Word/Discourse in *Roman*

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<div align="right">

То самое Слово, что было у Бога,
было вовсе не на бумаге.

В. Сорокин

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Поезд дернул в тот самый момент, когда Роман опустил свой пухлый, перетянутый ремнями чемодан на мокрый перрон.[1] This first, rather standard, sentence of the first chapter of the first part of Vladimir Sorokin's *Roman* (*A Novel* or *Roman*, 1985–89) announces the arrival of the main hero—Roman Alekseevich Vospennikov—in his home village of Krutoi Iar, tucked away somewhere in rural Russia. The beginning of the narrative, though not very remarkable, nevertheless offers promise to avid readers of Sorokin's linguistic constructs. With this sentence the reader enters Russia's great literary sanctuary and carefully follows the fate of the protagonist—a disappointed city lawyer-cum-aspiring artist—in his attempt to start his life afresh. Roman abandons the literariness of the law and enters the field of the visual arts, a field of immense possibility; he leaves the confining urban space of the capital and enters the vast and open rural landscape of the periphery.

This transformation is rather rewarding for the hero: after experiencing complete disillusionment with Zoia Krasnovskaia, an old flame, he regains proximity to his nation and land through lengthy conversations with and exposure to his loving aunt and uncle, the benevolent village priest Father Agafon, the humble intellectual Rukavitinov, the nihilist

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1   "The train jolted at the very same moment Roman lowered his plump, strapped suitcase onto the wet platform." Vladimir Sorokin, 2000, *Roman*, Moscow, p. 9. All further citations from the work will come from this edition and appear parenthetically within the body of the text. Translations are mine.

and misanthrope Kliugin, the grumpy gamekeeper and retired officer Kunitsyn, and the simple folk of Krutoi Iar. The pinnacle of the hero's ultimate conversion takes place when he encounters Tat'iana—an orphaned pure Slavic beauty whom Roman first meets in the village church during the Easter service. The two fall in love in a nanosecond, and the second half of the novel depicts Roman's dramatic proposal, the hastily organized engagement party and a jolly Russian wedding. As anticipated, however, Sorokin does not conclude his novel with the fairytale-like "and they lived happily ever after," and *Roman* undergoes a drastic transformation in the course of the remaining 100 pages, when the two protagonists start slaughtering every inhabitant of the village, including their own families.

The double move of "affirmative" disintegration or creative violence at the end of *Roman* can be interpreted as a ritualistic practice of (self-)*exorcism*. The phenomenon of exorcism, defined as "[t]he action of exorcizing or expelling an evil spirit by adjuration or the performance of certain rites" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, henceforth OED), permeates the text of the novel. At the same time, the phenomenon of ritual is significant in relation to the novel—many critics noted Sorokin's obsessive savouring of various ritualistic aspects of Soviet everyday life.[2] Roman, the main hero, expels the evil spirit of the classical Russian novel, and the pinnacle of this expulsion is his act of self-annihilation, which takes place in the very last sentence of *Roman*.

However, in a truly poststructuralist fashion, exorcism is also defined as "[t]he action of calling up spirits; the ceremonies observed for that purpose; conjuration" (OED, my italics). The gesture of expulsion presupposes initial gathering and the two contradictory actions, moving in opposite directions, stretch out and obliterate the novel itself and its characters. Moreover, the word is also used as a noun—"[a]n imprecatory oath" (OED)—for exorcism derives from Greek ἐξορκισμός (*exorkismós*—"binding by oath"), and it can be naturally used as a designation of Sorokin's "uneasy," dysfunctional but still rather affectionate relationship with his great Russian nineteenth-century literary precursors

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2 For Lipovetsky, for instance, the formal ritualistic quality (seamless narration followed by a violent rupture) is present in combination with the overtly ritual actions of Sorokin's heroes. Mark Lipovetskii, 2008, *Paralogii: transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov*, Moscow, p. 251.

(Goncharov, Turgenev, Tolstoy). The writer banishes the tradition and at the same time binds himself to it, or, in other words, he *exorcizes* and simultaneously *exercises* the mode of classical novelistic writing.[3]

Normal'nyi 'Roman'

Sorokin's thick novel (*tolstyi roman*) *Roman* is one of the most daring textual experiments to emerge from the late Soviet period. Written over the course of four years, from 1985 to 1989, it was crafted as a microcosmic vision of the great nineteenth-century Russian novel. The "archaic" textual bubble is meticulously blown and then violently, though with a preserved sense of style, punctured at the end of *Roman*. In Derrida's words from "La question du style," style always comprises "the question of a pointed object. Sometimes only a pen, but just as well a stylet, or even a dagger."[4] Without any hesitation Sorokin tenderly plunges his dagger into the obese body of the classical Russian novel, and zealously twists the handle in the course of 625 pages (in the 2000 edition). The result is the ultimate death of the protagonist and the genre—Roman merges with *Roman*, the novel, and enters the realm of non-existence.

