?¹⁰ It is this difficult problem that Slapovskii lets his lonely partisan explore, albeit on a much smaller scale and, of course, in less scholarly fashion. We saw this in his reading of the poster in the bank, where the conspicuous “National Socialism” was characterized as the same thing, yet not quite the same thing as “Fascism,” and where the “Second World War” instead of the “Great Patriotic War” was said to be “partly correct, formally speaking, but completely incorrect in its essence!” And we will see it even more clearly in the following examples where he deals not with semantic shifts caused by new synonyms, but with familiar Russian words that seem to have lost their “true” meanings.

8 Lew N. Zybatow, 1995, *Russisch im Wandel: Die russische Sprache seit der Perestrojka*, Wiesbaden.

9 Zybatow, 1995, p. 20. Thus Zybatow does not follow the narrower understanding of linguistic stereotype as a socio-psychological definition of the verbalised notions of a particular social group (Zybatow, 1995, p. 52).

10 The stereotypes investigated by Zybatow are: женщина (woman), интеллигенция (intelligentsia), свобода (freedom), память (memory), Европа—общеевропейский дом (our common European house), and земля/земля-мать (earth/Mother Earth).

Who are "they"?

The main and most problematic stereotype of the novel is indicated by its title: они. This "they" is explicitly or implicitly opposed to a group designated by "we" or to an "I," as is the case in M.M.'s lonely quest. During the novel's action-packed plot, Slapovskii shows the multiple combinations and meanings of "they" on all levels of contemporary Moscow life around the year 2001.¹¹ "They" are not only Caucasian immigrants in the eyes of Russians, or more specifically the Russian police, but also vice versa. Furthermore, "they" are policemen from the central district of Moscow as seen by those in the suburbs—and, again, vice versa; "they" are also the grown-ups in the eyes of a child, bureaucrats in the eyes of an architect applying for planning permission, football players in the eyes of a disappointed onlooker etc. With twenty-one chapters in the first part of the novel each beginning with a new они, the novel displays an astounding number of such groups.

Who "they" are obviously depends on context and on the associations of the particular "we" or "I" invoking the opposed group. Amazingly enough, although all these implied stereotypical groups are time and again confronted with each other and with singular exceptions to what "they" are like, there is apparently never any uncertainty as to who is referred to by "they" and what their characteristics are. Apparently, judging by the example of Slapovskii's characters, not even multiple confrontations and acute contradictions can shake the common human reluctance to revise our stereotypes. The only mind in which the semantics of all these variants of the stereotype is bound to change is the mind of the reader.

But again, there is an exception among Slapovskii's characters. To the paranoid Mikhail Mikhailovich, whose identity crisis is the most radical, "they" constitutes a stereotype in process, a word he is struggling to link appropriately to the invisible enemy, the "occupiers" (окупанты), that have secretly taken control of Russia. The opening of the novel goes as follows: Они везде.//Но режим оккупации открыто не объявлен, правила неизвестны. Поэтому трудно понять, кто они. (9).¹²

11 Andrei Nemzer in his review of the novel accentuates this socio-philosophical point to the extent of almost completely disregarding the plot. Andrei Nemzer, 2005, "Slovo o pogibeli nashego uchastka," *Vremia novostei* 48, 23.3.2005, <http://www.vremya.ru/2005/48/10/121105.html>.

12 "They are everywhere.//But the occupation has not openly been declared, the rules are unknown. And so it's difficult to make out who they are."

As long as he does not know who “they” are, he also does not know who he himself is, what group he belongs to. He is a “martyr of the moment”:

Вот почему он мученик мига. Чтобы поступить как-то, надо понять, как поступают в подобных случаях те, к кому ты принадлежишь, но в том-то и дело, что ты не знаешь, к кому принадлежишь, а сказки о том, будто человек принадлежит сам себе, М.М. много раз в жизни слышал, но никогда им не верил. (16)¹³

Not knowing who he is may be what makes M.M. refer to himself by means of the neutral, almost anonymous “M.M.” Because, as he thinks at one point, maybe he is not really a Mikhail but a Mike, a Michel or a Miguel (12). This basic insecurity concerning his own and his enemy’s identity fuels his general distrust of contemporary language and spurs him to take various linguistic precautions.

