

The Romantic Conflict between the Ideal and Reality in Vladimir Sorokin's Oeuvre

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Это блюдо, приготовленное разочарованным романтиком [...]

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SINCE the turn of the century, Vladimir Sorokin has frequently noted his affinity with the Romantic perception of the world: Вообще я романтик, хотя во многом и идеалист. Я не был прагматиком никогда, легкомысленно относился к деньгам. Я человек увлекающийся, и в этом я романтик.² Я романтик и не люблю копать во внутренностях [оперной постановки]...³ Я романтик и никогда мистикой не увлекался.⁴ Sorokin considers Romantic traits to be the foundation of the Russian mentality: Мы [русские] романтики, верим в идеалы, чудеса, светлое будущее.⁵

1 "This is a dish prepared by a disappointed Romantic." Viktor Erofeev, 1996, "Russkie tsvety zla," *V labirinte proklyatykh voprosov*, Moscow, pp. 232–50; p. 248.

2 "I am mostly a Romantic, although in many ways I am an idealist as well. I have never been a pragmatic and I have always had a carefree attitude towards money. I am a person who likes to enjoy himself and that makes me a Romantic." Vladimir Sorokin in Anonymous, 2001, "Interv'iu," *Km.ru*, 6 December 2001, <http://www.km.ru/glavnoe/2001/12/06/intervyu-s-izdatelem/vladimir-sorokin>, accessed 3 August 2012. If not stated otherwise, all translations are mine.

3 "I am a Romantic and I do not like to delve into the bowels [of opera staging]..." Vladimir Sorokin in Leila Guchmazova, 2005, "Po Bol'shomu," *Itogi* 10, pp. 63–65; p. 65.

4 "I am a Romantic and I have never been interested in mysticism." Vladimir Sorokin in Aleksandr Neverov, 2002, "Proshchai, kontseptualizm!" *Itogi* 11, pp. 49–51; p. 49.

5 "We [Russians] are Romantics, we believe in ideals, miracles and a brighter future." Vladimir Sorokin in Igor' Gavrikov, 2005, "Doktor Sorokin," *Litsa* 9, pp. 86–91; p. 91.

When talking about Romanticism, Sorokin is referring not to an artistic movement but rather to a “Romantic feeling.” In the words cited above, what he understands by a “Romantic feeling” is an aspiration towards the sublime and the ideal, as well as a holistic perception of reality. According to Michael Ferber, the editor of *A Companion to European Romanticism* from 2006, there is no “common denominator” for all Romantics. A better way to understand this movement is to adopt Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances” and compile a list of distinctive traits:

In a family of 10 people, for instance, there may be five or six distinctive facial or bodily features that recur among them, but it might turn out that two or even three members share none of them. They might each have two of the traits, but the other members of the family each have four or five of them, so there are many overlaps, and when you have had a good look at, say, five members of the family, you can pick out the other five from a crowd.⁶

One of these distinctive Romantic traits is the conflict between the ideal and reality. Hereinafter, when referring to Romanticism, we will address it not as an epoch but from a typological point of view. The first scholar to notice Romantic traits in the poetics of the Moscow Conceptualists was Boris Groys. While Sorokin is not mentioned in Groys’ article “Moskovskii romanticheskii kontseptualizm” and his relationship with that artistic movement remains complicated,⁷ some statements from Groys’ work are relevant to the problem we are going to explore here. Groys states: Русское искусство от иконы до наших дней хочет говорить о мире ином. [...] Искусство есть для них [московских концептуалистов] вторжение мира иного в наш мир, подлежащее осмыслению.⁸

The world of Sorokin’s works is often dichotomist and is based on a conflict between two contradicting artistic realities. The author applies

6 Michael Ferber, 2005, “Introduction,” *A Companion to European Romanticism*, Malden, Mass., pp. 1–9; p. 6.

7 For more details, see my *Absurdopediia russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina*, St Petersburg, 2012, pp. 35–39.

8 “Russian art, from the icons to the present day, wants to talk about the other world. [...] For them [the Moscow Conceptualists], art is an intrusion by the other world into our world, and it needs to be understood.” Boris Groys, 2003, “Moskovskii romanticheskii kontseptualizm,” *Iskusstvo utopii*, Moscow, pp. 168–86; pp. 185–86.

this principle in many different ways: from binary stylistic constructs in *Pervyi subbotnik* (*The First Saturday Workday*, 1979–84) to merging futuristic and archaic imagery in *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999) and *Den' oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006); from the opposition between the ways of life of Soviet apparatchiks and dissidents in *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (*Marina's Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84) to the conflict between “meat machines” and “people of the Light” in *Trilogiia* (*Ice Trilogy*, 2002–2005); from Siamese twins in *Mesiats v Dakhau* (*A Month in Dachau*, 1990) to clones in *Blue Lard* and *Deti Rozentalia* (*Rosenthal's Children*, 2005). In a number of works, there also appears an image of the ideal that embodies the ultimate values of this or that artistic reality. It alternates with an image of the anti-ideal as a representation of reality's negative and monstrous features. Chasing the ideal in vain, whatever disguise it takes, or its sudden loss, the tragic destruction of the ideal or idyllic world, are also recurrent themes. These four components—conflict between two contradicting artistic realities, images of the ideal, images of the anti-ideal and the recurrent theme of chasing the ideal in vain—constitute a Romantic paradigm in Sorokin's oeuvre.