The text in question is not an absolutely unique experiment, since it is conceptually and anagrammatically linked with Sorokin's *Norma* (*The Norm*, written 1979–83). They were both first published in Russia in 1994, and the covers of the books were absolutely identical—the capitalized titles in white are devoured by a minimalist and distressing black background. The two texts, one could argue, comprise textual funeral rites with obvious sacrificial elements. They celebrate, disrupt, violate, slaughter and bury the two prevailing genres that shaped the aesthetic horizon of every Russian/Soviet writer of the late twentieth century: the great nineteenth-century Russian aristocratic novel and the disastrous socialist realist experiment of the Bolsheviks. Sorokin liberates himself from the unbearable force of these two centres of gravity—one inherited and the other acquired/imposed.

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3   During his residency at Stanford, Vladimir Sorokin confessed that he had a bookshelf full of the Russian classics in his house in Vnukovo, and from time to time he literally leans/relies (*opiraetsia*) on them.

4   Jacques Derrida, 1977, "The Question of Style," *The New Nietzsche*, ed. D. Allison, transl. B. Harlow, New York, pp. 176–89; p. 176.

Unlike *The Norm*, which is a heterogeneous generic amalgam consisting of an experimental novella, short stories, poems and songs, *Roman* comprises an integral textual exercise, at least at first glance. The impatient reader dwells in the world of the great Russian nineteenth-century novel in the course of no less than 500 pages. Characters meticulously practise every activity from the list of favourite Russian pastimes: vodka-drinking, mushroom-picking, fist-fighting, steam-bathing, church-going, bird-hunting, fish-fishing, hay-cutting, God-is-dead debating, etc. A number of other clichés, such as Russian roulette with Tat'iana's stepfather, who initially objects to the youngsters' amorous union, the prominent and persistent appearance of the main heroine's pet—a bear cub, Roman saving an icon of the Mother of God from a burning peasant hut, even the hero killing a wolf with his bare hands, are scattered like precious jewels throughout the text. The excessive novelistic style is served to the reader as a luscious meal which risks presenting a challenge to the literary gastrointestinal tract; it is an extreme celebration of excess. Five hundred pages of introduction and waiting is just too great a challenge for the reader.

Henry James famously referred to several lengthy nineteenth-century opuses, among them the great Russian novel *Peace and War* [sic], as having life, but then he asks: "what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically *mean*?"[5] Sorokin appears to share this justified concern with his American colleague. The monstrosity of the Russian novel is redeemed through the process of inversion and deformation in *Roman*. James's unconscious slip (from *Voina i mir* [*War and Peace*] to *Peace and War*) is developed into an overly conscious artistic device for Sorokin. Accidental and arbitrary aspects of the life-like novelistic narrative are bracketed by means of a meticulously crafted conceptual construct. As a result, the monstrous discourse of the great Russian novel is loosened, but only in order to get immediately caught in its own graphomaniac trap, and then to be violently slaughtered and put into a body bag.

The conceptual transformation of the text—its death—takes place before the reader's eyes, while the process of reading (the ultimate passage of time, a movement towards death) is itself embedded in the novel. The reader's experience of reading the textual prelude to the conceptual rup-

5   Henry James, 1984, *The Art of the Novel*, Boston, Mass., p. 84, emphasis in the original.

ture becomes a task of endurance. In Boris Groys' words, hermeneutics is "replaced by an algorithm of reading" and understanding "is attained by means of the effort it takes to turn the page."[6] The 500 pages of the "normal" part of *Roman* are not only a test for the reader's patience and diligence, they re-enact every possible literary truism and stand as the ultimate burial stone on the grave of the Russian novel.

In this sense, the abundant narrative prelude of *Roman* can be seen as a novelistic/textual equivalent to Ilya Kabakov's album performances. The artist "enacted" his albums, which consisted of images and texts, for a close circle of friends who would gather in his apartment. The key to those performances, which lasted for hours, was the very process of turning pages and the monotonous and absolutely neutral voice of the artist, focusing on the banal and marginal details of the lives of his fictional heroes. As Kabakov notes: [листание альбома] находится в промежутке между бытом, стуком часов и «ничем».[7] The visual constituent of the albums, in turn, was dominated by "empty" white backgrounds—bare semantic fields. These very aspects push the album readings into the domain of religious vigil: they comprise a certain kind of rite, which anticipates, though in vain, a manifestation of the divine presence.

This ritualistic quality unites Kabakov's artistic performance and Sorokin's 500-page written construct. The overbearing narrative presence in both cases gradually creates a distance in relation to narrated events, and culminates in a total metaphysical absence (there is no conventional climax and nothing edifying takes place). Duration, dwelling in time, takes the place of action and progression, and the reader-viewer is invited or even forced to enter the field of blankness and stay there for a prolonged amount of time.[8]

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6   Boris Groys, 2010, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, Cambridge, Mass., p. 42.

7   The action of leafing through an album "is located in the interval between everydayness, the ticking of the clock, and 'nothing'." Il'ia Kabakov, 2010, *Teksty*, Vologda, p. 419.

8   This mode of interpretation also echoes the practices of Andrei Monastyrskii's "Kollektivnye deistviia" (Collective Actions), a late Soviet performance collective, which propagated the notion of "empty action." The essence of "empty action" does not lie in its actual content or final resolution but in the process of waiting itself. An "empty action" is supposed to envelop the participant by turning him/her into a co-creator (the reader becomes an observer).