Distorted lexicon as precaution

When M.M. realises that familiar places and people are no longer safe, no longer to be trusted, his second thought is that the familiarity of their names may lure him into a false sense of security. His first linguistic countermeasure is therefore to *distort* these familiar words, thus creating a new lexicon with alien and frightening connotations. Thus, by spelling Москва as Массква (11 *et passim*),¹⁴ M.M. gives a non-Russian or at least anomalous look to the name of his city.¹⁵ The possible dangers of his local metro station Тимирязевское—mostly police harassment—are invoked in a new name connoting prison and dirt: Тюрьмогрязевское (11 *et passim*),¹⁶ apparently reminding M.M. of things to avoid. The local main

13 “That’s why he is a *martyr of the moment*. In order to act in a certain way, you must comprehend how the people you belong to act in similar situations, but the whole point is that you do not know who you belong to, and the fairy tales about man belonging only to himself M.M. had heard often enough in his life, but had never believed them.”

14 The spelling is equivalent to writing “Masscow” for “Moscow.”

15 This writing style in fact resembles the playful phonetic writing of the *padonki* (see the articles on Russian internet language in this volume), which Slapovskii knows but M.M. obviously does not.

16 For a similar effect in English translation, “Timiriazevskoe metro” could perhaps be rendered as the “Chain-me-up metro.”

road, Дмитровское шоссе is transformed to Митькиное шоссе (11),¹⁷ a deformation which seems to come dangerously close to “traditional” intimate Russian, as M.M. points out, but since he regards this kind of pet naming as a symptom of self-irony and self-degradation, it does the trick and keeps him soberly indignant and alert.¹⁸ Finally, M.M. calls his native language not русский, but мрусский (11 *et passim*),¹⁹ a suitably nonsensical name for the nonsensical contemporary Russian language according to M.M.

Regarding the only certain representatives of the hidden occupation, the police, M.M. employs a stronger variant of precautionary new lexicon, replacing Russian words with foreign ones, more precisely with a German terminology obviously chosen for its “Fascist” subtext: instead of “police” (милиция), he calls them “Sonderkommando” (зондеркоманда), and they always want to see not his “documents” (документы), but his “Ausweis” (аусвейс, 11, 14 *et passim*). According to M.M., the Fascist connotations are not meant literally, but are designed to keep him on his guard and cautious, to help him resist trusting the police, for in his experience they are easily provoked, especially when you resemble a Caucasian, a “Black” (черный), which M.M. knows he does when he has not shaved (11).

By means of each new word in this small individual vocabulary, M.M. deliberately severs the connection between the word and the stereotype, so as to force himself to think of the thing, place or people behind the word as something new and unfamiliar. His aim is to escape the old connotations, the safe sounds, the ingrained habits, and thus stay alert and stand firm vis-à-vis the sliding norms. This limited precaution works to some extent, but is found wanting.

17 The transformation corresponds to Mitia for Dmitrii.

18 In Alisa Ganieva's analysis, the main thematic points of which are similar to mine, these examples of M.M.'s word play are central to his identity quest: “M.M. has the same attitude towards proper nouns as has the ‘Limonov group’ [...], but his attitude is born of a desire to single out, if necessary through self-irony, himself and those to whom he belongs.” Alisa Ganieva, 2007, “I skuchno, i grustno: Motivy izgoistva i otchuzhdeniia v sovremennoi proze,” *Novyi mir* 3, http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2007/3/ga15-pr.html.

19 “Mrussian” instead of “Russian.”

Towards pure denotation

Apparently, M.M. is convinced that no stereotypes at all may be trusted, not even words concerning his most intimate life and private relations. Compared to his above-cited thoughts on the altered connotations of “morning,” “day,” and “evening,” we may detect a radicalisation of his linguistic scepticism in the following later philosophising:

Он сегодня проснулся в начале того времени суток, которое люди называют утром. Начало этого периода они еще умеют угадать по восходу солнца, но вот когда утро переходит в день, не знает никто. Говорят: «одиннадцать часов утра». И: «двенадцать часов дня». Следовательно, конец утра и начало дня потеряно где-то в промежутке. (137)²⁰

Given the extreme semantic unreliability, M.M. must necessarily resort to radical countermeasures. He attempts to think and speak only in neutral, descriptive definitions, to use only accurate, unprejudiced words for the person, thing or act in question. For example, he forces himself to think of his wife not as “my wife,” (жена) but as “the woman I live with” (женщина, с которой я живу) and of his son—a grown-up who no longer looks like a “son” (сын) at all—as “the man who was born of the woman I live with”(мужчина, рожденный женщиной с которой я живу (*13 et passim*)).