Romantic dualism in 'The Norm' and 'The First Saturday Workday'

In the novel *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979–83) the concept of Romantic dualism (романтическое двоемирие) is expressed as a collision between the utopia produced by Socialist Realism and the reality of Soviet life. In the story “Padezh” (“Cattle Plague,” the core of part three of *The Norm*), a poverty-stricken and dilapidated communal farm is compared to a “neat and skilfully fabricated” model of the farm.⁹ The creator of this model, the chairman of the communal farm, Tishchenko, virtually turns into a Hoffmann-like Romantic hero—helpless, pitiful and awkward in real life, he secretly dreams of the ideal world where there is exemplary “order.” In the catalogue “Stikhi i pesni” (“Poems and songs,” part seven of *The Norm*), Soviet poetry, including poems with elements of “revolutionary Romanticism,” forms a bizarre symbiosis with “the prose of life,” which is represented in many ways—from naturalistic chronicles to the absurdist grotesque.

9 Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Padezh,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, pp. 168–202; p. 171.

The artistic strategy embodied in this catalogue is developed in the collection of short stories and tales *The First Saturday Workday*. According to the author, есть два полюса—хаос и порядок. Меня оба они привлекают, как магнит. Меня качает между жесткими и хаотическими структурами. В этом и спасение: сегодня одно, завтра—другое.¹⁰ In *The First Saturday Workday* the pole of order is occupied by the genre and stylistic clichés of Socialist Realism. Whereas Sorokin felt extremely hostile towards the Soviet system, in the 1980s and the early 1990s he admired Socialist Realist art, in which he found “inhuman beauty” (нечеловеческая красота).¹¹ He sees Socialist Realist literature as the ideal world, and enthusiastically worked on recreating this world in *The First Saturday Workday*. The opposite pole is the chaos of daily life, which is perceived in a purely Romantic way as a “menacing world” (страшный мир): Смотрим вокруг: дома, люди, машины, деревья, дороги, животные, насекомые. Что это? Зачем? Почему? Мир форм страшен. Он пугает своим существованием.¹² As in the catalogue “Poems and songs,” the ways of representing this world vary from элементы порно- или жесткой литературы¹³ to *zaum*, the grotesque and the absurd.

“The fall from grace of Soviet man [...] from the Socialist Realist Eden to the infinite chaos of the world,” described by Aleksandr Genis,¹⁴ is at the same time the writer’s own “fall from grace.” Ivan Popov states:

Писателя пугает хаос реальной действительности. И оттого ему так близка классическая литература и массовое искусство, пред-

10 “There are two poles—chaos and order. Both of them attract me like a magnet. I swing between rigid and chaotic structures. This is what rescues me—today one, tomorrow the other.” Vladimir Sorokin in Petr Vail’ & Aleksandr Genis, 1992, “Vesti iz onkologicheskoi kliniki,” *Sintaksis* 32, pp. 138–43; p. 142.

11 Vail’ & Genis, 1992, p. 141.

12 “We look around—houses, people, cars, trees, roads, animals, insects. What are they? What are they for? Why? The world of forms is ghastly. It frightens us with its very existence.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Morphophobia,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, pp. 709–10; p. 709.

13 “Elements of pornographic or coarse literature” Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, “Tekst kak narkotik,” *Sbornik rasskazov*, Moscow, pp. 119–26; p. 121.

14 Грехопадение советского человека, [...] из соцреалистического Эдема в бессвязный хаос мира. Aleksandr Genis, 1997, “Beseda desiataia. Pole chudes: Viktor Pelevin,” *Zvezda* 12, pp. 230–33; p. 230.

ставляющие реальность как четкость и упорядоченность. С этой позиции абсурдно-насильственные развязки его произведений можно интерпретировать как выражение подсознательного страха потери идеального литературного мира, провоцирующего эмоциональное переживание.¹⁵

However, the idealness of the Socialist Realist world is also perceived by the author as its artificialness, unnaturalness and falsity. Sorokin labelled Stalinist literature a “monster with a sugary-sweet, doll-like face” and “putrid entrails.”¹⁶ What we in fact have here is the anti-ideal disguised in ideal clothing; skilfully done in its own right, but a lifeless substitute called upon to replace true spirituality. This is why destroying this deceitful, false world, which is nevertheless very similar to the ideal, is a tragic inevitability. It leaves the author and the reader alone with the “menacing” world, beyond which there is nothing more than vacuous emptiness. These tragic overtones are dampened down beyond recognition in *The First Saturday Workday*—they can, however, be detected in Sorokin’s later works.

In the short story “Iu” from the collection *Pir (The Feast, 2000)*, the main character DANNO is haunted by a strange vision—a white dove with its belly cut open flying towards him, decomposing along the way. From the bird flows a “wave of tenderness” covered by the “smell of rotting entrails”: Голубь разлагается столь стремительно, что до меня долетает только его скелет, машущий костлявыми крыльями, из перьев которых жирным градом сыплются черви.¹⁷ This macabre vision comes up again in the libretto of the opera *Rosenthal’s Children*: anticipating

15 “The writer is frightened by the chaos of real life, and this is why he feels such an affinity with classical literature and art for the masses, which represent reality as something precise and ordered. From this point of view, the absurdist and forced resolutions of his works may be interpreted as an expression of a subconscious fear of losing the ideal literary world, which causes emotional distress.” I.V. Popov, 2006, “Russkii literaturnyi diskurs v tvorchestve Vladimira Sorokina,” *Semiozis i kul’tura* 2, ed. I.E. Fadeeva, Syktyvkar, pp. 242–47; pp. 246–47.