The excessive narrative of *Roman* creates a space of emptiness where the multiplicity of signifiers is transformed into verbiage, with the absent signified. The pages of the novel gradually turn into pulp fiction or even *makulatura* (paper for recycling). This conversion, in turn, motivates the reader to take the position of a mere observer-recycler. Overproduction of verbal matter is dealt with in the most violent fashion. Thus, Sorokin seems to practise the genre of theoretical fiction: in a paradoxical manner, the novel challenges the very text it produces. Meaning is constructed in a frontier space of affirmative fiction (literature) and antagonistic reality (criticism and the process of deconstruction). The resulting "symbiosis" creates and disrupts the *sredne-russkii* (mediocre/central Russian) *Roman*/novel.[9]

Due to this "dialectic" tension between affirmative and critical forces, the narrative of the novel gradually begins to show some flaws and cracks. As soon as Roman proposes to Tat'iana, the attentive reader notices that some stylistic changes start to infiltrate the story. The overwhelmed, emotional and verbose relatives are "counterbalanced" by the young lovers, who are hovering above the earth supported by the newly acquired but already brawny wings of sweet love. Tat'iana repeats her striking я жива тобой[10] eighteen times while Roman engulfs his wife-to-be. A jolly Russian wedding—some kind of extremist form of *lubok*—celebrates the amorous union in great excess across more than 100 pages. Every member of the 42 Krutoi Iar households and even the homeless local holy fool Paramosha Durolom are invited to sing a Russian version of hymenaios. An enormous sturgeon, roasted pigs, pancakes with caviar, an assortment of pickles, a giant wedding cake and various pies and jams decorate the festive table. Through his characters Sorokin carefully enlists 10 different techniques for eating pancakes and the guests are invited to drink in honour of the Russian samovar. The great nineteenth-century Russian novel starts exploding from within through the seemingly blatant use of familiar tropes and clichéd narrative developments: it swells like a tu-

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9   As Sorokin suggests: В этом романе действие происходит не во времени, а в пространстве русского романа. "The action of this novel does not take place in time but in the space of the Russian novel." Vladimir Sorokin, 1996, "Literatura ili kladbishche stilisticheskikh nahodok," *Postmodernisty o postkul'ture: interv'iu s sovremennymi pisateliami i kritikami*," ed. S. Roll, Moscow, pp. 119–130, p. 126.

10   "I live by you."

mour, leaving the writer with no other choice than to cut it out from the exhausted and sick body of Russian literature.

Speak, violence

After the 500-page test of the reader's endurance, the trademark Sorokin "shifting gears" device nevertheless appears, however delayed its emergence. The content overwhelms the conventions of the genre: the protagonists are finally liberated from the constraints of the Russian classical novel and the reader witnesses a breathtaking shift. The lack of original action during the first 500 pages is redeemed with quite severe overkill (both literally and metaphorically) in the final pages. The rupture is motivated by two unusual wedding gifts: a wooden bell, which Durolom finds in a holy man's cave, and an axe, Kliugin's gift, with an inscription Замахнулся—руби![11] It seems as if the writer takes the latter inscription too literally when he makes the newlywed couple slaughter all the inhabitants of Krutoi Iar. The protagonists perform somewhat of a black ritual: Tat'iana rings the wooden bell, while remaining hidden or simply staying outside, and Roman methodically takes the lives of his victims with the axe. The two celebrate their matrimonial union—the marriage is consummated through the bloody act of murder. The verbose narrative of the idyllic Russian countryside, in turn, collapses under the weight of its own linguistic excessiveness.

The absurd massacre is initially given a careful and detailed treatment, such as with the depiction of the death of Roman's uncle, Anton Petrovich Vospennikov—the first victim: Кровь хлынула из страшной раны, наискосок пересекающей лицо, разрубленная и вывороченная челюсть тряслась, из открытого рта слышались клокочущие звуки.[12] But the narrative acquires a repetitive ritualistic flair after Roman and Tat'iana slay every relative in their own house and start going from house to house in order to impose their senseless violence on the unsuspecting dwellers of the Russian countryside. Terse sentences, not overburdened with subordinate clauses, merge in extensive paragraphs

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11 "If you raise the axe, let it fall!"

12 "Blood gushed from the horrid wound, which cut obliquely across the face. The severed and wrenched jaw shivered, and bubbling sounds could be heard from the open mouth." Sorokin, 2000, p. 503.

and almost mechanically, in a log sheet manner, provide details of more than 200 murders.

Once Roman has taken the lives of 247 people, he celebrates the massacre by performing what resembles a "black mass" inside the village church. The protagonist takes the intestines from the 42 heads of the peasant households to the church, puts them on the floor and then puts bricks from their huts' stoves on top of them, followed by the severed heads of the peasants. Even more bizarre details are to come: Roman cuts out the testicles of his uncle, Tat'iana's father, Krasnovskii, Rukavitinov, Kliugin, Father Agofon, and the latter's guests (the *crème de la crème* of Krutoi Iar—its gentry) and puts them side by side on the floor of the church. He then removes the Christian regalia from the altar and arranges the heads of the peasants (in rows of four) on the communion table, thus creating a form of audience for his sacrilegious performance. He then takes out a baptismal font from the locked storage area, places bits of the collected bricks in it and mixes them with the testicles of the gentry. This is followed by a remarkable passage in which Roman decorates an iconostasis with the intestines of his victims:

> Роман положил топор на Евангелие. Татьяна трясла колокольчиком. Роман вышел из алтаря в придел. Роман взял кишки Николая Егорова и повесил их на икону «Святой великомученик Пантелеймон». Роман взял кишки Федора Косорукова и повесил их на икону «Рождество Иоанна Предтечи». Роман взял кишки Степана Чернова и повесил их на икону «Параскева Пятница, с житием». Роман взял кишки Саввы Ермолаева и повесил их на икону «Почаевская Божья Матерь». Роман взял кишки Петра Егорова и повесил их на икону «Иоанн Богослов».[13]

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13 "Roman put the axe on the Bible. Tat'iana jingled the bell. Roman emerged from the altar and entered a side chapel. Roman took the intestines of Nikolai Egorov and hung them on the 'Great Martyr St Pantheleimon' icon. Roman took the intestines of Fedor Kosorukov and hung them on the 'Nativity of St John the Baptist' icon. Roman took the intestines of Stepan Chernov and hung them on the 'Holy Life of St Parascheva Friday' icon. Roman took the intestines of Savva Ermolaev and hung them on the 'Pochaev Mother of God' icon. Roman took the intestines of Petr Egorov and hung them on the 'St John the Baptist' icon." Sorokin, 2000, p. 600.

The stylized ritual continues with graphic violence and now turns against Tat'iana: Roman cuts open her belly and inserts the wooden bell, which the woman incessantly rang during the murders. The narrative then dispassionately registers how the main hero beheads his new wife at the edge of the baptismal font, pours her blood into it and then stirs the contents with her legs, which he has already cut off. The end product of this process—the blend of bits of brick, testicles and Tat'iana's blood—is used by Roman to paint over the Iversk Mother of God icon with his wife's severed hand. This disproportionately violent narrative culminates ultimately in Roman cutting the woman's body into a pulp, eating parts of it and then eating and playing with his own secretions (excrement, urine, vomit and sperm).

The "black mass," in fact, mirrors the Easter service at the beginning of the novel. *Roman* starts with the arrival of the main hero in his home village right at the beginning of Holy Week, which begins with the Sunday of the Passion of Our Lord. Roman, who is approaching his 33rd birthday, strictly observes the Orthodox conventions, abstains from eating meat during his first family breakfast and orders his painting materials to be delivered after the religious holiday. The Easter service "converts" Roman, and the beginning of the novel already acknowledges this transformation: the hero regains his faith during the sacred communion, when he lights his candle from the same flames as his wife-to-be. At the same time, the beginning also announces the Russian novel's Passion—its 625-page-long ordeals. Unlike Christ, however, it is not resurrected at the end—it dies and vanishes without a single hint of resurgence. Sorokin enacts the Passion of the novel for the reader, and Roman's bizarre sacrilegious ritual in the church, depicted by means of gradually disintegrating language, is its pinnacle.

Thus, the depicted profanity at the end of *Roman* is impotent, for its excessiveness results in emptiness. The extreme violence loses its potential to impact on the reader because of its linguistic incapacity. The number of finite clauses dramatically decreases and the ending of the novel (the last six pages) is formed by simple sentences consisting of single independent clauses. The sole subject (Roman) is paired with several predicates (verbs in the simple past), which are periodically repeated. The ending itself reads: Роман качнул. Роман пошевелил. Роман дернулся. Роман за-

стонал. Роман пошевелил. Роман вздрогнул. Роман дернулся. Роман пошевелил. Роман дернулся. Роман умер.[14]

Death is the ultimate, singular, unrepeated event which concludes the novel. The intransitive verb "to die" is inscribed and presented in its finalizing (past simple) glory. However, the ending still follows the looped format of the text: it sends the reader back to the novel's prologue, which opens with a sentence addressing the very same notion of death, and it is related to the main hero of *Roman*—Roman Alekseevich Vospennikov. This time, however, death is aestheticized in a rather kitschy, outdated fashion by means of complex sentences with an abundant presence of multiple subordinate clauses. The very first sentence of the prologue reads: Нет на свете ничего прекрасней заросшего русского кладбища на краю небольшой деревни.[15] The opening is followed by a succulent verbal *paysage* (a linguistic *étude*—an equivalent to the main character's visual studies of the Russian landscape) which includes a description of various plants and birds characteristic of the Central Russian landscape. The prologue concludes with yellow bunting hanging on a sepulchral cross whose only inscription remains visible—ROMAN.[16] The capitalized first name of the hero is merged with the genre accommodating his literary fate. The double death manifests itself on the opening pages—the premonition of the violent end is almost too salient.

Maurice Blanchot's dictum, "writing so as not to die," inspired Michel Foucault to meditate on the interconnection between language and death. In his essay "Le langage à l'infini" (Language to infinity), the critic suggests: "Headed toward death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power—that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits."[17] That is, a process of incessant multiplication—an eternal postponement of the ultimate end—lies at the

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14 "Roman swayed. Roman stirred. Roman twitched. Roman moaned. Roman stirred. Roman shivered. Roman twitched. Roman stirred. Roman twitched. Roman died." Sorokin, 2000, p. 625.