We are mostly told about M.M. and his thoughts in the third person, in *style indirect libre*. But in order to give us a fuller picture of his way of thinking, the narrator presents us with a paragraph in the first person, in which M.M. describes his morning:

Введя в организм через ротовое отверстие некоторое количество углеводов, жиров и белков, я сказал женщине, с которой живу, что пойду перемещать свое тело. Выйдя из своей бетонно-кирпичной ячейки в пространство лестниц, я встретил человека женского пола из ячейки справа и в очередной раз напомнил ему

20 “Today he woke up at the beginning of that time of the day which people call morning. Of course, they may detect the beginning of this period from the rising sun, but when exactly morning becomes day, nobody knows. They say: ‘eleven o’clock in the morning’. And: ‘twelve o’clock daytime’. Consequently, the end of the morning and the beginning of the day are lost somewhere in between.”

(т.е. ей), что после времени, считающегося полночью, нельзя извлекать громкие звуки из музыкального инструмента с клавишами [...] (13)²¹

In a later chapter, the same style appears in a third person account, indicating that M.M. indeed keeps up this style of thinking, and at the same time hinting that there may be good reasons for some of his lexical replacements:

В комнате, предназначенной для выведения из организма продуктов химически переработанной пищи и омовения кожных покровов, М.М. все вывел и оросил эти самые покровы влагой из приспособления с дырочками. (Казалось бы, можно просто сказать: водой, но М.М. знает, что это давно уже не вода, а черт знает что, поэтому влага— точнее.) (138)²²

What M.M. does in his efforts to avoid the unreliable stereotypes and their dangerously alluring connotations may also be described as an attempted translation of all stereotypes into pure denotations. His aim is to achieve both an unprejudiced approach to the things behind the words, and a language that may be trusted. For tactical reasons, he mostly adapts his spoken language to that of his interlocutor, and he always inserts a sly “metaphorically speaking” (образно говоря) when openly using the words “occupier” and “occupied” about people (311–12). At other times, he heroically ventures to demand a higher level of precision from others. To his fellow human beings, who do not understand his quest, he appears to be simply a quarrelsome old man, but in the eyes of the reader, he has a

21 “Having introduced into my organism, through the oral opening, a certain amount of carbohydrates, fats and proteins, I told the woman I live with that I was going to relocate my body. Coming out from my brick and concrete cell into the space with stairs, I met a human being of the female sex from the cell to the right and once again reminded it (that is, the human being) that after the time regarded as midnight it is not permitted to draw out loud sounds from a musical instrument with a keyboard [...]”

22 “In the room designated for eliminating the products of chemically processed food from the organism and for cleansing the cutaneous coverings, M.M. eliminated it all and sprinkled the said coverings with moisture from a device with small holes in it. (It would seem that one could simply say: with water, but M.M. knows that for a long time it has been not water, but the Devil knows what, and therefore moisture is more precise.)”

strong point and actually manages to expose the habit of ordinary people to imply quite a lot when they speak, and the practice of those in power to ruthlessly exploit implicit assumptions of authority.

M.M. no longer respects any implicit authorities, be they in society or in language. Thus he does not yield to the authority of a hospital nurse or a private doctor, from both of whom he demands to know the exact contents of the medicine they are giving him and the case record they are keeping on him (74–75, 139–41), nor does he respect the authority of the *sonderkommandos* unless they prove to him who they are (399–400). The peak of his heroic struggle is a duel with words against his assailant's lawyer, who knows how to bend and split the words of the law in his own interest, but who cannot cope with M.M.'s obstinate drive for literal exactitude.

— Злость и гнев есть объективные субстанции, не зависящие от человека?—спросил М.М.

— Не понял!—озадачился адвокат.

М.М. уточнил вопрос:

— Всякий ли человек, который в обычном состоянии не обидит мухи, в состоянии аффекта способен покушаться на жизнь другого человека?

— Мы говорим не о всяком, Михал Михалыч, вы нарочно, что ли, путаете? [...]

— Вы не ответили на вопрос.

— Какой?

— Обязательно ли в состоянии аффекта убивать или бить другого человека?

— Что значит—обязательно? Конечно, не обязательно! Но...

— Спасибо, вы ответили на вопрос. (201–202)²³

23 “— So spite and anger are objective substances, not dependent on the person in question? M.M. asked.//—I don't understand! said the baffled lawyer.//M.M. clarified his question://—Is any person who would not normally hurt a fly capable, in a state of intense emotional distress, of making an attempt on another person's life?//—We are not talking about just anybody, Mikhail Mikhalych, are you deliberately confusing things? [...]//—You didn't answer my question.//—What question?//—If you're in a state of intense emotional distress, is it obligatory to try to kill or to beat another person?//—What's obligatory supposed to mean? Of course it isn't obligatory! But...//—Thank you, you've answered my question.”