16 Советская сталинская литература—[...] монстр со слащавым, наштукатуренным лицом, и я сделал попытку взглянуть на его гнилые потроха [...] Vladimir Sorokin in Gavrikov, 2005, p. 89.

17 “The dove decomposes so rapidly that all that reaches me is its skeleton, flapping bony wings with a thick coating of worms.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Iu,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3, pp. 427–50; p. 429.

his fast-approaching death, Wagner's clone dreams about a divine swan swirling in the blue of the sky with snow-white wings that are suddenly overwhelmed by death worms.

The image of a beautiful swan bearing death first appears in a key scene of the film *Moskva* (*Moscow*, 2001; script by Sorokin, 1997). In the film, the businessman Mike, who is passionate about Russian ballet, climbs onto the stage of the Bol'shoi Theatre carrying two bouquets of flowers. A ballerina is on stage and just about to finish her performance of *The Dying Swan*. Suddenly there is a sniper shot, and the terrified dancer crawls into the wings, splattered with Mike's blood. Mike dies on the path to his ideal—the art of Russian ballet. The ballerina in the pure white dress splattered with blood is equivalent to the “inhuman beauty” of Socialist Realism, steeped in the stench of its “putrid entrails.” It is a crystallized figurative embodiment of the narrative strategy, which is characteristic of many of Sorokin's works.

This context clarifies the meaning of an odd image that appears at the end of the short story “Sorevnovanie” (“Competition”) from *The First Saturday Workday*. The pyramid made from lard with pus inside is nothing other than a figurative model of the Socialist Realism canon that hides the atrocious (pus) under a (pseudo-)ideal disguise. The actions of Vasilii Petrovich, who cuts the pyramid in two, express the author's narrative strategy. The process of the pus exuding from Socialist Realism is depicted as joyless: the pyramid lying on a “pale bedsheet” (на бледной простыне) is put onto a “melancholic log” (грустная колода), Vasilii Petrovich cuts it with a “sad axe” (печальный топор) and brushes away a tear.¹⁸

The image of the “norm” as an embodiment of the anti-ideal

Ideal and anti-ideal elements in Sorokin's works are frequently concentrated in symbolic images around which the plot revolves. The frighteningly true-to-life scenes of coprophagy that brought the author contro-

18 The author will return to this image in the short story “Avaron” from *Pir*. At its culmination, the glass coffin with Lenin's embalmed body compresses into an equilateral pyramid and begins to shine with a “soft purple light,” and from its lateral side a purple Worm—Satan—smoothly stretches itself out. In “Avaron” Sorokin intricately links ontological evil, the authoritarian traditions of Russian regimes and communist ideology with Socialist Realist literature.

versial fame are, in fact, a condensed artistic expression of the negative and monstrous phenomena of reality.

In the first part of the novel *The Norm*, the characters eat briquettes made of child faeces on a daily basis. The image of the “norm” is usually interpreted as an embodiment of the perverted essence of Soviet ideology.¹⁹ In the text, however, there are no indications that the “norm” is specifically Soviet, and this presents an obstacle to a straightforward, allegoric decoding of the grotesque image. Interviewing Sorokin in 1998, literary observer Mikhail Novikov asked:

Книга написана так, что читалась тогда как памфлет, это было обличение ужасного строя. Сейчас ее читаешь и понимаешь, что все дело посерьезнее и посложнее. Как вы думаете, норма—это необходимый компонент общественного устройства? То есть нельзя жить в обществе и не «выкушивать» свою ежедневную норму.

Sorokin replied: Думаю, что проблема еще глубже. Собственно, нельзя жить на этой земле, не поедая нормы.²⁰ One can conclude: the image of the “norm” expresses not so much the absurdity of Soviet reality as the existential absurdity of human life as such.²¹ The protagonist of *A Month in Dachau* laments:

Движения сколько автоматизмов зубная щетка ножницы для усов щипчики для ногтей расческа вот наши вечные поработи-

19 For instance: Aleksandr Genis, 1997, “Sovetskaia metafizika,” *Vavilonskaia bashnia*, Moscow, pp. 98–104; p. 103. Mikhail Ryklin, 1994, “Roman Vladimira Sorokina: norma, kotoruiu my s’eli,” *Kommersant* 180, p. 13.

20 “Novikov: ‘The book was written in such a way that it was read like a pamphlet, it was a denunciation of a terrible regime. When you read it now you understand that the whole case is more serious and complicated. In your opinion, is the norm an inevitable part of any society? In other words, is it impossible to live in society and not ‘consume’ your daily norm?’ Sorokin: ‘I think that the problem lies even deeper. As a matter of fact, you can’t live on this earth without eating the norm.’” Vladimir Sorokin & Mikhail Novikov, 1998, “My ne vstanem ni pod kakim pamiatnikom,” *Kommersant* 161, p. 10.

21 This is a major problem for absurdist literature in general, cf. fatality and imprisonment in Franz Kafka’s *Der Prozeß* (*The Trial*) and *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*), meaningless and endless waiting in Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*), or everyday trials in Albert Camus’ *La Chute* (*The Fall*).