15 "There is nothing more wonderful than an overgrown Russian cemetery on the edge of a small village." Sorokin, 2000, p. 1.

16 Sorokin, 2000, p. 7.

17 Michel Foucault, 1998, "Language to Infinity," *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, transl. D. Bouchard & S. Simon, New York, pp. 89–101; p. 90.

heart of linguistic production. Writing—as language leaving "a trace of its passage"[18]—is a continuous echo resounding in the valley of death. Thus, the existential fear of death is substituted by a linguistic fascination with death.

Foucault was enthralled by the works of Marquis de Sade, with his late eighteenth-century tales of terror that reflect the deadly essence of language and which, according to the philosopher, gave birth to literature as we know it. These voices of violence, which were not meant to be taken at their face value, set and at the same time constantly transgress a certain limit: "they deny themselves the space of their language—but by confiscating it in a gesture of repetitive appropriation; and they evade not only their meaning […] but their possible being […]."[19] Thus, the passage of the "murmuring linguistic stream" manifests only and always the ultimate absence. That is why Roman and the great Russian aristocratic novel have to die at the end of *Roman*. The protagonist and the genre erase themselves in their writing through excessiveness combined with deficiency, and are denied the space of their language: they enter the realm of the unspeakable while their (self-)destructive potential is realized by means of death.

The first 500 pages of Sorokin's novel, where the *naïveté* of the anachronistic novelistic voice gains its full manifestation, find their precursor in the long narratives of those novels of terror which also aspired to be "as gray as possible":[20] their language "erased itself between the things it said and the person to whom it spoke, […]."[21] However, the ending—the violence which leads to an abyss, non-existence, death—is an interplay of reflections, infinity presented in the mirror of language. The simple sentences of the ending of *Roman* are reflected in each other. Incessant repetitions allow the writer to achieve the unachievable: the ultimate silence of the genre by means of practising it. Thus, the paradox of Sorokin's text emerges in its full glory: language's excessiveness (constant multiplication) and deficiency (ceaseless self-deconstruction) cancel out the possibility of halting and acquiring a resting place.

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18   Foucault, 1998, p. 90.

19   Foucault, 1998, pp. 96–97.

20   Foucault, 1998, p. 97.

21   Foucault, 1998, p. 97.

'Roman' with a typewriter

The text of *Roman* is a construct which has to be contemplated in its full conceptual glory from a safe distance. The apparent artificiality (*sdelannost'*) of the novel is its inherent aesthetic quality, which manifests itself through the content by means of the deathly linguistic reflections. Moreover, the formal aspects also play a crucial role in dismantling the genre of the Russian aristocratic novel. The process of the composition of *Roman* was highlighted by several conscious conceptual moves, which invite a reading through the prism of media theory. The handwritten manuscript of the novel was supplemented by a typewritten ending, and the given mediatic "discrepancy" has profound semantic consequences which reflect the development of the novelistic genre in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

According to the writer's own account, his texts were typically handwritten, and the use of a typewriter, however rare it may have been, was always a conceptual move. It should be noted that the discussed mediatic shift (from hand to hand on a typewriter) is not a quality exclusive to *Roman*, and had already practised in *The Norm* (the second part of which was typewritten) and *Tridtsataia Liubov' Mariny* (*Marina's Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84, the Pravda-newspaper-stream-of-consciousness ending of which, as in *Roman*, was typewritten). Moreover, *Ochered'* (*The Queue*, 1983, published 1985), Sorokin's very first published novel, was fully typewritten, and this allows one to classify this experimental text as belonging to the realm of visual-textual conceptual art.[22] Finally, it should be highlighted that the first computer text is *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999) (where the trope of cloning—some kind of version of the cut-and-paste technique—functions as a structure-generating device).

The case of *Roman*, however, remains quite unique. Sorokin acknowledged[23] that the handwritten manuscript (Notebook #6) of the novel ends after the murder of Avdot'ia Tverdokhlebova with the sentence: Роман взял Татьяну за руку и они сошли с крыльца.[24] The choice of the end of the handwritten manu(al)script and the beginning of the type(d)script

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22 It should be noted that Sorokin started his conceptualist career as Erik Bulatov's pupil and worked as a book illustrator for an extended period of time.

23 Vladimir Sorokin, in an e-mail to Nariman Skakov from 2012.

24 "Roman took Tat'iana by the hand and they came down from the porch." Sorokin, 2000, p. 558.

was motivated by a simple material aspect of the creative process: it was the very end of the notebook. However material this pretext was, the semantic consequences it prompts are of essential importance.

By switching from the process of manual (hands-on) production of writing to the use of a mechanical prosthesis (a typewriter), Sorokin achieves some necessary distance from the text of his novel. By doing this, he, consciously or unconsciously, refers to the dramatic shift which took place towards the end of the nineteenth century—a century of great thick novels—during which the dominion of the written word was challenged throughout Europe and America by the introduction of new media technologies. Typewriters radically shifted the perception of writing from that of the singular, subjective and exclusive expression of a literate, usually male, individual (a continuous flow of personality) to that of a sequence of objective and mechanically reproduced signifiers, imprinted by a typically female[25] assistant (a neutral field). The material basis of literature was inverted by the typewriter. The machine exaggerates the materiality of writing, which "no longer lends itself to metaphysical soul building."[26]

At the same time the typewriter solidified the concept of authorship: it gave birth to creators, not writers, of texts. As Friedrich Kittler suggests in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*: "Impassioned bodies cede to yearning souls, nameless desires communicated by an anonymous text make way for the spirit of authorship, and manuscripts to be read aloud in the company of others are replaced by printed books to be devoured in solitary silence: […]."[27] "Spiritual intimacy" was achieved only when the "sinful" body was distanced by means of technical mediation and the writer's earthly labour was abandoned for the idea of authorial stardom.