Conclusion

What M.M. does not notice, but what is sadly clear to the reader, is the truly *defamiliarising* effect of his insistence on pure denotation. Unwittingly, he is the perfect conceptual artist. Far from enjoying the performance, however, he suffers the consequences of his general scepticism and linguistic accuracy: a growing alienation, not only from other people and their, in his view, incomprehensible actions and language, but also from his own body and the time and place he lives in. If automatisations eat up your things, clothing, furniture, your wife and your fear of war, as Shklovskii pointed out, too much de-autonomisation or defamiliarisation, according to M.M.'s author Slapovskii, may eat up all the above and in addition make the war pointless.²⁴

Towards the end of the novel, M.M. realises that his fellow Russians are, indeed, members or helpers of the occupying power, but they are also themselves occupied. In other words, his attempt to identify and fight the opponent "they" (они) leads him to the realisation that he and his fellow citizens, even those in the *sonderkommandos*, are all part of—if not exactly united in—a "we" (мы). With this realisation, his hostile paranoia is replaced by forgiving pity and his lonely fight by a sad and tired isolation at home, where we want to believe he is at least reconnecting with his wife.

Through his lexical creativity and de-stereotypisation, M.M. has tried to establish his own reliable norm. He finds that he is losing his foothold when the linguistic norm begins to slide, that he is confusingly surrounded by multiple possibilities (можно), and consequently begins his search for new rules for what must be done (надо) and what may not (нельзя).

The attempts of Slapovskii's hero to create a "safe," denotative language is not unlike the once-proclaimed ambition of the young Soviet state to reinvent language so as to reflect the new society.²⁵ Significantly, the development of M.M.'s new language, although short-lived, seems also to follow that of the Soviet norm, tending as it does towards prolix

24 Viktor Shklovskii et al., 1990, *Gamburgskii schet: Stat'i—vospominaniia—esse (1914–1933)*, Moscow, p. 63. M.M.'s "defamiliarised" description of cigarettes and the strange phenomenon of smoking (15) is undoubtedly indebted to Tolstol's rendering of Natasha's opera experience, the most famous of Shklovskii's examples of *ostranenie*.

25 See the chapter "The Revolutionary Voice and the Resurrection of Meaning," in Michael S. Gorham, 2003, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia*, DeKalb, Ill., pp. 38–57.

and clichéd bureaucratise. Thus, far from being free from connotations, it is ironically full of them. This similarity underscores a lesson that should have been learnt from the Soviet experiment: that an artificially created new norm is prone to degenerate and become a parody of the high aspirations from which it springs. As exemplified by the other characters in Slapovskii's novel, it is in the living language culture—through communication and in communion with fellow speakers of the language—that old norms are broken and viable new norms are formed. That M.M. does not succeed in his linguistic quest is Slapovskii's way of telling us that there is no way a one-man army can either suppress or unify the plurality of words, connotations and practices of this living language culture, not even by peaceful negotiation, had that been his choice.

Intriguingly, the novel ends with a footnote listing M.M.'s alternative, precautionary names for Russian newspapers and journals—Эк-стресс-газета, Недоля, Каркументы и ах ты and so on (460).²⁶ In my interpretation this note qualifies as the author's tribute to his lonely partisan's efforts—and at the same time reveals his own almost irrepressible enjoyment of this kind of creativity. Unlike his unfortunate hero, Slapovskii does not take words too seriously. He seems to be genuinely fond of the great potential for entertaining dialogues and plots released by the landslide of old norms and the search for new ones. Despite the seeming failure of M.M.'s linguistic struggle, Slapovskii does not appear to be worried about the fate of the Russian language, nor to feel sorry for his fellow Russians in this respect. The short version of his position as expressed through this novel is: Можно? Ну, давай!²⁷

26 Эк-стресс-газета plays on Экспресс газета, "The Daily Express," replacing *press* with *stress*; Недоля is a distortion of Неделя, "The Weekly," transforming it into an old word for misfortune, translatable perhaps as "The Meekly"; Каркументы и ах ты is a play on Аргументы и факты, "Arguments and Facts," roughly equivalent to "Ill Bodings and Oh Dear."

27 "Is it permitted? Let's do it!"