тели и деррида прав каждое автоматическое движение текстуально каждый текст тоталитарен мы в тексте а следовательно в тоталитаризме как мухи в меду [...]»²²

In this case the hero Vladimir Georgievich Sorokin expresses the author's thoughts, since more than 10 years later—in 2003—the writer will almost literally reiterate the statement:

Человек движется в направлении счастья, но на пути к нему на нем остается висеть, как на еже, дерьмо—это наши автоматизмы. [...] Человек живет в условиях насилия и насилием, как комар в банке с медом. Мы долго барахтаемся в этой жизни и не можем выбраться.²³

The figurative identification of automatisms with faeces has a linguistic dimension. In the “new Russian” language of *Blue Lard*, the word *kal* (“faeces”) means “popular quotation.” Жопа он, а не хозяин. Ишь говна развел—says Mokin in “Cattle Plague,” referring to the ridiculous orders of the chairman Tishchenko.²⁴ Later, Mokin makes the harsh accusation against Tishchenko that he had “pissed and shitted on everyone,” and this can also be understood as a hint at his turbulent legislation. In the seventh part of *The Norm*, a “historical talk between Duchamp and Dali about the sale of shit by one pop-artist” is mentioned—they were obviously discussing *Merda d'artista* (*Artist's Shit*, 1961) by Piero Manzoni.

22 “Movements lots of automatisms toothbrush moustache scissors nail clipper comb these are our everlasting enslavers and derrida is right every automatic movement is textual every text is totalitarian we are in a text hence in totalitarianism like flies in honey [...]” Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Mesiats v Dakhau,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, pp. 745–65; p. 758.

23 “A person moves towards happiness but on the way he is burdened like a hedgehog carrying shit—these are our automatisms. [...] A person lives in violent circumstances and by violence, like a mosquito in a honey jar. We have been floundering in this life for so long and we cannot get out.” Vladimir Sorokin & Daniel-Dylan Böhmer, 2003, “Es war schon immer gefährlich ein russischer Schriftsteller zu sein,” *Der Spiegel*, 11 October 2003, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/interview-mit-vladimir-sorokin-es-war-schon-immer-gefaehrlich-ein-russischer-schriftsteller-zu-sein-a-269164-druck.html>, accessed 6 August 2012. Russian translation: 2003, “Byt' pisatelem v Rossii vseгда bylo opasno,” *Der Spiegel*, 13 October, <http://www.inosmi.ru/inrussia/20031013/196241.html>, accessed 6 August 2012.

24 “He is an asshole, not a master. Look at all this shit.” Sorokin, 2002, p. 170.

The conceptualistic and pop-artistic strategy of dealing with the “norm” can be conveyed by Sorokin’s words about Lev Landau (a protagonist of Il’ia Khrzhanovskii’s film *Dau* (*Dau*, 2011; script by Sorokin)): Он ее, норму, и не ел на самом деле никогда. Потому что он был фрик. Он нормой жонглировал, мазал стены, писал ею формулы. Таким образом он преодолевал советскую реальность.²⁵

The image of the “blue lard” as an embodiment of the ideal

The category of the ideal is artistically expressed in Sorokin’s works in the images of lard and ice, finalized as the “blue lard” from the eponymous novel and the “Heaven Ice” in *Ice Trilogy*. Asked why “soft” and “eluding” substances occupy a central role in many of his texts, the writer said: это подсознательная романтическая, может быть, утопическая идея выделить абсолют некий, которого не хватает в нашей жизни.²⁶

The image of lard first appears in the aforementioned short story “Competition.” The expression “pus and lard” (гной и сало) is used in the short story “Pamiatnik” (“The Monument”) from the same collection, alongside “defamation of lard ice” (шельмование ледяного сала).²⁷ Later, the expression “blue lard” appears in the play *Doverie* (*Confidence*, 1989)²⁸ and in *Dostoevsky-trip* (1997)—“heavy leaden lard” (тяжелое свинцовое сало).²⁹ In the *Blue Lard* novel this matter accumulates in the bodies of the clones of great writers after they finish their “script-process.” The “blue lard” is here the quintessence of literature, of the very phenomenon of literariness, a material substitute for a spiritual matter: голубое сало—цель всякого творчества, сбывшаяся мечта худож-

25 “In fact, he never actually ate the norm. Because he was a freak. He juggled with the norm, smeared walls with it, wrote formulas by it. That was his way of overcoming Soviet reality.” Vladimir Sorokin & Andrei Arkhangel’skii, 2012, “Proiskhodit obydenie elit,” *Ogonek* 4, 30 January, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1857067>, accessed 6 August 2012.

26 “It’s a subconscious Romantic, maybe even utopian idea of singling out something absolute that we lack in our life.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, “My vse otravleny literaturoi,” *Arba.ru*, <http://www.arba.ru/art/849/7>, accessed 6 August 2012.

27 Vladimir Sorokin, “Pamiatnik,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, pp. 701–706; pp. 703–704.

28 Vladimir Sorokin, 2007, “Doverie,” *Kapital: polnoe sobranie p’es*, pp. 37–74; p. 58.

29 Vladimir Sorokin, 2007, “Dostoevsky-trip,” *Kapital: polnoe sobranie p’es*, pp. 303–36; p. 319.

ника, предел божественного преображения. Дело в том, что голубое сало—это русский грааль: дух, ставший плотью.³⁰

The “blue lard” balances on the cusp of material and spiritual, physical and metaphysical realities: Сало светилось нежно-голубым, ни на что не похожим светом. [...] Этот необычный и неземной свет заставил братьев смолкнуть.³¹ It is Sorokin’s *blaue Blume* which the writer endows with incredible characteristics that express his understanding of the key features of literature:

Это вещество устроено по-другому, чем все сущее на Земле. Оно не может ни нагреваться, ни охлаждаться и всегда такое же теплое, как наша кровь. Его можно резать, оно разрежется, можно рвать—оно разорвется. Но если его вложить в раскаленную печь, оно не сгорит и не нагреется, если опустить в ледяную майну—не охладится. Оноечно. И всегда будет таким же теплым, как кровь людей. Его можно раздробить и развеять по ветру, но частицы его все равно будут в мире, и даже если мир наш замерзнет ледяной глыбой или превратится в пылающее солнце—голубое сало навсегда останется в нем.³²

Why was such an earthly object as lard chosen for the artistic embodiment of a highly spiritual activity? Lard is pig fat and fat is the energy reserve for an animal. Likewise, classics form a stable complex of ideas and

30 “The blue lard is the goal of any creative work, an artist’s dream come true, the end of the divine transfiguration. The fact is that the blue lard is the Russian Holy Grail: the spirit transformed into flesh.” Aleksandr Genis, 1999, “Strashnyi son,” *Radio Svoboda*, <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/OTB/1999/OBT.03.asp>, accessed 6 August 2012.

31 “The blue lard was shining with a tender blue, one-of-a-kind light. [...] This unusual and *unearthly light* forced the brothers to fall silent.” (Emphasis added.) Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Goluboe salo,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3, pp. 7–302; pp. 106 and 110.

32 “This substance is organized unlike anything else on Earth. It cannot heat up or cool down and is always as warm as our blood. You can cut it and it will get cut, you can tear it and it will get torn. But if it is placed in a glowing furnace it will not burn down and heat up, if it is dropped into an ice-hole it will not cool down. It is eternal. And it will always remain as warm as people’s blood. You can break it into pieces and scatter it in the wind, but its particles will still be in the world, and even if our world freezes over like a block of ice or turns into a glowing sun, the blue lard will remain in it forever.” Sorokin, 2002, p. 139.

images that is used by subsequent generations. The inexhaustibility and imperishability of classical works of art is literally conveyed in the novel: the existence of the “blue lard” has fostered “the fourth law of thermodynamics” and in time it will allow the creation of a reactor of perpetual energy.³³ The natural colour of lard is white or tender pink, but Sorokin makes it blue in keeping with the archetypal colour of ideal images which has its roots in the colour of the sky (“blue flower,” “blue bird,” “blue blood”³⁴). There is also a “clone-pigeon post” (клон-голубиная почта)³⁵ in the novel which indirectly links the “blue lard” with the pigeon as an ancient symbol of purity and spirituality (in Russian the words for ‘blue’ (*goluboi*) and ‘pigeon’ (*golub*) have the same root).

The epigraph to *Blue Lard* is taken from *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (*Gargantua and Pantagruel*), written by François Rabelais in the sixteenth century, and the text of the novel is filled with physiological imagery and obscenities. This brings out another meaning of the word “lard” in Russian—the adjective *sal’nyi* can mean “obscene,” “cynical.” There is also a clear association in the novel with homosexuality—the “blue lard” is being created by the queer (in Russian slang *goluboi*) Boris Gloger. Sorokin states: Настоящий литератор—это не изготовитель конфет. Это некий пользователь мира, мир не только из радостного, возвышенного, нежного и комфортного состоит, но с таким же правом—из служебного, из отвратительного тоже.³⁶ According to the writer, Russian literature of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century lacks corporal imagery: Из-за повышенной концентрации идей в русском романе плоти почти не оставалось места.³⁷ That is why, by imitating the styles of Russian classical writers in the novel, Sorokin completes their creations with sexual scenes, obscenities and the depiction of physiological functions.

33 Sorokin, 2002, pp. 107–108.

34 In the novel Hitler refers to the liquid “blue lard” as “blue blood” that will save the world (Sorokin, 2002, p. 288).

35 Sorokin, 2002, p. 18.

36 “A true man of letters is not a confectioner. He is a certain user of the world, and the world consists not only of joyful, sublime, tender and comfortable things, but, with the same right—of duty, of disgusting things too.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2005, “Literator—eto ne izgotovitel’ konfet,” *Evreiskoe slovo* 14, p. 8.

37 “The Russian novel concentrated so many ideas that there was no room for the flesh.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2005, “Ot sostavitelia,” *Russkii rasskaz XX veka*, Moscow, pp. 5–8; p. 5.

The corporal connotations mentioned above, however, do not undermine the sublime nature of the “blue lard.” This substance is depicted in the novel as the embodiment of Schiller’s “ideally beautiful.” Many characters try to take possession of the “blue lard,” including Stalin and Hitler, and this is a clear metaphor for how art is used by totalitarian regimes. But while nobody really knows how the “blue lard” should and can be used, even so, all the characters suspect that it possesses colossal power. Sorokin believes: процесс комбинирования [букв] весьма загадочен. Никто не знает, что такое творчество и зачем оно. Однако обойтись без него мы пока не можем.³⁸ At the same time the writer states: Текст—очень мощное оружие. Он гипнотизирует, а иногда—просто парализует.³⁹ The fact that wonderful “blue lard” is accumulated in the bodies of monstrous clones conveys one more important idea:

Тексты и тело, которое их породило,—достаточно разные вещи. Я знаю одного тонкого поэта, который как человек—жуткий такой коммунальный монстр. [...] Поэтому благодарить Рубинштейна за то, что он породил эти тексты, для меня бессмысленно, поскольку это несознательный процесс.⁴⁰

At the end of the novel, the postmodernist cultural situation in Russia is depicted in a grotesque and estranged way: the ideally beautiful, miracle-working “blue lard” is used for vulgar and utilitarian purposes by a dull young man. His patchwork cloak, made out of 416 pieces of “blue lard,” metaphorically embodies the centonical principle of composing texts that gained popularity among postmodernist artists and is actively used in the novel itself. The frustratingly trivial picture of reality stands in clear contrast with the totalitarian epoch, terrifying but full of the hero-

38 “The process of combining [letters] is very enigmatic. Nobody knows what creativity is and what it is for. So far, however, we have been unable to live without it.” Sorokin in Neverov, 2002, p. 50.