Two great philosophers—Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger—who nurtured the deconstructive project of the twentieth century, which, in turn, nurtured Sorokin's artistic practice, envisaged this mediatic shift. Moreover, the two had very involved relationships with typewriters. Nietzsche's connection with his machine—Rasmus Malling-Hansen's writing ball which he received in 1882 directly from the in-

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25   The English word meant both typing machine and female typist.

26   Friedrich A. Kittler, 1999, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, transl. G. Winthrop-Young & M. Wutz, Stanford, Cal., p. xxviii.

27   Kittler, 1999, p. xxiii.

ventor—was clearly expressed in a dutifully typed passage: "Unser Schreibzeug arbeitet mit an unseren Gedanken." ("Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts, […]."[28]) The philosopher acknowledged the media's ability to shape one's philosophic or artistic production, and it made him laconic. The change was rather drastic: "from arguments to aphorisms, from thoughts to puns, from rhetoric to telegram style."[29]

Heidegger—the second assassin of Western metaphysics—also cared about the mediality in which he proceeded, though he fervently resisted any progress in technical media. The philosopher provides a set of passionate thoughts on the phenomenon of the typewriter in his lecture course on Parmenides. He starts off with two features which distinguish a human being ("man") from the rest—the hand and the possession of the word:

> Man himself acts [*handelt*] through the hand [*Hand*]; for the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man. Only a being which, like man, 'has' the word (μύθος, λόγος), can and must 'have' 'the hand'. Through the hand occur both prayer and murder, greeting and thanks, oath and signal, and also the 'work' of the hand, the 'hand-work', and the tool.[30]

The hand is a uniquely and essentially human body part. Bonding and violence both originate in the possession of the hand for the philosopher. He continues the argument by classifying the process of handwriting as an essential component of "man's" existence:

> The hand sprang forth only out of the word and together with the word. Man does not 'have' hands, but the hand holds the essence of man, because the word as the essential realm of the hand is the ground of the essence of man. The word as what is inscribed and what appears to the regard is the written word, i.e., script. And the word as script is handwriting.[31]

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28 Kittler, 1999, p. 200.

29 Kittler, 1999, p. 203.

30 Martin Heidegger, 1998, *Parmenides*, transl. A. Schuwer *&* R. Rojcewicz, Bloomington, Ind., p. 80.

31 Heidegger, 1998, p. 80.

Thus the introduction of a prosthetic machine into the process of writing alienates "the modern man," for it creates a distance from the intimate process of inscription and results in the ultimate destruction of the word: "The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something 'typed'."[32] The machine creates an undistinguished standardized text devoid of any physical or metaphysical individuality—it creates a field of uniformity. Roman seems to follow the philosopher's concern when he literally uses Tat'iana's severed hand to paint over the Iversk Mother of God icon during his "black mass": the degenerated protagonist uses his dead wife's hand to reject his human essence. Heidegger's argument and the "black mass" scene can be further illuminated though the multiple semantic layers that surround the word "imprint." The typewriter produces imprints, and an imprint is a trace of writing in two senses: as a surrogate writing (an imprint) and as a process of writing by means of imprinting (when one of the machine's keys is depressed, it imprints a corresponding character on a moving sheet).

The process of the composition of *Roman*, dutifully, though with a hint of contradiction, pays respect to the German philosophers' (incompatible) thoughts about their mechanical devices or their absence. The writing tool of the typewriter does perform some work on *Roman*'s discourse: it violently pushes it in a destructive direction where it annihilates itself. Here Heidegger's possession *of the word* turns into Sorokin's possession *by the word* at the end of his novel—the created artefact consumes itself. It should not be forgotten that typewriter, in its English slang use, stands for a machine-gun (OED), and the Russian writer willingly appropriates this weapon for his arsenal, allowing his protagonist to machine-gun every character in the novel before his own act of ultimate disintegration followed by death.

The at once conventional and avant-garde text of *Roman* can also be read through the prism of Mikhail Bakhtin's influential essay "Slovo v romane" ("Discourse in the Novel," 1981). In one passage often quoted, Bakhtin suggests: "The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. In it the investigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different lin-

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32   Heidegger, 1998, p .81.

guistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls."[33] The novel hous-
es multiple forms of oral everyday linguistic practices along with purely
literary discourses appropriated by the writer, which he or she merges
into a "heterogeneous stylistic union."

This heterogeneous aspect of the novelistic genre is reduced by
Sorokin to a single authoritative construct. He challenges the hegemony
of the classical Russian novelistic word/discourse, which underwent a
process of monologization in the twentieth century, and shatters it at the
end of *Roman*. The polyphonic novel is treated by the writer as a mon-
ster—a textual Frankenstein—which has to be brought to life only in
order to be slaughtered.[34] The reader observes a process of stylization, for
Sorokin imitates a novelistic voice, which itself imitates various speech
practices found in a living language. This stylization of stylization creates
a semantic vacuum, and the word/discourse in *Roman* loses its inherent
metaphysical value and turns into verbal garbage.[35]

Sorokin elegantly, though with a hint of sadism, confronts the vio-
lent nature of the authoritative word of the "Great Russian Literature."
The sacred and life-affirming *lógos* of Bakhtin is transformed into verbi-
age, while the human "appearance" of the word/discourse gets lost (the
speaking voice/subject is removed) and is converted into an almost sterile
device. The ending of the novel is no one's speech—it is an anonymous
log sheet. *Lógos* is deprived of its producer-source—the central subject of
speech, it is orphaned. The end of the novel, with its template-like non-

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33 Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Es-
    says*, transl. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Austin, Tex., pp. 259–422; p. 261.

34 Cf. Lipovetsky's observation: Многоязычие—это тот бульон, в котором распада-
    ются традиционные формы мысли и зачинаются неведомые прежде гибриды,
    из которых могут вырасти монстры, но могут образоваться и такие мутации,
    которые будут наследоваться в поколениях. ("Heteroglossia is the very broth in
    which traditional forms of thought disintegrate and previously unknown hybrids are
    conceived. The latter can give birth to monsters but also to certain mutations, which
    will be inherited by generations to come.") Lipovetskii, 2008, p. 450, emphasis in the
    original.

35 The process of deconstruction of the polyphonic novel was initiated in *The Queue*—a
    text which, according to the writer, does not explore the socialist phenomenon of the
    queue but which evolves into носитель специфической речевой практики, как
    внелитературный полифонический монстр ("a carrier of a specific verbal prac-
    tice, as a beyond-literary polyphonic monster"). Vladimir Sorokin, 1992, "Tekst kak
    narkotik," *Rasskazy*, Moscow, pp. 119–126; p. 121.

sensical but brutal violence, is a telling illustration of this transformation. Roman is devoured by *Roman* (the novel) and the two cease to be.[36]

Index of 'Roman'

There is, however, an almost too transparently deconstructivist addendum to the text of Sorokin's novel—a supplement in the form of an index. This appendix is somewhat archaically and inappropriately politely called «Список убиенных Романом Алексеевичем Воспенниковым» ("The list of victims slaughtered by Roman Alekseevich Vospennikov"). It subjoins itself to the main text of *Roman*, thus intensifying its deathly connotations. The writer carefully enumerates the 247 victims of the Krutoi Iar massacre—with given names, patronymics (only in the case of gentry) and surnames—in the order they were slaughtered. Pedantically chronological, the list dispassionately maps out 42 village households, which are connected by brackets, with the names of their heads underlined. Sorokin reveals the systematic order that shapes the violent ending of the novel by creating this detailed register. Moreover, this very order allows the uncontrollable disorder of Roman's violence to emerge. Thus, the narrative chaos is achieved by pedantically systematic means.

It should be noted that the index is inaccessible to the reader, for it is a secret supplement—the writer never made it public. "The list of victims slaughtered by Roman Alekseevich Vospennikov" is a private register to mourn the death of the literary genre and the fictional victims, who were sacrificed in the name of an unidentified ideal. Sorokin undermines the public domain of the novel by means of this private gesture—he makes the death of the great Russian novel his personal and intimate affair.

The list itself raises several major philosophical questions: from the nature of fictional names to the nature of identity. Despite the fact that proper names provide concreteness and definiteness, some philoso-

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36 Cf. Sorokin's comment: 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. ("Some time ago, in the novel *Roman*, I collided two styles, as if they were two monsters, so they would devour each other and release the energy of annihilation, which I tremendously enjoyed.") Vladimir Sorokin, 2005, "Mea culpa?: ia nedostatochno izvrashchen dlia podobnykh eksperimentov," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 14 April 2005, p. 5.

phers, such as Paul Ziff,[37] suggest that names do not have meaning as such—they do not belong to language. Sorokin's index to *Roman* also reaches beyond linguistic boundaries—the mourning list of the subjects of violence, in all its detailed glory, represents the ultimate silence. The victims are presented as statistics—a kind of textual memorial—against the background of the novelistic genre.

The list also provides a rather unexpected connection with an actual historical massacre which resulted in the creation of a real mourning list. Ivan the Terrible's mass murder through the hands of his oprichniki culminated in a rather theatrical and carnivalesque gesture of repentance. Before his death, in 1582, Ivan tried "to save the souls of those he had dispatched unshriven to their deaths."[38] The "Sinodik," or "Memorial Lists of the Executed," was compiled by the tsar's chancery and sent along with large sums of money to monasteries for prayers for the victims' souls. According to Skrynnikov,[39] the chancery list recorded the disgraced in chronological order, that is, in the order they were mentioned at the trials. Around 3,300 individuals, including the many "whose names were known only to God,"[40] entered the commemorative books. Some 2,060 of them were only numerically indicated, without any biographical details or even names, indicating that most of them belonged to the lower strata of society. The remaining 1,240 individuals comprise the ultimate list of those who perished during the period of the oprichnina executions and whose names it had previously been strictly forbidden to mention.