39 “A text is a very powerful weapon. It hypnotizes and sometimes even paralyzes.” Sorokin, 1992, p. 121.

40 “Texts and the body that produced them are quite different things. I know one subtle poet who as a person is such a scary communal monster. [...] That’s why it is nonsensical for me to thank Rubinstein for generating these texts, because it’s an unconscious process.” Vladimir Sorokin & Tat’iana Voskovskaia, 1998, “Nasilie nad chelovekom—eto fenomen, kotoryi menia vseгда pritiagival...,” *Russkii zhurnal*, 3 April, <http://old.russ.ru/journal/inie/98-04-03/voskov.htm>, accessed 6 August 2012.

ism and greatness that are so aesthetically attractive to Sorokin. In the words of Petr Vail': в рваных, многожанровых, разностильных сочинениях Сорокина отчетливо видна тяга пусть к иллюзорному, но цельному бытию прежних поколений.⁴¹ In a perspicacious review of the novel, Arkadii Ippolitov wrote:

Роман «Голубое сало» — очень нежное творение, полное трепетного идеализма и голубиной веры в величие человеческого духа. [...] «Голубое сало» доказывает, что всем человечеством движет только желание обладания духовностью. Утверждать такое всегда было довольно смело, а сейчас и вообще кажется, что никто не поверит. [...] Оно [искусство] важнее идеологии и политики. Оно важнее истории, борьбы и возмездия. В мире нет ничего важнее литературы, утверждает Владимир Сорокин, и с этим нельзя не согласиться.⁴²

The tragic unattainability of the ideal

The artistic world of Vladimir Sorokin is in fact a tragic world in which the “norm” is plentiful and easy to reach, while the “blue lard” always remains a dream. This is most clearly confirmed by his novel *Roman* (*A Novel*, 1985–89) which is set at the very end of the nineteenth century—in 1898–1904.⁴³ This period of time was primarily chosen due to the author’s historiosophical concept, according to which the Russian revo-

41 “In Sorokin’s ragged, multi-genre and stylistically diverse writings a propensity towards the possibly illusory but integral existence of past generations can clearly be seen.” Petr Vail’, 1996, “Pokhval’noe slovo shtampu, ili Rodnaia krov’,” *Inostrannaia literatura* 1, pp. 232–34; p. 233.

42 “The novel *Blue Lard* is a very delicate creation, full of gentle idealism and dovelike faith in the greatness of the human spirit. [...] *Blue Lard* argues that the whole of humanity is driven only by the desire to possess spirituality. Stating such things has always been quite daring, and nowadays it seems as if nobody at all believes it. [...] It [art] is more important than ideology and politics. It is more important than history, struggle and retribution. Nothing else in the world is as important as literature, Vladimir Sorokin insists, and we cannot but agree.” Arkadii Ippolitov, 1999, “Simvolika tsveta i simbolika tela,” *Novyi mir iskusstva* 5, p. 37.

43 First noted by Ol’ga Bugoslavskaiia in her thesis: O.V. Bugoslavskaiia, 2001, “Postmodernistskii roman: printsipy literaturovedcheskoi interpretatsii: ‘Roman’ V. Sorokina i ‘Poslednii son razuma’ D. Lipskerova,” (author’s abstract of the thesis), Moscow, p. 7.

lutions were produced by classical Russian literature⁴⁴—and the first revolution shook Russia in 1905. The wooden bell into which Tat'iana, the protagonist's wife, "calls" in order to incite him into committing murders can be taken as an unambiguous reference to the newspaper *Kolokol* (*The Bell*, 1857–67), published by Aleksandr Gertsen and Nikolai Ogarev (which also explains the choice of wood as the material for the bell, since paper is made from cellulose derived from wood). In 1860 the newspaper featured the notorious *Pis'mo iz Provintsii* (*Letter from the Province*), in which a certain "Russian person" wrote—"Call on Russia to take the axe!" The novel's protagonist brings this statement to life and brutally kills all the inhabitants of Krutoi Iar, using an axe given to him by the rural paramedic Kliugin—a supporter of the revolutionary-democratic ideology.

The end of the nineteenth century is the author's favourite historic era, in his own words: Если б я мог, я бы хотел оказаться в России конца XIX века. В этом языке, с людьми, которые могут достойно выражать свои мысли и достойно вести себя. В городах, где ездят на лошадях. Где дамы красиво одеваются. Это моя эдакая личная утопия.⁴⁵ This neo-romantic period attracts Sorokin with its clear ethic and aesthetic guidelines. В те времена еще умели искренно любить были живы идеалы была сильна вера любовь к родине к родителям все то что циничный двадцатый век залил кровью и втоптал в грязь,⁴⁶ laments the autobiographical hero of *A Month in Dachau* while reading

44 Примерно в конце девятнадцатого века у нас произошла литературная революция. Литература захватила власть в этой стране. Обе русские революции, сталинский террор, а потом и перестройка—все это последствия литературной гегемонии. "Somewhere at the end of the nineteenth century, we experienced a literary revolution. Literature seized power in this country. Both Russian revolutions, Stalin's terror and after that perestroika—all of this was caused by the literary hegemony." Vladimir Sorokin in Tat'iana Voskovskaia, 2003, "Liubov' sil'nee literatury," *Konservator* 18, p. 17.