According to Stepan Veselovskii,[41] Ivan acknowledged the right of the executed to have the support of patron-saints on Judgment Day—the memorial lists offered hope of Christian salvation. This was a merciful gesture, which followed the unmerciful execution. However, as Isabel de Madariaga puts it, the lists "relieved the dead more than the living,"[42] for the tsar did not release his many living prisoners from their jails. The car-

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37 Paul Ziff, 1966, *Philosophical Turnings: Essays in Conceptual Appreciation*, Ithaca, New York

38 Isabel de Madariaga, 2005, *Ivan the Terrible: First Tsar of Russia*, New Haven, Conn., p. 351.

39 Ruslan Skrynnikov, 1981, *Ivan the Terrible*, transl. H. F. Graham, Gulf Breeze, Flor., p. 111.

40 Stepan Veselovskii, 1963, *Issledovaniia po istorii oprichniny*, Moscow, p. 477.

41 Veselovskii, 1963, p. 340.

42 Madariaga, 2005, p. 351.

nivalesque aspect of this rather extravagant project was exacerbated by the fact that Ivan used what remained of the possessions of those he had executed (*opal'naia rukhliad'*)[43] to pay for their own memorial service.

Sorokin's list imitates Ivan the Terrible's "Sinodik" in its double gesture: it laments certain victims of mass genocide whom they killed with their own hands (practically in the tsar's case and fictionally in the writer's case). The slaughter prompts a prolonged act of mourning: the lists carefully enumerate those who are no longer living. This results in a gesture of banishment: the word *oprichnina* is taken out of the Russian lexicon by Ivan's decree (it was forbidden on pain of death to use the word), and the genre of novel (*roman*) is pronounced dead by Sorokin. One should remember, however, that the names in the "Sinodik" are real—they were written down in order to be remembered and mourned, for the after-lives of their bearers are at stake. Sorokin's list of the fictional names, though it meticulously records 247 combinations of proper names, does not provide an excuse for bereavement. The fictional violence aimed at the genre is, in fact, celebrated by the author.

At the same time, reality also gradually gains fictional attributes in the case of the "Sinodik": the real names endure the process of erasure. The mourning lists, rolled into manuscripts, were used during services on a daily basis and hence they aged very quickly. This required a process of constant rewriting, which, in turn, inevitably led to corruption—monks censored cruel depictions of executions, and removed nicknames and non-Christian names. The list gradually but radically divorced itself from reality and entered the domain of fiction.

The real historical name was actually the subject of literary debate in Russia in the seventeenth century. According to Likhachev, early writers challenged a century-old assumption that the existence of a work of literature is legitimized by the fact that it depicts something real and historically significant.[44] The ambition to create a purely fictional work was equal to acknowledging a wish to be in the domain of falsehood. The way out was to depict an everyday "man"—an Ivan—devoid of any historical or spiritual splendour, and openly acknowledge his fictionality. The initial dwelling-places of this Ivan were proverbs and cock-and-bull stories (*nebylitsy*). Realistic fiction—a product of modernity—starts flourishing

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43 Veselovskii, 1963, p. 341.

44 Dmitrii Likhachev, 2006, *Chelovek v literature Drevnei Rusi*, Moscow, p. 127.

because of the shift from the domain of history (chronicles) and spirituality (saints' lives) to the sphere of the everyday, with its routine details (*byt*) and dialects. This is a rather paradoxical movement: from the abstract and even non-representational history-reality to realistic fiction, full of mundane details.

Sorokin, who dwells in the space and time of after-modernity, pushes the limits of fiction even further—he makes it analytical/conceptual. After the work of art has disclosed "its own structure and its material presence in the world,"[45] it re-enters the domain of the real.[46] The process of historical affirmation (chronicles), followed by fictional negation (the modern novel), re-enters public discourse by means of conceptual/playful affirmation (postmodern text): the reality-illusion binary pair is no longer valid. In all of its affirmational-negational glory, Sorokin's novel continues the history of production of textual matter. The death of Roman/*Roman* celebrates his/its life: Roman est mort, vive le roman![47]

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45 Groys, 2010, p. 43.

46 Cf. Sorokin's observation: Мне концептуализм дал великое оружие—дистанцию между мной и текстом. Он позволил мне взглянуть на текст как на вещь. И в отличие от традиционных русских писателей, тонущих в своем тексте и не могущих сказать ничего вразумительно, я получил от концептуализма как бы крылья, позволяющие парить над текстом, над этим океаном. За это я концептуальной традиции всегда буду благодарен. ("Conceptualism gave me a great weapon — a distance between myself and the text. It allowed me to look at the text as a thing. And in contrast to traditional Russian writers who drown in their texts and are unable to say anything intelligible, conceptualism gave me wings of some sort, which allow me to hover above the text, above this ocean. For that I will be always grateful to the conceptualist tradition.") Vladimir Sorokin & Nikolai Sheptulin, 2008, "Razgovor o moskovskom kontseptualizme," *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* 70, *http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/70/sorokin- sheptunin/*, accessed 30 July 2012.

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