45 "If I could, I would love to be in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. In that language, with people who could express their thoughts and conduct themselves in a dignified manner. In cities where people ride on horseback. Where women dress nicely. This is my own kind of personal utopia." Vladimir Sorokin in Vladislav Gorin, 2011, "Tirannozavr leg na briukho," *Sol'* 9, pp. 88–91; p. 91.

46 "In those times people still knew how to love sincerely ideals were alive love for thy country and for one's parents was strong everything that the cynical twentieth century covered in blood and trampled into the dirt." Sorokin, 2002, p. 756.

Turgenev's *Veshnie vody* (*Torrents of Spring*, 1872).⁴⁷ In the novel *Roman*, not only the genre and stylistic canon of the classical Russian novel destroyed, so is the author's ideal—both the aesthetic and lifestyle ideal.

The tragic unattainability of the ideal forms a consistent absurd pro-plot in Sorokin's work. Novels which are as stylistically different from one another as *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983), *Serdtsa chetyrekh* (*Four Stout Hearts*, 1991) and *Metel'* (*The Snowstorm*, 2010) are united by their movement towards a target that is perpetually slipping out of reach. In the relatively optimistic *The Queue*, the protagonist achieves his subtopian idyll, obtaining a woman and special access to goods without having to queue, but in the profoundly pessimistic *The Snowstorm*, Doctor Garin's insistence on fulfilling his duty brings him the "very difficult and harsh" (очень тяжкое, суровое) fate of a disabled person.⁴⁸

The novel *Day of the Oprichnik* begins with Komiaga's dream about a white stallion that leaves him "forever more, everlastingly, irrevocably," while he needs it "like the very air."⁴⁹ This dream, a recurring story, lays bare the remainder of what is human in the soul of the protagonist, whom the totalitarian machine has transformed into a real monster. Вообще, я довольно критически настроен к нашему миру. [...] Мир создан не для счастья. Оно иногда снисходит, но редко, Sorokin once said.⁵⁰ And, in another context: Этот мир слишком тяжел. Ненадежность, иллюзорность, ни на что нельзя опереться. Разве что на смерть.⁵¹

Fleeting contact with the ideal gives Sorokin's characters a moment of supreme happiness, but in the end it invariably leads to death. In the

47 The harsh sadomasochistic context in which a well-known love story is mentioned provokes an ironic attitude to this sentence. At the TV show *Na noch' gliadia* (*Pervyi kanal*, 21 March 2012), however, Sorokin named *Torrents of Spring* as a literary piece about love that he would advise his grandson to read at the age of 15. The image of the protagonist of *A Month in Dachau* is based on the author's own identity, and that is why, in a number of the hero's phrases (not all of them are ironically defamiliarized), the author's voice can be heard.

48 Vladimir Sorokin, 2010, *Metel'*, Moscow, p. 301.

49 Навсегда уходит, [...] уходит навеки, уходит бесповоротно [...] как воздух. Vladimir Sorokin, 2006, *Den' oprichnika*, Moscow, p. 5. Eng.: Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, *Day of the Oprichnik*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York, p. 3.

50 "I have a rather critical view of our world. [...] The world was not created for happiness. It does show us mercy sometimes, but only rarely." Sorokin, 1998, p. 10.

51 "This world is too difficult. Insecurity, illusoriness, you can't rely on anything. Except for death." Sorokin in Vail' & Genis, 1992, p. 143.

short story “Avaron” from *The Feast*, Petia Lur’e meets the Divine Worm and shudders with delight.⁵² Having encountered the divine through the infernal world, the protagonist loses interest in the material world and also loses interest in life: Ужасная скорбь парализовала Петю. Цепь тянула его назад, в мертвый мир. Но Петя не хотел туда.⁵³ With the words “let it shine” (пусть сияет) the hero dies.⁵⁴

In the short story “Loshadiniy Sup” (“Horse Soup”) from *The Feast*, the “invisible food” becomes more real and important to Ol’ga than the material meal, which she believes to be burdened with “lethal severity” (смертельная тяжесть).⁵⁵ Burmistrov, nicknamed “Horse Soup” by Ol’ga, opened up the world of emptiness to her, and his murder reveals to Ol’ga the true “essence” of reality: Ей вдруг стало все видно в мире. И все было тяжелое и мертвое. [...] В голове у нее пела сухая пустота. [...] Мертвый мир обтекал Олю и расступался равнодушной тяжелой водой.⁵⁶ The inability to gain the much-desired emptiness leads the heroine to her death.⁵⁷

In *Ice Trilogy* the Heaven Ice brings death to all those who come into contact with it. Sister Khram recalls:

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- 52 In this short story Sorokin invokes the ancient tradition of depicting Satan as a worm. The most famous literary work with this imagery is Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*, 1308–21). Virgil calls Satan “the fell worm, who mines the world” (in H.W. Longfellow’s translation).
- 53 “A terrible grief paralysed Petia. A chain pulled him back, to the *dead* world. But Petya did not want to go there.” Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Avaron,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3, pp. 364–82; p. 378.
- 54 Sorokin, 2002, p. 378.
- 55 Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Loshadiniy Sup,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3, pp. 451–92; p. 477.
- 56 “Suddenly everything in the world became visible to her. And everything was heavy and lifeless. [...] Dry emptiness rang in her head. [...] The dead world flowed around Olga and parted like indifferent and dense water.” Sorokin, 2002, pp. 487–89.
- 57 In this short story Sorokin artistically explores the concept of emptiness that occupied a central place in Russian Conceptual art. «Пустое»—не временная или пространственная пауза, а бесконечно напряженное поле, содержащее в потенции все богатство разнообразных смыслов и значений»,—утверждал Андрей Монастырский. “Empty’ is not a pause in time or space, but an infinitely strained field, containing in its potency the entire wealth of diverse senses and meanings,” stated Andrei Monastyrskii. See *Slovar’ terminov moskovskoi kontseptual’noi shkoly*, 1999, compiled by A. Monastyrskii, Moscow, p. 75.

Мы работали как одержимые: ледяные молоты свистели, трещали кости, стонали и выли люди. Внизу, этажом ниже непрерывно гремели выстрелы—там добивали пустышек. Их было как всегда—99%. И только один процент составляли живые. Но сколько радости доставляли нам эти единицы из сотен!⁵⁸

At the end of *Ice Trilogy*, however, the “living” literally form a mountain of corpses—the attempt to become rays of the Primordial Light ends in the deaths of all members of the brotherhood.

In an in-depth analysis of *Ice Trilogy*, Alla Latynina drew a parallel between this work and the Hans Christian Andersen’s Romantic tale *Sneedronningen* (*The Snow Queen*, 1845):

Сердце Кая, оледенев, делается бесчеловечным, бесчувственным и равнодушным, но, оттаивая от слез Герды, обретает человеческую возможность сочувствовать, сострадать. У Сорокина наоборот: сердце пробуждается от сна и обретает способность говорить под ударами ледяного молота.⁵⁹

In *Ice Trilogy* a Gnostic neomyth is superimposed onto Romantic dualism—the world is governed by evil, but the path to the Absolute is only open to 23,000 selected beings. The cult of the “hidden life of the heart” (*sokrovennaia zhizn’ serdtsa*, Vissarion Belinskii), the juxtaposition of the taciturn “person of feelings” and the coldly rational “person of words,” the subject of the “natural person” and the escape from a corrupt civilization—all these Romantic and pre-Romantic ideas find a paradoxical embodiment in *Ice Trilogy*.

58 “We worked as though possessed: the Ice hammers whistled, bones cracked, people moaned and wailed. One floor below us shots rang out incessantly—the empties were being finished off. As always, they comprised ninety-nine percent. Only one percent remained alive. But how much joy we received from each one of a hundred!” Vladimir Sorokin, 2002, “Led,” *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3, pp. 603–814; pp. 760–61; Eng. Vladimir Sorokin, 2011, *Ice Trilogy*, transl. J. Gambrell, New York, p. 418.

59 “Having turned to ice, Kai’s heart becomes inhuman, insensitive and indifferent, but, as it is thawed by Gerda’s tears, it acquires the human ability to feel compassion and sympathy. With Sorokin it is the opposite way round—the heart wakes up from sleep and acquires the ability to talk under the blows of an ice hammer.” A.L. Latynina, 2006, “Sverkhchelovek ili neliud’?,” *Novyi mir* 4, pp. 135–42; p. 136.

A certain "belief in ideals" thus accompanies Vladimir Sorokin throughout his literary career. The opposition between the ideal and reality stands at the very foundation of his artistic world. It is hard to find a joyful description of daily life in his works. The real world is mostly seen by the author as violent, enslaving, ghastly and repulsive. The persistent aspiration to break through the material, carnal essence of the world and reach the Absolute is the inner pathos of his works of art.

As a true Romantic, Sorokin feels affinity with fantasy worlds without any borders and with awesome and horrifying phenomena. These phenomena are not natural or supernatural as in the classic Romantic tradition; they are predominantly acts of extreme violence and totalitarian ideologies that are aesthetically attractive to the author. The problematic correlation between fruitless efforts to reach the ideal and violent acts lies at the centre of the writer's creative pursuits, and this makes his post-Romantic conception unique.

The ideal, whatever disguise it assumes, embodies the ultimate values of this or that artistic reality, and it attracts Sorokin's heroes like a magnet. The story lines of *The Queue*, *Shchi (Cabbage Soup, 1995–96)*, *Four Stout Hearts*, *Blue Lard*, *Ice Trilogy*, *The Snowstorm* and many other works by Sorokin are basically a fight to take possession of the ideal. In most cases, the "inhuman beauty" of the ideal reveals itself literally, which results in the deaths of heroes and/or the triumph of violence. Thus the aspiration towards the sublime is seen by the author as ambivalent, since it can easily result in a triumph of violence and totalitarianism, whether in the form of Soviet, Nazi or sectarian ideology.

At the same time the unattainability of the ideal, or its sudden loss, is perceived by the characters and by the author himself as tragic, and this results in scenes of profound intensity in *A Month in Dachau*, *Cabbage Soup*, "Avaron," "Horse Soup," *Rosenthal's Children*, etc. And a world that is deprived of the ideal, as in the first part of *The Norm* or in *Ice Trilogy*, is depicted as utterly disgusting and repulsive.

Herein lies the tragic dilemma of Sorokin's oeuvre.